

Art and Morality in Essays and Fiction

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Keywords: the responsibility of the artist, artistic value, virtues of the society, freedom of expression, prudence.

Abstract: The paper is devoted to the highly discussable problem of the influence of the Arts as a cultural concept on the Morality of the society and thus the social responsibility of the artist. The question is if art is supervenient on morality being responsible for bad and good. The problem is considered within the framework of two theories: “Art for Art’s sake” and “Art for the People”. By nature, Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds with no distinct and intrinsic subordination between them. But when it comes to the moral or immoral value of a work then the society is to deal with the problem of freedom of expression in terms of prudence and limitations that are inevitable and justifiable.

The ambivalence of art as having a direct impact on morality or being independent of this responsibility has been discussed since the times of Plato and Aristotle. In the late nineteenth century with the development of the Arts as a cultural concept the argument if it has an influence for social bad and good intensified. One of the most controversial statements is that art in the service of morality means the end to the freedom of expression.

In this paper the views of the thinkers who consider that morally reprehensible work of an artist is a wasting of his talent through the failure to fulfil the social duty are contemplated. Some of them refer to the opinion of Carl Jung who wrote in his reflection of life and death in 1957 that “The sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being” [1]. C. Jung’s work on himself and his patients convinced him that life has a spiritual purpose beyond material goals. The main purpose of it is to discover and fulfill a person’s deep innate potential. On the study of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Taoism and other religions he named human’s life as a journey of transformation for the aim to meet the self and at the same time the Divine. This spiritual experience is essential to the well-being. Art might be considered as the means to achieve this goal.

This idea was shared by J. Baldwin in his recollections on the creative process and the artist’s responsibility to society. Five years later after C. Jung this great novelist, playwright, essayist and cultural critic agreed that “this existential kindling of light is the sole purpose of the artist’s life”. In the essay “The Creative Process” J. Baldwin laid out a manifesto for the trying but vital responsibility that artists have to their society: the state of being alone which did not mean to bring to mind merely a rusting musing “beside some silver lake” [2]. The aloneness he spoke about was like the aloneness of birth and death, or like the aloneness of love or suffering. These are extreme, universal and inescapable states: people know this but they would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which man falls prey

in the attempts to avoid this knowledge. J. Baldwin considered that an artist's unique position in the society distinguished him from its all other responsible members – politicians, legislators, educators, scientists: he works in his own “laboratory” to very rigorous rules and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal the deep mysteries about the human being that are hidden by the visible reality and illusions. And this responsibility springs from the artist's responsibility to himself. That monumental challenge of self-awareness and the notion that “we hardly know our own depths” and evade the elusive art of knowing ourselves. It brings J. Baldwin to the idea that “An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are” [3].

There is much in make you realize common in J. Baldwin's ideas with what is proclaimed by J Conrad in his profound philosophical works exploring the depth of psychology, morality, the creative impulse and other pillars of existence. In the preface to his novella “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’: a Tale of the Sea” he presented his definitions of art: a work that aspired to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line [4]. Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, underlying its every aspect. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. The thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts. They speak authoritatively to our common sense, to our desire of peace, to our intelligence or to our desire of unrest, sometimes to our prejudices, fears, often to our egotism - but always to our credulity. It is otherwise with the artist who is confronted with the same enigmas of existence. His appeal lies in people's less obvious capacities. Because of the warlike conditions of existence, people's nature is kept out of sight like a vulnerable body within a steel armor. The artist's appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The successive generations discard ideas, question facts, demolish theories. But the artist appeals to that part of human nature which is not dependent on wisdom and it makes this appeal more enduring. He speaks to the human's capacity for delight and wonder. To the sense of mystery which surrounds lives. To the sense of pity and beauty and pain. To the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of the innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams in joy in sorrow, in aspirations in illusion in hope in fear which binds men to each other which binds together all humanity. All art appeals primarily to the senses and the artistic aim when expressing itself must make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. J. Conrad concluded his recollections on the essence of art by defining its aim. Art, like life itself, is inspiring and difficult, obscured by mists. It is not less great, but only more difficult. To make a man to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and color, to make him pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile – such is the aim. The task is difficult, evanescent and reserved only for a few to achieve, only for the deserving and the fortunate.

So, both thinkers in their recollection of the moral duty of artists highlight the same things. First, it is “to bring to light the truth of life” (J. Conrad), “to correct the delusions” to which humans “fall prey” in their attempt to avoid the knowledge of what they are as the main goal of creative activity. That is to reveal the deep mysteries of the human being that are hidden, “the doom and the glory of knowing who you are” (J. Baldwin). Second, “the aloneness”, the state of being alone which J. Baldwin understands as not a state of nihilistic resignation but a prerequisite for realizing one's own true identity rather than have an identity imposed by society. J. Conrad called it “a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice”. The artist works “in the lonely region of stress and strife”. And they both agree that the artist's duty is in the cultivation of minds, to make humans feel, see that they are responsible for their actions, that if they understand themselves better they would damage themselves less.

Art and the responsibility of the artist were discussed by H.Miller [5]. He also thought that the main aim of art was to tell the truth about life: “Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life”; “Art is only a means of life, to the life more abundant. It merely points the way, something which is overlooked not only by the public, but very often by the artist himself”. He recognized the artist's special duties and responsibilities one of which is “to overthrow existing values”. He thought that the artist was opposite of

the politically minded individual, the opposite of the reformer, the opposite of the idealist. Instead of mending the universe, he recreated it out of his own experience and understanding of life.

In one of the most known and discussed works on the problem – Jacques Maritain’s “The Responsibility of the Artist” – the following points are related [6]. The author claimed: “By nature Art and Morality are two autonomous worlds, with no direct and intrinsic subordination between them. There is subordination, but extrinsic and indirect”. This idea at the same time denies both the irresponsibility when any subordination whatever of art to morality is denied and the opposite extreme – the totalitarian claim that the artist must be completely subservient. The fact is that the realm of Art and the realm of Morality are two autonomous worlds, but within “the unity of the human subject”. Art is a particular energy, vital power, which exists within man – a kind of “virtue”, undeviating strength. The most problematic issue of the difference between a virtuous person and a good artist the author solves the following way: “Art by itself tends to the good of the work, not to the good of man. The first responsibility of the artist is toward his work”. Through goodness Art is connected with the realm of Morality, the moral values. In J. Maritain’s interpretation “Artistic value and moral value belong to two different realms. Artistic value relates to the work, moral value to man”. Evil can even contribute to feed the virtue of art, certainly not as a necessary requirement of art. So the artist is confronted with the notion of moral virtue. Virtues are stable dispositions or inner forces developed in the soul, which perfect its operative powers in a certain line or direction. The four cardinal virtues - Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance, perfect and fortify the intellect, - and the will in the line of morality. They are connected with one another, but the principal of them is Prudence, Insight and Wisdom, because it has to do with the intellect and the command of man’s actions. The act of moral choice is individualized by the personality and by the circumstances of the action. It makes Prudence play the dominating part, both intellectual and moral, in human life. But Art is another virtue, intellectual, not moral and is concerned with the good of the work, not with the good of man. At this point appears the relationship – and the conflict – between Art and Morality (Prudence). Art in its own domain is independent like wisdom. It is subordinate neither to wisdom nor to prudence nor to any other virtue. J. Maritain comes to his crucial conclusion about the responsibility of the artist: “From the point of view of Art, the artist is responsible only to his work. From the point of view of Morality the artist is responsible to the good of human life, in himself and in his fellow men”.

In fiction the problem of the responsibility of the artist was discussed in J. Fowles novel “The Ebony Tower” in the dialogues of the main characters, Henry Breasley and David Williams [7]. Henry Breasley, born in 1896, an artist of great renown, who was in a lifelong exile from Britain, and David Williams, born in 1942, a successful artist and critic, meet in 1972 in France, in Coëtminais. The author devotes much attention to the personalities of his characters mostly to H. Breasley, who is described as “a frightful old bastard”, ill-famed for his unregenerate bohemian lifestyle (drinking and women). David Williams, unlike H. Breasley is a decent man, a good husband and father. Still as the result of his visit to the old artist he labels himself as a failure in their professional strife. Henry Breasley is “not verbal”, “not good with words”, when talking about art but is very definite about the idea of “human and social responsibility” of the artist. Art for him is a form of speech. Speech must be based on human needs. Not abstract theories, “or anything but the spoken word. The real word”. Turning away from nature and reality atrociously distorts the relationship between artist and audience. Creating for “intellect and theories, not people pays dividends, in economic and vogue terms, but is a vicious spiral, a vortex, and a drain to nothingness. This is “the spiral” D. Williams goes along and it is the cause of his professional failure. One the author’s basic principles is that making something great is not arrived at by overnight experiment, histrionics but by endless years of solitary obstinacy and not by an odd instant success. An artist can’t be misled by the excess in vogue, the officially blessed indiscipline, the surface liberties and if he doesn’t want how he lived to be reflected in his work and makes it compromised, settled-for-the safe, camouflages its hollow reality under craftsmanship and good taste he comes to a dead end. Safety hides nothingness. It is how J. Fowles introduced the depravity of the “Art for Art’s sake” approach.

“Art for Art’s sake” is discussed as opposite to “Art for the People” problem [8]. The theory of the responsibility of the artist to men is considered from the point of view of the artist and his own conscience.

It is purely moral. It is about the impact of the work on the moral life and standards of other men, and on the moral health of the community and possible degrading and corrupting influence of his work. The artist can convey ideas through man's intelligence on all the rational and emotional fabric of notions and beliefs, images, passions and instincts on which the moral life of men depends. The idea "Art for the People" or "Art for the Community" appeals to socially-minded, politically-minded or humanitarian persons who consider that the intentions of an artist are inspired by generous human purposes. The virtue of an art is to have the joys of Beauty made available not only to privileged intellectuals but to under-privileged as well. The failure of this approach consists in the wish to raise the needs or ideas of the community to the status of a rule of creation imposed on the very making of the work. If "Art for Art's sake" disregards the world of morality and the values of human life, so the idea "Art for the People" disregards the world of art itself, the values of creative intellect. If it is true that art serves the good of the human community, still it is wrong that the social or moral value of the work must be imposed on the sphere of the process of creation as its supreme standard. Though the outside conditions: wages, commissions, ideas and beliefs (religious, philosophical, cultural) always intervene or are integrated from the start and the rules of the making have to obey them. Thus the autonomy, freedom of art is not impaired. On the contrary, it is increased and fortified.

But the theory of "Art for the People" is not concerned with a notion of the autonomy of art. It ignores this autonomy and makes the social value, the social significance or social impact of the work, the supreme aesthetic or artistic value. According to this theory, a good of human life determines and specifies the very virtue of art. The work must be ruled and shaped and brought into being not with regard to the creative intuition in which it originates but with regard to some social and moral requirements to be satisfied. An artist who yields to this craving for regimentation fails in his gifts, in his calling and in virtue. Art is the appendage of values that are independent of the noblest of human life interests, and it provides mankind with spiritual ideas that come from subjective experience, revelation and intuition. The idea of "Art for the People" arose as a reaction to the excess of the theory of "Art for Art's sake", the system and practice of the complete irresponsibility of the artist. People cannot indefinitely bear to have their basic standards and beliefs mocked or undermined, their moral heritage threatened, their minds confused or their imagination poisoned for the sake of the artist's irresponsibility.

It becomes urgent to find a solution to the problem. As concerns the human community it must be recognized that freedom of expression and freedom of art are not absolute and limitless [9]. They are not absolute and limitless in nature. It is not true that every thought or artifact has an absolute right to be displayed in the human community because they were born in a human mind. So certain limitations on the exercise on the freedom of expression are both inevitable in actual existence and justifiable in themselves. There is no clear objective borderline between the two distinguished domains, so the quarrel between the moral interests of the community and the aesthetic interests of the artist will never cease. The application of this distinction is only a matter of prudent or wise practical judgement. The only reason for limitations being brought on freedom of expression is the common good of the human society. At the same time the primary duty of the human society toward art is to respect it and its spiritual dignity and to be interested in its living process of creation. A work of art conveys to the mankind the spiritual treasure which is the artist's own singular truth. In judging of the artistic achievements, the society has a responsibility, both to the artist and towards itself. And it should be aware of this responsibility.

The conclusion the socially-minded humanitarian intellectuals make about the moral responsibility of the artist is that an essential component of the production of art, the human factor, can be sensible if taken along with the perceived moral considerations which govern humanity.

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