

Louis F. Groarke. *Uttering the Unutterable: Aristotle, Religion, and Literature.* McGill-Queens University Press 2023. 336 pp. \$110.00 USD (Hardcover 9780228014232); \$120.00 USD (eBook 9780228015239).

In *Uttering the Unutterable: Aristotle, Religion and Literature*, Dr. Louis Groarke writes a timely work for our age, boasting a very disjointed sense of literature and the world as it does. In this book, he sets himself the aim of reconstructing a theory of literature and literary criticism that reaches back into the realist theories of ancient Greece, which he updates by couching them in current philosophical debate with firm eloquent responses to modern ideas. His sense of literature as transcendence is poignantly applicable to many schools of inquiry. In a world where purpose and value have been all but destroyed under the vivisectionist criticism of deconstructionists, his efforts to sew our lives back together with the holism of literature, and thus breathe new life back into the human project, are nothing short of heroic. Even so, it is a very realistic, common-sensical approach that, under his expert philosophical guidance, appears almost embarrassingly obvious. It is so straightforward and plain that one almost feels like “kicking oneself” for ever having felt the sense of intellectual despair brought on by our postmodern thought.

Groarke is an incredibly thorough researcher and brings that conscientious work ethic to bear very effectively in defending his theory. He leaves no stone unturned when insuring he has adequately answered all valid foreseeable objections to his work. His ability to ably anticipate and deftly defeat objections to his ideas is impressive. Groarke has done his work, and no interlocutor can claim they have not had a fair hearing.

Groarke spends a great deal of time answering these objections almost to the point of exhaustion. He often constructs much of his theory while in the process of dealing with opposed interlocutors. He helps us with his succinct summaries at the beginning and end of each section, but, if we really want the full impact of his arguments, we get their best presentation as he parries and thrusts in the process of intellectual debate. One feels very much like being in the middle of a philosophical dialogue rather than a treatise or lecture. The book brings the reader into the debate. I often found myself raising objections as if in audience of a debating hall, only to have them answered before they fully formed. As surely as if I had posed them in person. Groarke has a very intuitive sense of his audience and what concerns they may raise.

The book starts with providing an invitation into the idea of transcendence as a literary phenomenon, proposing a possible relation of literary experience to religion and religious practices.



Groarke wittingly says later in his work that “Mystics and saints manage contemplation on their own. ... Literature is for the rest of us” (232), demonstrating the role of literature in providing us with a sense of meaning and moral purpose. The text then takes a sharp turn right into the lair of its biggest foes. Groarke wrestles with modernism and postmodernism as a progressive (or regressive) loss of metaphysical meaning for a very large portion of the work. He rightly identifies the trends of anti-realism, non-essentialism, anti-definitionalism, etc., as they appear in various schools to plague western thinking, with having their beginnings in the skepticism of Descartes, Kant, and Hume. The otherwise very careful professor can perhaps be forgiven, in the interest of brevity, for presenting us with a rather unsophisticated explanation of those thinkers as they are given through the eyes of later philosophical commentators. After all, the schools following from them very much did take on the problematic bent of thought that he describes, and Groarke does acknowledge there are much better readings, he even hints at them positively in some places in this book. The schools following these thinkers become very taken up in the problems those earlier philosophers presented, and neglect to take seriously the very sophisticated resolutions they provide. Nihilistic thinking is in vogue and even those from whom the nihilism finds its birth are denied the right to critique it. Professor Groarke needs no invitation or permission. He takes up the argument with both academics and intellectual giants alike, debating no less than the likes of Derrida and Foucault where they oppose him, reaching repeatedly and consistently back to his intellectual mentor, Aristotle, and convincingly demonstrates, for each objection in turn, the failure of these late thinkers to fully appreciate how well that ancient master of reason anticipates and answers their questions. He turns the postmodern arguments on their head, has skepticism defeated itself, and moves on in purposeful strides to establish better answers.

In the final sections of the book, Groarke establishes a well fleshed out Aristotelian theory of literature, adequately applying the various explanations and categories of that philosophy, to create a comprehensive but succinct definition. Literature is Superior wiring that accomplishes a specific purpose as it elicits delight and transcendent thought in its readers. He draws the writer and reader together in a cooperative mode creating works of art that present life in all its astonishing fullness through a transcendent moment of truth telling. Groarke has a number of different formulations of this process, and he defends them all. He ends by establishing the very moral nature of literature, not as dry duty, but as a vibrant process that betters and enriches our lives.

Groarke has accomplished his work masterfully. Any but the most dogmatic of objectors will

see there is a ring of truth in his words and an almost salvific movement for human thought in his ideas. Rediscovering our ties to the world through the transcendent process of literature, philosophy and religion is sorely needed in a world so drifting in the meaningless confusion inflicted by modern skeptics and sophists. There is something very comforting in the realization that one of the best thinkers of the Western tradition from 2500 years ago has already anticipated these problems and provided us with clear directions forward. This is necessary reading for many areas of current philosophy.

Daniel Bessey, Memorial University