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The Power of Taste

Abstract

In this paper I address the problem which Kant in his *Lectures on Ethics* called the “philosopher’s stone”, i.e. how to give to understanding, “a compelling force ... that can move the will to perform the [morally good] action.” Drawing on Kant’s analysis of the relation between beauty and morality, as well as on Joseph Brodsky’s thesis that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics”, I provide the analysis of two ways in which reading great literature, and especially poetry can affect our ethical conduct: the first, through the beauty of its language, and the second, through its content.

Abstrakt

W tym artykule rozwijam tezę Josifa Brodskiego, że „estetyka jest matką etyki”, zilustrowaną również w wierszu Herberta *Potęga smaku*. Podobnie Kant w *Wykładach o etyce* uważał edukację moralną za „kamień filozoficzny”, a w *Krytyce władzy sądenia* znajduje nadzieję w pięknie przyrody, której bezinteresowna kontemplacja może nauczyć człowieka podobnie bezinteresownego podejścia w działaniu etycznym. Idąc za Brodskim, analizuję, jak literatura piękna może być źródłem refleksji i inspiracji moralnej, poprzez piękno języka oraz etyczne wartości, które literatura odsłania poprzez działania postaci, które podziwiamy i potępiamy.

Słowa kluczowe: estetyka i etyka, Kant, Brodski, literatura a moralność

Keywords: aesthetics and ethics, Kant, Brodski, literature and morality

In this paper I will look at the ways reading literature can affect one’s ethical conduct, thus addressing the problem which Kant in his *Lectures on Ethics* called the “philosopher’s stone”, i.e. how to give to understanding, “a compelling force ... that can move the will to perform the action” which understanding judges to be morally good.¹ In his *Lectures*, Kant thinks this problem could be addressed if parents instilled in their children a sense of shame, which would prevent them from ever wanting to do evil, but that advice never reappears in his later *Critique of Practical Reason*, which emphasizes free will rather than

1 I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, translated by L. Infield, Hackett, Indianapolis 1980, p. 45.

a conditioned response. And in his prophetic paper “Is the Human Race Continually Improving?”, the philosopher grows more pessimistic about the idea of educating children, saying that parents expect the schools to do it, and the schools don’t have money for qualified teachers because the government needs all the money for wars.² Kant comes back to his problem again in *The Critique of Judgment*, where in Section 59 he introduces a novel thesis that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” which can be construed in the light of his concluding remarks of the same section:

Taste makes possible the transition, without any violent leap, from the charm of sense to habitual moral interest, as it represents the imagination in its freedom as capable of purposive determination for understanding, and so teaches us to find even in objects of sense, a free satisfaction apart from any charm of sense.³

In other words, taste, as the faculty accustomed to admiring beauty for its own sake in the objects of sense, teaches us the same disinterested admiration for the moral law in our own conduct. Reason legislates over the faculty of desire in the moral judgment – it asks the agent to forgo the interests of desire for the sake of morality. Ultimately, the agent is rewarded for the forsaken pleasure with purely moral satisfaction, which is akin to the aesthetic pleasure in the contemplation of the beautiful. However, if the moral choice is difficult because it demands deliberation, sacrifice, practice, and powerful will, the aesthetic appreciation does not require any of the above, as it is immediate, spontaneous and pleasant in itself. In this way the appreciation of beauty can be a stepping stone to the appreciation of morality: one used to appreciate beauty for its own sake is more likely to do the same in the realm of morality, i.e. to appreciate the good in a disinterested way, which is, as we know, the only way morality should be treated, according to Kant.

One who loves the beauty of nature is not bound to destroy the forests, poison the rivers, or pollute the air for profit. One who appreciates the beauty of the other is bound to respect her, not hurt her. Desire for beauty, rightly called by Plato by the name of love, is capable of transforming one’s pursuit of pleasure and profit to the disinterested contemplation of beauty, which ultimately must lead to the realization of our dependence on nature and others, and thus to respect and reverence.⁴ Now, if the appreciation of beauty can lead to moral improvement through the feelings of love and respect that beauty evokes, then great literature, and especially poetry, could be shown to be particularly suitable for moral instruction, not only because of the beauty of its language but also because of its contents. Literature is full of stories of human vice and wretchedness, presented in the form that does not leave us any alternative

2 I. Kant, “Is the Human Race Continually Improving?”, *Political Writings of Kant*, translated by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970, pp. 189-190.

3 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, in *Kant, Selections*, edited and translated by L. W. Beck, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York 1988, p. 387.

4 Greek poet Cavafy talks about the transforming power of love in his poem *Below the House*: “suddenly everything was made beautiful by desire’s spell:/ the shops, the pavements, the stones, and walls, and balconies, and windows; there was nothing ugly that remained there”. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated, with introduction and commentary by D. Mendelsohn, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2012.

but to identify with the good and reject the evil, as the desire for beauty is as natural as the rejection of ugliness. It is in this sense that Dostoevsky claimed that beauty will save the world, or as the late Russian poet Joseph Brodsky put it, “aesthetics is the mother of ethics”.

Why does one engage in unethical conduct? Some do it because they are seduced by the objects of their desires. They know what they are doing is wrong, but they are too weak to stop. A husband who buys flowers for his wife after a night with his girlfriend might realize that he betrays both and yet is too weak to stop. Honesty, being too abstract, takes a back seat to comfort and desire, which are both concrete and palpable. What harm is done if none of the women would ever know? The same is true of stealing, which is driven by desire and most frequently committed with the perfect awareness of the infringement of the legal and moral laws. The voice of the conscience is pushed aside here not only by the blinding desire but also by the thrill of the action as it is accompanied by the fear of being discovered or caught in the act.

It is not that an unfaithful husband or a thief does not reflect on their actions, for they might be capable of doing so, they might even wallow in the realization of their depravity, deriving some moral solace from the presence of the guilt that accompanies their actions like a shadow. Yet neither the realization nor the guilt is sufficient to occasion a change in their behaviour. “His understanding sees that a thing is disgusting and is hostile to it but his sensibility is not disgusted,” says Kant, for if it were, the action would stop because, as Plato already saw, reason needs the help of passion to overcome desire.⁵ Thus, any ethical education that is solely concerned with reason is bound to be ineffective, as it is the heart that, in the final analysis, provides the necessary incentive for action.

Great literature is capable of showing us the hideousness of the moral depravity in our own conduct by evoking in us the repulsion towards various forms of wretchedness perpetuated by the fictional characters. Presumably, despite many movies glorifying great crimes, a normal reaction towards wretchedness, deceit and deception, not to mention genocide, rape or murder is that of repulsion, rejection, and condemnation. I assume these to be normal reactions and the opposite ones would be pathological. There are of course people who admire serial killers or even become ones themselves; we call them psychopaths, and they need more than a book to sit down with, so let’s refer them to the helping professionals and continue with our story.

In literature, we normally despise evil characters on both aesthetic and moral grounds, and we have hardly any choice in the matter—they are presented as aesthetically repulsive and morally abhorrent. It would be pathological to root for them. Take Luzhin from *Crime and Punishment*, a 45 year old bachelor, who is trying to marry Raskolnikov’s twenty year old sister, Dounia, not because he’s in love with her but because he dreams of a “virtuous, poor (she must be poor), very young, very pretty, of good birth and education, very timid, one who had suffered much, and was completely humbled before him, one who

⁵ I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 46.

would all her life look on him as her saviour, worship him, admire him and only him.”⁶ Dounia exceeds his expectations and Luzhin is already convinced that she “would be slavishly grateful all her life for his heroic condescension, and would humble herself in the dust before him, and he would have absolute, unbounded power over her!”⁷

The way Luzhin is described does not leave us any choice but to perceive him as a repulsive character and to reject his conduct. That teaches us not so much to look at real people in the same fashion, because that is what we already do anyway—in life we rarely admire slimes and crooks—but to look at ourselves from the same sort of distance that we look at the characters in a novel. We are appalled by the meanness of Luzhin, only to realize with horror that we do not lag much behind, that contrary to our self-image, we lag behind the benevolent rationality of Razumihin—we would like to perceive and relate to the world as he does, not like Luzhin.

Likewise, we are not only repelled by Raskolnikov’s murder and terrified by the thinking process that led him up to it, but we are also glancing at our own actions and beliefs, fearing that our negative potential might come to its actualization in a similar way. In other words, literature teaches us how to look at our own conduct from outside, as if we were the characters in a book, and—to borrow Husserlian language—how to constitute the world as a virtuous human being would; it kindles in us the desire to purify our hearts so that we could perceive reality like Razumihin, not Luzhin or Raskolnikov.

Underlying Raskolnikov’s murder of an old usurer is the theory he espouses, according to which human sacrifice is justified in the name of higher ideals. Thus Raskolnikov believes that he is justified to kill an “old worthless hag” and help his destitute mother and sister with the usurer’s ill-gained money, and perhaps to open a way for himself to create something noble for humanity, as he would be freed from financial constraints. Razumihin who does not share his friend’s theoretical views is always capable to find less violent solutions both to his own and other people’s existential problems. I have yet to see a political or moral philosophy book that would draw a reader more passionately into the discussions of the issues of morality and social justice while at the same time providing us with the glimpses of the depth of the misery, terror and despair that human beings can reach. Only great classical literature can do this and readers can do no better than reaching for Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Zola, Stendhal, Proust, Flaubert, and other great novelists when they are in distress, in need of ethical advice, spiritual consolation, or simply a glimpse into their own souls.

Our self-image is rarely accurate. As the narrator of the *Notes from Underground* tells us, we are bound to lie not only when confessing to others but even when confessing to ourselves. We are not likely to look at ourselves from the perspective that would reveal our worst features. Reading alone can do the trick, putting us squarely in front of our character traits that we recognize in the fictional characters. No wonder then that we identify them as familiar.

⁶ F. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, translated by C. Garnett, Global Grey 2018, p. 317.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

We are horrified by Raskolnikov's thought process that leads him to murder—he ends up killing not only the old woman but her sister as well—and he himself is horrified and falls ill afterwards. This fictional murder, the consciousness of the killer, the discussions and the brisk plot in the novel keep us in the grips of suspense, horror, remorse, and expiation for hundreds of pages, and stay with us forever, whereas the numerous murders that happen every day, rapes, genocides, countless mutilated bodies of women and children we see on the TV screen every evening might sadden us momentarily, and then we forget about them. Is it the “banality of evil”, to use Hannah Arendt's expression, its ubiquity that leaves us cold, or is it the fast-paced nature of the news that does not leave time for the events to sink in to have any real impact on the viewers? However, if the news is fast-paced and packed with evil, tragic events, it is because it reflects the nature of reality which is also fast-paced and full of evil, and we are swept by its current and immunized by the ubiquity of its ills to be able to cope with it. The medium of art slows it down, frames it, puts it on the stage for us to look at and contemplate, lowering at the same time our defences so that our immunity is disarmed.

Book readers are asked to relax: “the characters and events presented in this book are fictitious”; you don't have to reach for your purse or be wary of any undue strain on your heart. But it is exactly the heart that art is after, and now that our guard is down, it hits it hard and leaves it aching long after the curtain is drawn or the book is closed. Literature leaves the deepest impact because in reading, let us recollect Ingarden here, we are never passive observers but performers, co-creating the characters and the scenery, imagining the untold details of their thought process, and so on, although our contributions remain anonymous to us. Therein lies the mystery of the strength of the bond between us and the world of the novel—the more work we put in co-creating it and the less aware we are of what we are contributing to the fictional world, the stronger the bond that binds us, the less resistance is encountered, the deeper the truth sinks in, and the harder the heart is hit.

Normally, we are not particularly susceptible to the advice given by others, not even to the admonitions of our own reason or conscience. We manage to do what we really want to do, no matter how detrimental it might be to ourselves or others. Literature tricks us into believing that the words are meant for somebody else—for the characters of the presented world—thus we are not defensive against their power, and their truth reaches us and sinks into our minds and hearts before our defensive mechanism, which usually protects us from any unpleasant truth, has time to kick in. For in an aesthetic perception we are too busy enjoying the action, contemplating beauty and being moved by the emotions which grip us powerfully enough to feel them but gently enough not to be pained by them.⁸ The recognition of these truths comes later—when

⁸ Bohdan Dziemidok's reinterpretation of Aristotelian concept of *catharsis* in relations to modern psychological and aesthetic theories attest to the power of art not only to provide a release from troubling emotions but also to occasion self-introspection, which might lead to positive changes in behavior. B. Dziemidok, *Główne kontrowersje estetyki współczesnej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2002, pp. 225-235.

we are done with the reading-and has all the marks of the Greek tragedy-the tragic event has already happened-we have done the deed and now remember it clearly as something we should not have done, but it is too late. Which means of course that before we were able to protect ourselves from the unpleasant truth about ourselves, it has already reached our hearts, and now that it can't be denied or neglected, we need to do something about it, we have to change our lives, as the torso of Apollo silently commands in Rilke's poem, "The Ancient Torso of Apollo".

Some people commit evil out of ignorance-they do not see that what they are doing is immoral. If they gave any thought to it at all, they might even believe that what they do is actually good, or at least that the goal is good and thus worth sacrificing some other good for, such as human lives. They might sign up for an unjust war under the mistaken belief that it is just and that it is their patriotic duty. The governments are not interested in a good education of their citizens because they are trying to instil this feeling of duty and patriotism for any action they undertake, thus limiting the possibility of a critical distance of their citizens towards the official propaganda. In this way, some people fall victims to what Barry Clark called "heteronomous evil".⁹

Stanley Benn, drawing on Barry Clark's commentary of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* says: "We resign ourselves absolutely to heteronomy at the risk of becoming, like Eichmann, people of evil will, with a capacity in no way impaired to grasp the evil that we do in obeying wicked orders but willfully disregarding it as evil."¹⁰ The point that Benn is missing, however, despite his awareness of the two cases that I will mention below, is that Eichmann's capacity or conscience was indeed impaired, or even perverted, to such an extent that his conscience bothered him when he, in response to the plea of his relatives, saved a half-Jewish cousin and then a Viennese Jewish couple from pogrom. To what extent can we say here that Eichmann was capable of recognizing that his actions were morally wrong? And if he was not, how more terrifying is his crime, as the crimes of the Nazis who were not only oblivious as to the evil nature of their crimes but even believed that the massacre of the Jews was good. What could be the cause of such perversity?

Hannah Arendt, reporting on Eichmann's trial, noticed his "heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him. ... officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with his inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else."¹¹ Thus, for Eichmann and others like him, Hitler's law became the moral law, whose infringement resulted in a guilty conscience. The reason that Hannah Arendt gives is Eichmann's inability to think, caused by his mind's total absorption of Nazi propaganda. As it turned out, Eichmann read only two books in his life,

⁹ B. Clarke, *Beyond 'The Banality of Evil'*, "British Journal of Political Science" 10 1980. I owe this reference to Stanley Benn, see the note 10 below.

¹⁰ S. Benn, *Ethics*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1985, p. 799.

¹¹ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Penguin Books, New York 1994, pp. 48-9.

“and this was perhaps a considerable achievement for a man who, by his own account, had always been utterly reluctant to read anything except newspapers, and who, to the distress of his father, had never availed himself of the books in the family library.”¹²

Good literature provides us with a higher aesthetic plane of regard, which stands in marked contrast to the ugliness of any propaganda. It also teaches us how to look at the world from the standpoint of the other. Where we thought only one perception was possible—ours—many different perspectives are shown possible by different characters of a novel.

The familiar defence of Eichmann, as well as of other Nazi criminals, was that they were only acting on orders, that they did not hate the Jews but merely did their duty. In other words, they were convinced that what they were doing was right. That means they must have bought into the Nazi propaganda, together with its rationale and language. From what we know about Nazi propaganda, however, is that it was quite crude and simplistic, its language consisted of clichés and worn-out slogans which were repeated endlessly, and that, on Hitler’s own admission, its crudeness was the reason why it was supposed to work. It did because it fell on the ears that were not tuned to a more sophisticated language, such as that of good poetry. As Brodsky said, “political evil is always a bad stylist”, so it would be impossible for someone whose taste was educated on beautiful poetry to “fall for the refrains and the rhythmical incantations peculiar to any version of political demagoguery.”¹³ In other words, it is hard to imagine a reader of Goethe, Rilke, Pushkin or Tsvetaeva lending her ear to the crude, simplistic and repetitive propaganda of the Soviets or Nazis. The histories of the nations in whose languages these poets wrote might have been a sufficient counter-argument if not for the fact that poets are rarely read, and poetry is written by a small number of individuals for a tiny minority. For if the poetry readers were in the majority there would hardly be anyone to attend the rallies.

The power of literature to transform an individual morally, to make her capable of critical stance, rendering her thus oblivious to any propaganda, was recognized by many tyrants who tried to destroy good literature precisely for that reason. Hitler burned books. Stalin subjected Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Pasternak, and countless other poets and writers to constant persecution, not so much because their writing had any anti-communist content but because it remained defiantly beautiful and detached from the official language of the party, continuing and preserving, as Brodsky put it, “the hereditary nobility of the forms of culture ... that were equivalent in our consciousness to forms of human dignity”, thus immunizing anybody who has come into its sphere against soviet propaganda, like a vaccine immunizes against a virus.¹⁴

Communism tried to outlaw and marginalize poetry because in its presence its own language paled into evident falsity. Nobody who was familiar with the former would fall for the latter. For as Brodsky put it, “where art has stepped,

12 Ibid., p. 41.

13 J. Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York 1995, p. 49.

14 Ibid., p. 56.

where a poem has been read, they discover, in place of the anticipated consent and unanimity, indifference and polyphony; in place of the resolve to act, inattention and fastidiousness.¹⁵

The late Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert expressed similar sentiments in his poem "Potęga smaku" [The Power of Taste] best:

To wcale nie wymagało wielkiego charakteru
nasza odmowa niezgoda i upór
mieliśmy odrobinę koniecznej odwagi
lecz w gruncie rzeczy była to sprawa smaku
Tak smaku
w którym są włókna duszy i chrząstki sumienia

Kto wie gdyby nas lepiej i piękniej kuszone
słano kobiety różowe płaskie jak opłatek
lub fantastyczne twory z obrazów Hieronima Boscha
lecz piekło w tym czasie było jakie
mokry dół zaułek morderców barak
nazwany pałacem sprawiedliwości
samogonny Mefisto w leninowskiej kurtce
posyłał w teren wnuczęta Aurory
chłopców o twarzach ziemniaczanych
bardzo brzydkie dziewczyny o czerwonych rękach

Zaiste ich retoryka była aż nazbyt parciana
(Marek Tulliusz obracał się w grobie)
łańcuchy tautologii parę pojęć jak cepy
dialektyka oprawców żadnej dystynkcji w rozumowaniu
składnia pozbawiona urody koniunktiwu

Tak więc estetyka może być pomocna w życiu
nie należy zaniedbywać nauki o pięknie.¹⁶

15 Ibid.

16 Z. Herbert, *Potęga smaku*, in *Wiersze wybrane*, Wydawnictwo a5, Kraków 2005, p. 283. English translation:

"It didn't require great character at all
our refusal disagreement and resistance
we had a shred of necessary courage
but fundamentally it was a matter of taste
Yes taste
in which there are fibers of soul the cartilage of
conscience
Who knows if we had been better and more
attractively tempted
sent rose-skinned women thin as a wafer
or fantastic creatures from the paintings of
Hieronimus Bosch
but what kind of hell was there at this time
a wet pit the murderers' alley the barrack
called a palace of justice
a home-brewed Mephisto in a Lenin jacket
sent Aurora's grandchildren on into the field
boys with potato faces

What the poet alludes to is the aesthetics of the communist reality, with its grey buildings, ill fitting suits, moronic, monotonous speeches, and atrocious TV. In other words, there was nothing beautiful or seductive about the communist reality, so it was not that difficult not to fall prey to its promises, especially that the latter was expressed in ugly language.

Communists in Russia and Eastern Europe first tried to wipe out the intelligentsia and then did everything to make both education in schools as well as the available art and literature outside the schools as dull and uninspiring as possible, thus trying to limit the possibility of a critical distance to the communist dogma, depriving the citizens of the point of reference, of comparison. Our choices are primordialy aesthetic in nature—we are attracted to other people, animals, music, art on an aesthetic level, at least initially. The reflection on the content, the ethics, or metaphysics, comes later. Although, as Herbert observes, in taste, already “there are fibers of soul the cartilage of conscience”, the beauty is already fused with the good, as the ancients suspected. It is the poetry that teaches us about this union best because poetry itself constitutes the most perfect fusion of the euphonic and the semantic or, as Brodsky would say, the beautiful and its attendant truth.

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very ugly girls with red hands

 So aesthetics can be helpful in life
 one should not neglect the study of beauty
 Before we declare our consent we must carefully
 examine
 the shape of the architecture the rhythm of the drums

official colors the despicable ritual of funerals
 Our eyes and refused obedience
 the princes of our senses proudly chose exile”.

Z. Herbert, *The Collected Poems: 1956-1998*, translated by A. Valles, Ecco Press, New York 2007.

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