On the Aesthetic Turn

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The critical tide is turning, once again. The professional critics—and not just the old, curmudgeonly ones—are fed up with moralizing, and they are willing to speak about it in public. From Lauren Oyler's observation that "anxieties about being a good person, surrounded by good people, pervade contemporary novels and criticism" to Parul Sehgal's exhortation against the ubiquitous "trauma plot" that "flattens, distorts, reduces character to symptom, and ... insists upon its moral authority" to Garth Greenwell's lament about a literary culture that "is as moralistic as it has ever been in my lifetime"—the critical vanguard has made its judgment clear. For all its good intentions, art that tries to minister to its audience by showcasing moral aspirants and paragons or the abject victims of political oppression produces smug, tiresome works that are failures both as art *and* as agitprop. Artists and critics—their laurel bearers—should take heed.

The extent of this shift in critical sensibility is hard to measure, but what some have labeled the "aesthetic turn" is not limited to the literary reviews. The rise of "postcritique"—a mode of scholarship that finds meaning in the full diversity of our personal and social responses to art—signals a similar pivot in some English departments, while in the broader culture the aftermath of the Trump years has been marked by a steady retreat from feverish activist critique and a new hunger for style, humor and frivolity (TikTok, not Twitter; Red Scare, not Rachel Maddow). Recent art and film reviews in mainstream publications likewise suggest the possibility that we are reaching a tipping point. Writing about Disney's live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, this time complete with a multicultural cast consisting of no fewer than seven racially distinct daughters of Triton, Angelica Jade Bastién argued in *New York* that Disney was "taking advantage of those who believe film is a mirror or a moral tool. It shouldn't have to be either." When the comedian Hannah Gadsby staged an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum on Picasso, titled *It's Pablo-matic* and designed to highlight the artist's (already well-chronicled) misogyny, the *New York Times*'s Jason Farago chided the curators for encouraging their audience to forgo the challenges of serious art in favor of the "comforts of story time."

But with the discourse about the limitations of moralizing steadily growing, the question of an alternative naturally arises. The critics of self-righteousness and trauma mongering are for the most part not calling for a return to the amoral ironism that governed the Nineties and early Aughts—the sensibility that surely gave rise, at least in part, to the overgrowth of didacticism that followed. But if not this, then what? Where do we go from here?

The first and most familiar complaint against moralizing or overly politicized approaches to art is that they shortchange the "aesthetic" dimension of artworks. In her essay for *Tablet* on the tendency of today's museum curators to reduce the works they display to "a single blunt message," the critic Alice Gribbin notes that to take such an

approach is "necessarily to bar oneself from aesthetic experience." Such charges, echoed by numerous critics in and out of the academy, harken back to the work of the New Critics in the 1930s and 1940s, who focused on the formal qualities of artworks and their employment of paradox, irony and ambiguity. These were the elements of the work that were held to be responsible for a sui generis response in the reader or viewer, a unique kind of satisfaction—Gribbin calls it "dispersive, layered, paradoxical"—that was independent of any use the work might be put to, moral, political or otherwise. In turn, that response was understood to call forth aesthetic judgments—judgments that made copious use of terms like beautiful and ugly, good and bad, success and failure.

By the end of the 1960s, however, the "aesthetic" approach of the New Critics was having its authority challenged by feminist, psychoanalytic and postcolonial critics, among others. In deconstruction and New Historicism, two paradigms that shaped English departments in the Eighties and Nineties, the point was no longer to valorize aesthetic experience but to penetrate behind it. In his book *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*, the literary scholar Timothy Aubry surveys the rise, fall and underground endurance of aesthetic criticism even in the supposedly more politically savvy forms of interpretation that superseded it. But Aubry also contends with why, even for committed formalists, it had been difficult to fully segregate aesthetic concerns from moral and political ones from the very start. Surveying the reception of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Aubry writes: "While critics have been tempted to insulate *Lolita* from controversy by insisting that its style is more important than its content ... they have also worried that doing so might serve to evacuate the novel of seriousness, rendering it lifeless or ?sterile.'" The novel may be, as some critics argued, "really about" language or creating art, but it chooses to address these things by telling the story of a middle-aged man possessed by a passion so outrageous he abducts and rapes a prepubescent girl to fulfill it. The most committed aestheticians could not fail to glimpse the question: How can we acknowledge *that* fact while not reducing our function as readers to the inane task of asserting moral banalities ("it is in fact wrong to abduct and rape...")? Whatever it is "for," art undeniably engages us as moral—morally aspiring, morally flawed, morally judging—human beings: that's one reason we regard taste in art as something different, and more consequential, than taste in perfume.

Perhaps, then, the problem is not with the idea that art has a moral purpose but that our conversation about the morality of art has become so parochial. In a recent essay for the *Yale Review* on Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*, the novelist and critic Garth Greenwell writes: "To treat art as purely aesthetic, a question merely of formal exploration and sensuous experience," is only "one way to preempt the claims of moralism." Greenwell's proposal echoes Becca Rothfeld's suggestion, itself inspired by Lionel Trilling's idea of "moral realism," that we need only "renovate our notion of the ethical" to "see how it might come to stand in a more intimate relation to the aesthetic." According to Greenwell, the work of art is not a tool for learning to pass better moral judgments, or an occasion to exercise our capacity for the same; rather it facilitates the acquisition of a far more important skill: the ability to view one another as moral equals.

By contemporary standards, Mickey Sabbath, the protagonist of Roth's novel, is nearly as morally abhorrent as Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. But, Greenwell writes, a "moral education" depends not on averting our eyes from "filth," but on "diving wholeheartedly into it." "The wonder of *Sabbath's Theater*, the measure of its achievement," he adds, "is that after 450 pages with this intolerable man I don't want to turn my back on him. I can't, because I've come to cherish him." Art should not be expected to make us better, but if we let it, it can help us cultivate moral tolerance, teaching us to cherish as our equals not only literary moral filth but also the people we find repugnant in real life.

Greenwell's suggestion certainly represents a more appealing way of thinking about the moral dimension of art than using it to raise ourselves above those we find morally wanting. Yet while self-righteousness is a vice and a certain moral humility perhaps a virtue, moral equality, as Kant (to whom Greenwell refers) knew well, does not mean the end of moral judgment. For Kant, we are morally equal whatever we do because we are always equally capable of freely doing the right thing in the light of our shared knowledge of good and evil. Because our freedom is rooted in this shared knowledge, we can also all know without much trouble when someone does wrong: when they lie, when they make false promises, when they sexually torment children or students. We are equally free and must therefore treat everyone with respect; but we are under no obligation to embrace moral reprobates. Indeed, there is at least one person who spent even more than 450 pages with Mickey Sabbath: his creator, Philip Roth. And yet Greenwell acknowledges that all that time in Sabbath's company did not make Roth long to meet his protagonist in real life: were Sabbath to sidle up to him on his couch, Roth said, he would not hesitate to kick him out of his house. Works of art certainly endear all sorts of scoundrels to us, but to love the morally condemned is not a Kantian injunction, it is a Christian one. Might contemporary literature's purpose really be to return us to Christ's gospel?

One could call the third possibility of non-moralizing reading the epistemic one: it puts aside both the strange pleasures of art as well as its purported moral and political powers in favor of the force of its testimony. What art does is show you how things "really are." In her essay "Art Is for Seeing Evil," the philosopher Agnes Callard explains that she teaches novels and poems to her students "neither to improve their moral character, nor to offer them literary entertainment" but because it is only in literature that one can find the sort of fear, pain, loss, injustice and cruelty necessary to think about, say, death or courage. If normal life, organized by practical concerns—"aiming, achieving, improving"—is burdened by positivity and the instinct to make the best of things, art succeeds in "suspend[ing] our practical projects, releasing the prohibition against attending to the bad." This is very often how contemporary philosophers justify their interest in art: only it can provide us with the full rich texture of human experience. In a characteristic example, Callard muses on the possibility of teaching a class about marriage. Imagining herself assigning philosophy journal articles on commitment, shared agency, love as a moral emotion, etc., she thinks: "All of that is great,

but what about the misunderstandings? The standing, ever-present loneliness? The small betrayals and minor cruelties and unspoken disappointments? The problem of marital sex? The ambiguities of divorce? Those are parts of marriage too. And it is the poets who get them into view."

That they do. But this, *pace* Callard, is hardly unique to art. Why do we need the poetic imagination to get marriage's disappointments into view? Surely psychology, sociology and a good ear at the office water cooler would do just fine. Why doesn't the philosopher consider teaching those?

While these attempts to justify art in non-moralistic terms—claiming that art is for aesthetic pleasure, or the cultivation of moral broad-mindedness, or a special form of knowledge—may not be entirely satisfactory, none of them is without merit. Undoubtedly, our hunger for beauty can occasion a distinctive form of pleasure; thrust us into the hidden recesses of human psychology in ways that make it harder for us to rush to moral judgment; help us grapple with the realities of suffering, pain, loss, failure, the significance of death; even play a part in shaping our moral character or political preferences. It can surely do much more too.

That is one reason we asked our editors and writers, in this special issue of *The Point*, to reflect on the question "What is beauty for?" In the pieces they have written, we see how our search for beauty—in art, in other people, in our public spaces—penetrates our lives. It can remove the dry scales of national and ethnic parochialism from our eyes. It can bring us moments of spontaneous ecstasy, forcing us to break from the dead end of routine. It can make us laugh, help us remember, or forget, or mourn. It can inspire us to try to refashion ourselves, aid the pleasures of conversation and philosophy or help us contend, paradoxically, with the fact of ugliness. It can help us recognize the limitations and internal contradictions of other forms of value, perhaps above all of the political and economic values that have been so culturally central in recent years.

For all that, I would like to end this letter by putting a spoke in our wheels. In the very way we have posed the question—what is beauty *for*?—the magazine signals agreement in at least one regard with the moralizers about art: art and beauty must in some sense be salutary, offering us some pleasure or good. Art must be for *something*—even if only for its own sake. For all their differences, everybody seems to agree that beautiful images have "value"—the question is merely what kind. But I wonder if we are not flattering ourselves, at least a little, when we insist that we seek out beauty, and in particular the beauty of art, with a view to its value, at all.

Kant, who accords aesthetic pleasure a central role in his account of the beauty of nature and art, never spoke of "value" in the context of beauty. Beauty, for Kant, is neither valuable for anything else nor in itself. To accept this does not mean that we should stop asking why we come to art or what we get from it, but it might prompt us

to ask these questions in a different key. If we did not start from the assumption that art is valuable, we might instead begin with the question of why we keep "turning" to beautiful images the way we often do—not just in a quest for some sort of edification but as if we had no choice, more like a compulsion than a sensible, goal-oriented or character-building activity.

Aubry writes that aesthetic pleasure is a "broad category of experience," which, far from being limited to delight in form and appreciation of ingenuity, "involves masochistic moments of confusion, abjection, and self-denial." But to invoke "masochism," in art as elsewhere, is not to provide an explanation; it is to pose a riddle. Why do we take pleasure in images of confusion, abjection and self-denial? Callard, who ostensibly puts the question of pleasure to the side, pauses to consider the infamous tale of Leontius in Plato's *Republic*, who could not help but stare at corpses strewn outside the walls of the city. Disgusted, he is at the same time overpowered by the "appetite" to look. Were she to see a corpse in real life, Callard assures us, she would be compelled to turn away. Things are different, however, when she sees one on the screen. There, she feels her eyes are invited to "take their fill of the ?beautiful' sight." But no one can entice you with what you do not already crave. If this is right, to truly turn toward art and beauty is not to reach out to some external object or special form of experience, but rather to reach into ourselves—and what we end up finding there may just be the most alien and unruly discovery of all. "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror," Rilke wrote in the *Duino Elegies*, "which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us."

In the fairy tales we tell ourselves about art, we imagine that the images of the artist can set us free: from the quotidian tedium of everyday life, from ignorance, from moral turpitude. But in their ability to make contact with the strangest, most hidden parts of ourselves, images can themselves beguile and entrap us: Madame Bovary's diet of sentimental romance fictions and histories; the cold, shimmering stills and images on our endless—horrifyingly titled—"feeds"; pornography; saints and devils; logos; green cartoon frogs; Emily Ratajkowski; mountains beckoning "into the brotherhood of courage and into death" and SS regalia; flat, half-bitten apples. Images can feed our narcissism, divert our thoughts, seduce us, delude us morally, constrict our imaginations—and yet we can never seem to get enough.

If good art and its criticism can free us from anything, it can free us, first and foremost, from the totalizing fantasies that are fed by such images—whether of mountains shot by fascists, or of the perfect faces generated by algorithms, or of a society cleansed of its treacherous elites or deplorables. It can liberate us, in other words, from the comforting delusion that we can ever transcend our human limits, defeat death, unhappiness and evil once and for all, or live in anyone's vision of heaven on earth. This does not mean, however, that we can ever be liberated from the infinite pull of beauty itself, or be able to attend to images only when we feel like it. It is rather like this: we can decide what to do, but we can never decide what to dream.

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