

Schiller's Impossible Wager.

From the perspective of the realist and the hopeful idealist, art can be seen as the mediator between power and truth, truth and power. In this paper I will argue that the tensions between truth, art, and power are shaped by the way we articulate the influence of each epistemic nucleus on the other, which leads to a series of sterile profusions; the only true aesthetic position *all for art* is the Schillerian apotheosis of the Beautiful. Schiller is aware of the impossibility of his aesthetic state but like Nietzsche he will uphold the value of an affirmative thought-image: “By our knowing how to specify the ingredients which combine to produce Beauty, its genesis is by no means yet explained; for that would require that we ourselves grasped that combination which, like all reciprocal action between the finite and the infinite, remains inscrutable to us [...] Experience can give us answer whether there is a Beauty, and we shall know that as soon as it has taught us whether there is a humanity. But how there can be a Beauty, and how a humanity is possible, neither reason nor experience can teach us.”¹

A perspective weighing on the side of truth captures the work of art as a vehicle for knowledge as truth (truth-art), a point that Plato makes framing art as imitation, therefore as a means of transmission in the service of truth. In the *Republic* art is considered a skill: the Homeric rhapsodes are on the wrong side of the power struggle, as the mellifluous poets will be replaced by the rational *techne* of the guardians (art-truth). On the other side of the same fence, if we side with Thrasymachus' realpolitik against Socrates we will *use* power to frame truth, and hence art, which would beget a cynical aesthetics articulated along the axis of power-truth-art.

If we side with Burke's epistemological approach we will see the making of truth through the power of sensation as an *effect* to be registered by reason. Burke claims that truth and art are affected by the universal power of sensation (truth-power-art). For Schiller this is an instance of

¹ Schiller, Friedrich. On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters. Translated by Reginald Snell. Dover, 2004. 77

the predominance of a biological instinct. On the other end, Longinus sees sublimity as both truth and power anticipating the Romantic idea of genius and Nature. The sublimity that is given by nature cannot be conceptualized by science. Burke would call this an absurd proposition because, in his view, it is still the reason that is the dominating force notwithstanding the most powerful emotion of the sublime.

For Plato truth coincides with purity and coherence. Art is not excluded as long as it serves the established order of truth: “We would send him [the artist] away to another city, anointing his head with myrrh and garlanding him with wool. But we ourselves [the guardians], for our own good, would employ the more austere and less pleasing poet and storyteller, who would imitate the good man and tell stories according to the patterns we laid down at the beginning.”² Indeed, for Plato truth, goodness, and beauty spring stem from a unitary source like the Sun.³ It is apparent throughout the *Republic* that the artist (including the musician) is an instrument of power that is used in the crafting of an ideal society. The guardians of the *Kallipolis* must uphold role models that keep disharmony at bay and exalt unity over multiplicity, including the ban on the “pan-harmonic scale” and temporal oscillation of flute music: “Ugliness and discord and inharmonious tempo are nearly allied to ill words and ill nature, as grace and harmony are the twin sisters of goodness and virtue and bear their likeness.”⁴ Plato’s politics of aesthetics is tied to the idea of *mimesis* as imitation; art has the power of *suggestion*, a power both revered and feared. These restrictions are not so extravagant as we have had recent examples of dictatorial suppression of the arts such as the Taliban’s war on music.⁵

Burke has no interest in framing the power of art although he is on the same page as Plato in regards to the determinations of affect: “So that when I speak of cause, and efficient cause, I

² Plato. Republic. Translated with an Introduction by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2004. 39.

³ Ibid., 172-73.

⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁵ In this article there is a counter-Platonic claim that banning music actually produces disunity. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/13/afghanistan.books>

only mean, certain affections of the mind, that cause certain changes in the body; or certain powers and properties in bodies, that work a change in the mind.” (117) His *Enquiry* is based on the empirical study of sensation, which is granted universal authority: “As the conformation of the organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same.”⁶

Coming back to the question of the relationship between art, truth, and power, Burke’s position leaves art under the yoke of empirical power: “The imagination is only the representative of the senses, it can only be pleased and displeased by the images from the same principle on which the sense is pleased or displeased with the realities.”⁷ Ultimate authority is granted by sensation as the most powerful emotions are aroused by an intimation of the “king of terrors” death: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger that is to say whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind if capable of feeling.”⁸ This negative dimension of the sublime counters Plato’s ontology of art (perhaps confirming Plato’s worries); for Burke obscurity lends itself more to the effects of the sublime than radiance-semblance: “Poetry with all its obscurity, has more general as well as more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art [mimetic art].”⁹

The sublime leads us out of the mimetic function of art seen in Plato as well as moving the *experience of art* closer to the individual. Not only closer to the individual but also closer to mortality introducing time into the picture. What this movement does is situate art further away

⁶Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Edited by Adam Phillips, Oxford World’s Classics, 2009. 13

⁷Ibid., 16.

⁸Ibid., 36.

⁹Ibid., 57.

from the power of the philosopher-king (a likely dictator) and the rule of law. Another point Burke makes in relation to political power and the State that distances him from Plato is that there is an assumption of the *virtual* equality of all human beings that grounds the experience of the beautiful and the sublime.

Although Longinus can be considered an aesthete only in part, due to his situatedness within classical rhetoric, he can be viewed as an *ante litteram* Romantic thinker promoting a certain sensibility that privileges the individual over the collective, emotion over reason, and the power of the sublime over the beautiful: “For all Longinus’ discussion of the techniques of producing sublimity, what his treatise highlights is the importance of the personality of the author in the genesis of great writing.”¹⁰ Art is no longer only a technical skill based on imitation but an obscure encounter with an unknown power, almost a form of mystical awakening: “Inventive skill and the proper order and disposition of material are not manifested in a good touch here and there, but reveal themselves in slow degrees as they run through the whole texture of the composition; on the other hand a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker.”¹¹ Rhetorical training can only supply the structure whereas this surging of sublimity may take place.

Schiller brings the argument *for art* to an intoxicating conclusion as truth, art, and power are fused into the Beautiful. Schiller’s concept of the Beautiful is the ideal harmonization through the play impulse (*Spieltrieb*) of the immediate power of the senses (Life) and the Kantian “moral law within” (Reason). He declares art to be the truest source of power and truth; only art can guarantee the development of mankind in freedom: “Humanity has lost its dignity, but Art has rescued and preserved it in significant stone.”¹² For Schiller humanity is degraded by

¹⁰ Longinus. On the Sublime. Trans. Penelope Murray, T.S. Dorsch. *Classical Literary Criticism*. London: Penguin, 2004. xlvii

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114

¹² Schiller, Friedrich. On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters. Translated by Reginald Snell. Dover, 2004. 52

instrumental reason and the logic of the market: “Necessity is master, and bends a degraded humanity beneath its yoke. Utility is the great idol of our age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance. In these clumsy scales the spiritual service of Art has no weight; deprived of all encouragement, she flees from the noisy mart of our century.”¹³

I believe that what is really amazing about Schiller’s aesthetic philosophy is that he is saying that art has its own logic and as human beings we are endowed with this unknown power of creating *living shape*. How can this essence be ignored when considering truth and power? Schiller’s agenda of humanity entrusted to the guidance of Art is worrisome, perhaps disastrous, but it certainly makes us question our comfortable predicament in a world governed by utility.

¹³Ibid., 26

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