Poiesis: Another Gift from the Greeks

(Symposium on Politics & the Arts, St. Anselm College, April 18, 2009)

We are here today to consider the relation between politics and the arts, two major domains of human life that are often kept apart. Some see politics as the exercise of power in distinction from the merely esthetic. In contrast, others have sought to protect the purity of art by adopting the slogan "art for art." By putting the modest conjunction "and" between the two terms the organizers of our conference apparently want to nudge us toward seeing politics and art together. But doing so forces us to ask about the proper relation between them. History gives us some terrible negative examples. Hitler, the political leader, used the art of film and pageant to inspire support for his evil campaign. He burned books and banned paintings that did not support his vision of Aryan superiority. In this country, writers and artists gave lurid presentations of blacks and Jews that led to and supported hate and discriminatory laws and practices. Perhaps politics and art are so powerful that it is best to keep them apart.

But there are examples on the other side. Think of great playwrights who made leaders of state their central characters. Sophocles did it in Greece with Oedipus and Creon and Antigone, Shakespeare in England with Macbeth and the Kings, Racine in France with Alexander the Great, and Lessing in Germany with Nathan the Wise. In all of these cases the practice of statecraft and personal relations are the occasion of some of our most enduring lessons about human life.

I have chosen the Greek word "poiesis" as a point of entry to our topic. It is, of course, the root of the word poetry. But it is a bud that flowers in many directions. It means to make, to create, to practice, and to act. I propose that we can use it to consider the relations between politics and the arts.

In her important book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt explores several dimensions of the Vita Activa, the ways in which we act. In this book she leaves aside perhaps the highest act, thinking, and explores labor, work, and action. Laboring comprises those actions aimed at maintaining life, actions that must be repeated over and over again and which do not lead to a product other than the sheer fact of living. Work, according to Arendt, involves making something, adding to the things of the world. Both laboring and working use tools. Tools used in laboring produce food which is consumed. Tools used in working produce such things as tables and automobiles which can be used. In the realm of labor things are used up; in the realm of work they are used for. Arendt reserves action, as a distinct realm, for politics, public space, where human beings speak and act together to do what has not been done before and to search for meaning. To take a simple example, the baseball pitcher works in throwing the ball whereas the umpire acts when the pitch is called a ball or strike. Action is connected with the human capacity for speech.

Does art have a place in this scheme? Arendt notes that although speaking and acting do not leave a trace the artist can make the action survive by telling the story. The highest level of human making, *homo faber*, is artistic creation. Materials such as sound, pigment, and marble are used to make something. But Arendt notes that the distinctive thing about the work of art is that it itself is not used. It is set apart. We are to give it our attention, to behold it, not to touch it. The work of art, unlike to table or the car, does not change. The great power of art, however, is that we the observers, readers, spectators, can be changed. Art consists of figures that can transfigure us. Arendt says that the work of art is permanent. But can it not be destroyed? Hitler attempted, unsuccessfully, to destroy

books by burning them. Of course, the Mona Lisa could be slashed or burned. All scores of a Bach cantata could be destroyed. That is the nature of all worldly things, including the human species. But Arendt's point is that if the work of art is set apart and not made useful it will be permanent. There is, however, a way that art can be destroyed and that would be to ignore it, to forget it, to act as if it is not there. That, I submit, would be a crime against our humanity almost as serious as burning.

Arendt concludes this discussion with the following words: "In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced." (173-4) For her, politics, public life, and art are a pair that complement each other and that are essential to human life as it is meant to be. We can also see that central meanings of poiesis, making, creating, and acting, can be closely linked.

Writing in the 1950s, Arendt worried that society was becoming uniform and anonymous. Artists were the only ones really making, and they were increasingly marginalized. Scientists, not politicians, were the creative actors. Her concerns were echoed by Harry Slochower, a literary and culture critic. Writing a few years later, in 1970, he wants to respond to a hunger not being satisfied by technological advances, a hunger to be oneself, to be creative. (12) He asked, How can I avoid be flattened in uniformity and gadgets of all kinds, including nuclear weapons? He rejects the two alternatives of passive withdrawal and violent rage in favor of learning from ancient and modern prophets, artists, and poets who envisioned a world beyond the present conflict

and rupture. In great writers such as the author of the book of Job, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Kafka, and Mann he discerned a process of what he called mythopoesis. That is, these artists took the materials of traditional myths and gave them a symbolic form which made their values available to the people of their time. These artists were not innocently immersed in their traditions. They consciously chose them and made something new. They held their societies up for scrutiny, criticized them, and proposed ways of reconciliation. The new harmony was not a perfect, everlasting one, however, because it was won after an arduous quest for meaning and connection. Slochower names the renewed tradition one of freedom, a tradition which has a real future and which leaves room for other creative spirits to emerge when the need arises. Such artistic creation requires withdrawal from society, but it is not a pure esthetic stance. Rather, the artist makes it possible for the artist and audience to return to the world.

In his essay, "Literature and Society," Slochower faults naturalistic and idealistic writers because they choose one of the extreme alternatives: time or eternity, history or law, change or permanence, particular or universal. He says that "the quality unique to art if that of *mediating* between these extremes. Art presents coordinates applicable to man and his world generally." (482) Science and philosophy also do this, but art differs in that "its form is of a *sensuous* nature. . . . Its universals appear through the medium of *particular, concrete situations and characters."* And, more to the point of our conference, Slochower writes, "literature and politics are parts of the human pattern and coexist in the framework of reality. Indeed, to the extent that it is sensitive to the total human situation, art cannot but encompass the social. Such inclusion, as Thomas Mann puts it . . . , constitutes the *democratic* nature of art. (480)

Kenneth Burke, another philosopher of art, wrote a Foreword to one of Slochower's book, *Three Ways of Modern Man*. About German artists during the Nazi period, he said: "The decrees of a leader or his underlings may determine what matter shall be played up or omitted. But they cannot determine what matter shall be played up with fervor. Where the artist, deep within him, finds cause to symbolize nostalgia or rejection, he will not glorify; or if he does glorify, his glorification will at best be trivial or wooden. Nazism despises the ballot. Very well: it may find that in the exigencies of art it *more than* get what it has asked for. In art the "sell out" is impossible. One can only write his best by writing what he most intensely believes." (15-6)

A few years ago Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, wrote an op-ed piece for the New York Times just before a United Nations conference on racism. He called it "Poetry's Power Against Intolerance" and referred to Czeslaw Milosz, the Lithuanian poet, and Nelson Mandela, the South African. He applauded Milosz's poem celebrating reason for a touch of irony that saved the poem from sentimentality and illusion. He quoted this passage from Mandela's book, *Long Walk to Freedom*: "It was during those long and lonely years [of imprisonment] that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, black and white. . . . The oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed [for] . . . the oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity." Heaney says that Mandela's signature at the bottom of the conference declaration gives it a moral gravity. For "when Mr. Mandela's writing rises to a noble statement, that statement has been earned. It has behind it the full weight of a life endured for the sake of the principles it affirms." Heaney then quotes the luminous conclusion of Milosz's poem:

Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia
And, poetry, her ally in the service of the good.
As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth.
The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.
Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.
Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

Earlier this month I heard a talk by another moral hero of our time, Elie Wiesel who spoke at Drew, my university. In the question perioed he was asked about the huge losses suffered by his foundation thanks to Mr. Madoff. He responded that, of course, Madoff is a scoundrel, but that he did not want to dwell on him. He said that his entire life has been overcoming obstacles and that this was just one more, one that would not compromise his affirmation of hope. Wiesel, the writer, told how important words are to him and how he still writes each book with a fountain pen, a pen for each book. His advice for writing and living to that university audience is good to recall here at St. Anslem College. For Wiesel there are four stages. Information must be converted into knowledge. To knowledge must be added sensitivity. It all should result in commitment. So information, knowledge, sensitivity, commitment.

So far, I have talked about the larger picture, and I hope that I have convinced you that a serious life will take seriously both politics and art and that it will hold them closely together. In conclusion, I would like to consider how poiesis can be applied to our daily lives. Mary Catherine Bateson has written a lovely book entitled *Composing a Life.* This suggests to me that we might consider our lives as a work of art. One feature of acting and creating in politics and art is that something new is done. Until the speech is made, until the vote is cast in a sense there is nothing. Or, to put it another way, the result is something that simply did not exist before. Similarly, until the artist creates the page is blank, the canvas is empty, and the block of marble is unformed. In both cases something

is made from, relativity, nothing. Is it not the same with our lives each day? Of course, we start from somewhere with a specific history. But what comes next is undetermined. It is up to us. We can be the authors of the next page in our life. Sartre would say that we are condemned to be that. Less bluntly, he also says that we are responsible for the page we write. That is the accent I would choose. Some of you are already artists and politicians. Others of you will become artists and politicians. But whoever you, I urge you not to see artists and politicians as others than yourself. If you see yourself as an artist of your life and if you realize that that life is lived in the world with others, you will embody the conjunction of art and politics. You will be open to being shaped by the gifts of great creative artists and you will be ready as a citizen to help shape the society in which you live. You might take as your motto the wonderful phrase of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur: "aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions." (172)

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