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Joseph P. del Tufo

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Can Art Be Immoral?

JOSEPH P. DEL TUFO

NOT long ago I attended a dramatic performance in which the leading characters were engaged in the most immoral of pursuits. On stage they were very attractive people, and far from suffering punishment, this lovely couple obviously enjoyed their crimes; even as the curtain fell, they were seen contemplating with manifest gusto yet another immoral action. In the light of this description, the play should have been condemned. Yet as the house lights came up, priests and nuns and all present applauded vigorously. The Ateneo de Manila High School's performance of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the lovable aunts and their thirteen laugh-provoking murders, had delighted everyone.

The problem of Morality in drama or in literature cannot be solved in simple terms. A series of rules like 1) no immoral action may be dramatized on stage, or 2) the criminal must always be shown as suffering or being punished, can become ridiculous if applied without reference to some higher set of norms.

This article attempts to take one step toward clarifying such a set of norms. First, I will offer a distinction between Art and non-Art, and explain why such a distinction is valuable, almost necessary, in any discussion of Morality in literature or drama. When this distinction has been made, I shall discuss some of the relationships between Art and Morality.

A distinction between Art and non-Art might easily be made, if there were agreement on a definition of Art. But

there is not. Just what makes Art, Art, is as prickly a problem as the relationship between Art and Morality. "Art is a criticism of life"; "Art is a mirror of life"; "Art is that which arouses a noble emotion"; "Art is the record of the most worthwhile human experiences"; "Art is a form of knowledge"; such are but a few of the definitions offered by critics.¹ Further complications arise because critics use the word "Art" both for the skill of the artist and for the art object (though in this discussion we are clearly concerned with the art object). Finally the fact that "work of Art" and "artistic" may justifiably be applied to things as diverse as divans and portraits or flower pots and sonatas, confounds the confusion.²

Despite the babel of tongues that mocks one who looks for a definition of Art (or just for a simple answer to the query, "What makes it Art?") a distinguishing trait does seem to emerge from most definitions: Art is a correlative of contemplation. Most explanations of Art seem to imply that the primary activity of the viewer is contemplation; that Art of its nature does not move to any external activity.³ Some critics,

¹ The best discussion of Art for one trained in Scholastic Philosophy is Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1955). Mr. Maritain discusses his subject within the traditional scholastic framework, and though he defines both "Art" and "Poetry" as habits of the artist rather than as objects, his position on the nature of the art object itself is clear. Briefly, the art object is analogously a *verbum*, a concept, produced by the pre-conscious creative activity of man's intellect.

² Here we are concerned with fine Arts, not with useful arts. Although the word "art" is applied to such things as carpentry and well-digging in such expressions as "The Art of Basket-weaving" (where it means craft or technique) it is used absolutely only of the fine Arts.

³ See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1942), p. 13.

Mr. Maritain may seem to deny this when he makes Art an activity of the practical intellect, but it is clear that he is speaking of the artist's creative activity, not of the viewer's activity.

Psychological critics like I. A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1924) and Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York, 1957) investigate the effects of an Art work on the *psyche*. They see the contemplation of Art as producing a practical internal effect, as do those critics who make Art a correlative of emotion.

with whom I would agree, also deny any subjective effect, such as emotion or psychological satisfaction, as an intrinsic purpose of Art. These they would reject as practical effects not consistent with the nature of Art.

If one accepts the notion that Art is a correlative of contemplation, it follows logically that a work which aims primarily at some external practical purpose beyond contemplation is not Art. But while this norm seems clear enough, its application offers some difficulty. How do we decide whether the work has a practical purpose or not? First, it should be noted that the author's statements are not always reliable. One need only read the prefaces of some of George Bernard Shaw's plays to realize this. No matter what the author says, whether or not the work has a practical purpose beyond contemplation must be judged from the work itself.⁴ The intrinsic drive, the *intentio*, the tendency manifested in the work itself, must reveal the presence or absence of a practical purpose.

A second difficulty in applying this norm appears with works which "carry a message." Whether this message be good or bad, a "message" makes the work at least partially propaganda or rhetoric, partially aimed at a practical purpose.⁵ It is for the judge of Art to decide whether the work as a whole entices contemplation or incites to action.⁶ In some cases where a work does both, the critic will have to pass judgment on it according to two sets of norms.

The distinction which I am making here is most clearly seen in reference to ancient Rhetoric, for example, in an oration of Cicero or Demosthenes. When the speech was delivered by its author, it was Art and Rhetoric; but the audience, it may be presumed, heard it as rhetoric, as urging them to action. Today, the speech remains both Art and Rhetoric but

⁴ For a modern statement of this principle see W. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, "The International Fallacy" *Sewanee Review*, 54 (Summer, 1946), pp. 568-88.

⁵ I use the word "propaganda" as a neutral word for good propaganda as well as bad.

⁶ "Action" here includes any willful activity such as espousing a cause or belief.

we who read it contemplate it and are not moved to action. A similar example would be a water jar so made that it was also a work of Art. Today we contemplate it in a museum, and it is no longer judged according to its ability to hold water.

If there is present in the art object the tendency to arouse subjective emotion, as there is in many a Romantic poem, this tendency must be judged apart from the work as an art object. Those who correlate Emotion with Art will have to judge not only the object contemplated, but in each case, the emotion which they say every art object aims at arousing.⁷

A third difficulty connected with this norm springs from man's fallen human nature. Theoretically, any human action and anything which exists, whether it be good or bad, high or low, may be the object of contemplation; but practically, as man is, certain actions when described or dramatized incite to action and preclude contemplation (notably those pertaining to procreation, even when these are holy actions). To make this difficulty more annoying, the tendency to action in these cases varies greatly. What a married man can contemplate with profit, and without the incitement to action which is called lust, may differ greatly from what a single man can so contemplate; what may easily be viewed as an object of contemplation in the South Seas can bring out the police force in Boston.

In solving this difficulty, the critic who would distinguish between Art and non-Art must also distinguish between what originates in the supposed art object and what arises because of Original Sin. If the tendency to action derives from the

⁷ The theory that Art aims at arousing a noble emotion in the viewer seems to me manifestly false. This paper will proceed on the assumption that contemplation alone is the activity of the mature viewer. But what is said here would be true *mutatis mutandis* if Art were a correlative of emotion. Herbert Read has expressed what seems to me the soundest view of emotion in Art: "I would say that the function of art is not to transmit feeling so that others may experience the same feeling We come to the work of art already charged with emotional complexes; we find in the genuine work of art, not an excitation of these emotions, but peace, repose, equanimity" (*The Meaning of Art*, [London, 1931], pp. 218-22).

state of the beholder, while the object itself merely invites contemplation, the object remains Art. It is not the fault of glass houses that little boys like to throw stones.

Morality refers to human acts. Only they can properly be called moral or immoral. However, once a distinction has been made between Art and non-Art (in literature and drama, non-Art would include Rhetoric, preaching, propaganda, pornography, and all that we call salacious,⁸) it is possible to speak about the morality of non-Art. Since non-Art urges to action, it may by analogy be called moral or immoral because the action to which it urges would be moral or immoral for a man. But art, on the other hand, allows of no such adjectives. Art cannot be moral or immoral because all it does is exist as an object capable of contemplation, and the word "moral" or "immoral" is not applied to objects of contemplation even by analogy. A moral landscape or an immoral idea (except when "idea" is used widely for "plan" or "judgment," both of which involve human action) does not exist.⁹

It would seem, then, that Art falls beyond the measuring circle of the moralist. But this is not entirely true. While an art object cannot be praised as moral or chastized as immoral, it can be labeled dangerous. What in itself is but a mute object capable of contemplation, may become, because of the viewer's age or condition or more generally because of fallen human nature, an enticement to immoral action. In these cases the moralist must speak. No one infringes on the rights of the dynamite-owner by insisting that he label the sticks "dangerous."

⁸ This word, with its origin in the Latin verb *salire*, to leap, can be made to yield the image of a work which leaps out and attempts to capture its viewer. I do not suggest this as the origin of the word, but it pictures the reason why the salacious cannot be Art.

⁹ "Obscene" is applied to objects of contemplation which ought not to be presented to men's eyes. Since I find the reason for this prohibition in man's fallen nature, I hold that theoretically there can be an obscene work of Art. Practically, since there would be no one capable of contemplating it without being moved to action, such a work would become equivalent to non-Art.

Several advantages accrue to the moralist if he distinguishes sharply between Art and non-Art. First, it becomes clear that most of the supposed conflict between Morality and Art does not exist. Most condemned movies and best-sellers simply are not Art. They make no pretense of being objects of contemplation for its own sake. The second value might be that reviewers would cease to praise second-rate movies and novels which contain excellent messages but which offer nothing for mature contemplation. This would be no small gain. Much of the scorn heaped on Catholic reviewers is provoked by their confusion of Art with non-Art, and from their praise of non-artistic movies and novels.

Art is autonomous. This statement sometimes raises the hackles of the moralist. But his annoyance arises from a misunderstanding. The phrase does not mean that the artist as a man claims freedom from the Natural Law; still less does it mean that the Art viewer may exempt himself from his conscience. It does mean that Art has a right to exist from the very fact that it is Art; that like an unseen rainbow it needs nothing outside of itself to justify its existence; it also means that the laws which govern Art as Art are artistic laws and no others.¹⁰

Human morals and human beliefs are found in drama and literature; because of this, some have attempted to judge these morals and beliefs according to laws which govern men. Art rejects this extension of morality's scope. Perhaps the best way to state Art's rejection is to say that Art recognizes only Artistic Truth and rejects moral and philosophical and theological Truth as norms for the value of an art object as such.

With relation to characters in literature, Artistic Truth is easy enough to explain when the work has a realistic framework. The characters are either credibly human or they are not. Artistic Truth in a realistic work demands that the individual character be credibly human in himself and in relation to the plot; moreover, it demands that the complete cast of characters be plausible with relation to one another. A realis-

¹⁰ The concept "law" when applied to Art is so analogous as to be almost equivocal. However, the discussion of what a law would be in Art is outside the scope of the present article.

tic novel, for example, in which every character was perverted in one way or another, would lack Artistic Truth despite the fact that each character was plausible.

The moralist-critic or theologian-critic may run astray by confusing Artistic and Moral or Theological Truth. For example, the character portrayed is an atheist, but a credibly human character. He is artistically true, because such humans exist; they are legitimate and valuable as objects of contemplation.¹¹ The judgment that this particular character acts irrationally or illogically is not an artistic judgment, and it is irrelevant to artistic evaluation.¹² If a theologian wishes to point out a character's errors, it should be made clear that his criticism has nothing to do with artistic criticism, that it has nothing to do with the value of the art object as such. Just as no sane Calvinist critic should prefer Milton to Dante because he believes Milton's theology, so no Catholic critic ought to praise Greene more than Faulkner merely because of Greene's theology.

In realistic drama and literature Artistic Truth differs from Moral Truth. An immoral character may be artistically true. The only question which interests the art critic is whether the character is plausible or not. The art critic may condemn a character because his freedom from any sense of guilt is implausible; he may condemn him because the amount of suffering directly resulting from his crimes seems implausible (the creator's hands are seen pulling the puppet strings) but he will not be interested in whether the character keeps the moral law. The morality of a character is a neutral fact in a drama or novel; it cannot directly affect the evaluation of the work as Art.

A problem arises in literature when the author has created a whole new world and does not project a realistic setting. Realistic norms cannot be applied. Who would find fault with

¹¹ The notion that a character in a play or a novel must stand for a type has been discarded. A character is considered credibly human if it is plausible that one such human being exist.

¹² For a good discussion of Literature and Ideas, see Ch. X of René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1942), pp. 98--112.

A Midsummer Night's Dream because Puck is not plausible according to realistic norms. In the same play Lysander and Demetrius are frequently objected to on the grounds that they lack individuality—a failure to realize that Shakespeare wanted typical Romantic lovers. In such cases the critic must look for Artistic Truth in terms of the author's *donnée*. Thomas More's *Utopia* must be judged in terms of the world fashioned by its author; so must *Gulliver's Travels*, the *Faerie Queene*, and all other works framed in non-realistic worlds. But this is a problem for the art critic.

The only direct relevance that Moral Truth and Philosophical or Theological Truth have to a genuine art object springs from the danger such objects can be to weak human beings.¹³ It may be necessary to point out the moral or philosophical errors of characters in a realistic movie or novel. But the moralist-critic should make it clear that this is not an artistic judgment. Much more, he should avoid making himself look ridiculous by condemning the art work when the difficulty belongs to the audience and not to the work. Judging Art by the morals of its characters is not less foolish than judging Philosophy by the beauty of its style or examples.

Many people who appreciate artistic drama and novels for their own sake join moralists in regretting that modern works of art are so often peopled with the immoral and the perverted. But their reasons are not moral ones. They believe that Art ought to offer more than the distorted character for our contemplation.¹⁴ Unfortunately, it is easier to write an artistic novel or drama about a weak character than about a saint.

¹³ Moral and Philosophical Truth enter literature indirectly. Especially in realistic literature, they give coherence and complexity to both plot and character. But to say that you must recognize Moral Truth and Philosophical Truth to read well is like saying that you must be able to distinguish colors to appreciate painting. The degree of Philosophical or Moral Truth which a character has must be known, yet it offers no scale for an artistic evaluation of the character.

¹⁴ For one who holds that an art object communicates concrete knowledge (as opposed to the abstract knowledge communicated by Philosophy) and draws its value from its communication of what it is like to be some "I" in an existential situation, the lack of more normal "I's" is regretted because it deprives the mind of much possible concrete knowledge.

For every movie of the artistic value of *Monsieur Vincent*, there are hundreds in which sentiment or obviously sugar-coated virtue or plain preaching makes the good character about as artistic as a plastic statue. Such movies insult the mind, provide nothing for mature contemplation, and feed fuel to the falsehood that evil is interesting; good, not. For every character of the artistic stature of a King Lear, there are thousands whose goodness tastes like watered-milk. (Milton, as great as he was, never succeeded in creating a successful "good" character.) We may regret this lack of morally good characters in much of modern artistic literature, but it is not a sufficient or even a valid reason for condemning artistic works about evil characters. Perhaps a motive for moralist-critics' distinguishing sharply between Art and non-Art lies here. If those who are sincerely devoted to Morality, also showed a just esteem for Art, they might help stimulate a generation of artists who could express goodness and virtue with the artistic skill that artists who portray evil have shown.

It will be noted that while this article pinpoints the Art viewer's activity as contemplation, it does not attempt to say why an object is worthy of contemplation. The reason for this omission has already been suggested; it is the wide divergence of opinion why an object is Art. But the distinction which I have made does afford a negative norm; moreover, it excludes a vast amount of material from any claim to be called Art, and excludes it on a principle whose validity most critics recognize, at least implicitly. The norms that different critics use to decide whether or not an object of contemplation deserves to be called Art, vary greatly. Most critics will accept the practical norm that an object which has been recognized as Art for a hundred years cannot be denied the title, and many will accept an even shorter span. Disagreement ranges widely only over relatively recent claimants to the title. In this sphere the moral judge should have no practical problem since the objects under discussion do not move to action. If such an object is judged dangerous, the danger will have to be noted whether or not the work is Art; the moralist-critic will then be wise to pass on the information that Art critics differ among themselves as to the artistic value of the work in question.