

THE LINK BETWEEN SYMBOLISM, DECADENCE AND REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The literary world has over the centuries been engaged in a never ending debate on the role of literary art in man's life. Should literature or literary art for that matter teach or instruct on the one hand, or give pleasure and amusement on the other or should it do both?

This paper is an attempt to join that debate on the side of the second option. It will seek to examine literary movements such as Symbolism, Decadence and Realism in an attempt to establish their nexus, which is aestheticism because these movements have been, and are still concerned with the nature of art, life and of ideas.

Keywords: Parnassian, Symbolism, Decadence, Realism and Aestheticism.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Ages, literary artists have in their works led the way to man's understanding of himself and his environment. While the ancient Greeks and Romans primarily saw the role of the literary artist as imparting knowledge, teaching or instructing, others then and in later centuries thought his role was to entertain others. Yet others prescribed a dual role for the literary artist to teach and to give pleasure.

Homer wrote his epics – the Iliad and the Odyssey primarily to instruct Greeks on their history even though they were entertained through the music. Sophocles wrote his Theban Plays primarily to instruct people on the need for reverence for the gods. Oedipus Rex for example is a treatise on morality. Aristotle in *The Art of Poetry* is concerned with giving instruction. Longinus on the other hand believed that literature ought to be sublime or give pleasure.

In modern times literary artists such as Wilfred Owen wrote realistic poetry not to shock people but to tell people that war is neither a picnic nor is it about patriotism. He tells/shows the uselessness and the pity of war, the pity that war distils. The Romantics on the other hand were concerned with the beauty of nature.

We shall attempt in this paper therefore to establish that aestheticism is the nexus between symbolism, decadence and realism by first discussing them individually and severally as movements and then

drawing conclusions, on the role art ought to play in man's life.

DISCUSSION

Symbolism

The word 'symbol' comes from the Greek 'symbolon' meaning, 'contract', 'token' 'insignia', a means of identification. In its original Greek meaning, the symbol represented and communicated a coherent greater whole by means of a part. The part as a sort of certificate guaranteed the presence of the whole and as a concise meaningful formulae indicated the larger context. But symbols are not always in non-verbal communication. They occur in verbal communication as well. In Awoonor's "The Cathedral", and "Weaver Bird" for example, the nouns "cathedral" and "weaver bird" symbolise colonialism with all its attendant connotations of christianity, exploitation and slavery. So also is "vultures" in David Diop's "The Vultures".

Symbolism can therefore be defined as the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them directly nor by defining them through overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by re-creating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols. This is personal symbolism. But there is also transcendental symbolism.

Transcendental symbolism uses concrete images as symbols not of particular thoughts and feelings within the literary artist, but of a vast and general ideal world of which the real world is merely an imperfect copy.

This concept of the existence of an ideal world lying beyond reality goes back to Plato and his theory of Forms. That is why Rimbaud can elevate the poet or artist to the rank of "The Poete Voyant" – the Poet – Seer. The poet-seer is endowed with the power to see behind and beyond the objects of the real world to essences concealed in the ideal world. And what does he see? He sees that the essence of literary art is to see art for what it is, to give pleasure not to instruct. It is thus a de-emphasis of Horace's notion of art as "docere" – to teach or instruct. Art should therefore be divorced from instruction.

As a movement, symbolism evolved into the literary scene between 1885 and 1895 as a reaction against Parnassian Poetry. Parnassian poetry, which was then in vogue, stressed restraint, objectivity, technical perfection and precise description as a reaction against the emotionalism and verbal imprecision of the Romantics. The essence of the symbolists was to see art for art's sake, which after all, is aestheticism.

Decadence

"Decadence" suggests a deviation from the norm, from the status quo, a lowering as it were of literary standards, a debasement of the moral, social and religious convictions or beliefs of a period or time.

The term "decadence" refers to the post Romantic period of the 1890's because its proponents such as Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson reacted against Romanticism.

They believed that poetry is not all about "the outpouring of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility", but that poetry must go beyond that and break new grounds.

Thus a new style of art as exemplified by Beardsley were derogatorily referred to as "decadent" because it was a complete departure from what people were used to.

Thus their style was maligned as "sick" and "kinky" and grotesque and therefore decadent. But is there a link between decadence and aestheticism? Aestheticism perhaps like vulgar hedonism evades us when we too persistently self consciously pursue it and that the lover of beauty, (the aesthete) is sooner or later, impelled to seek beauty in things not commonly and normally considered beautiful.

As a matter of fact, symptoms of decadence had been observed even in the early Victorian critics. In 1863

for example the "Saturday Review" commented on "the artistic type who foster peculiar emotions". Ten years later, the same paper still represented the aesthete as "one who saw life as not action but as, being the delirious contemplation of the infinitely little". The paper concluded with the following words "the beauty he the aesthete loves is the beauty that springs from decay". There is beauty in ugliness. This paradox of beauty in ugliness seems to us to be the link between decadence and aestheticism.

Realism

Realism refers to the accuracy of representation: telling or showing the thing, as it is not as it should or ought to be. In other words, realism is allowing the truth to show/tell itself rather than leaving it to the artist's creative imagination.

In Stendhal's *Scarlet and Black* for example, Julien Sorel the hero is presented with all his warts and carbuncles with no holds barred. Sorel is ambitious and lecherous. Conrad tells it as it is about the colonial enterprise in Africa in his *Heart of Darkness*. Nor is Dostoevsky any different in his *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In all these examples, the characters have been presented as they are – shorn of any coverings of decorum.

Realism broadly speaking, is the taste and search for truth in art, the desire for accuracy. As a movement, it was a reaction against Romanticism. It therefore presupposes a representation of the idea, concept or thing as it really is, not as imagined.

There are however two basic types of realism – Western and Eastern European. Western European realism is not the realistic objective reality of photography but one perceived from the point of view of the individual – a frank, concise and complete expression of the individual self. It is thus an attack upon existing conventions, attitudes, schools and movements. In the words of Flaubert "... realism is a movement away from the fictitious to the real – a construction of a fictitious yet real society..."

In contrast, Eastern European realism is based on socialist ideology in which art is seen as a creation of the artist's own world. Art thus becomes a means to an end, a response to the shift from a transcendental conviction to the agnostic, a means of the artist's immortality. The artist or creator is thus unimportant after the work is finished.

It is only the work that then becomes solely and absolutely important not the literary artist. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* comes into mind.

The link between realism and aestheticism lies in the fact that realism seeks to present life in the form of art, as life really is – not a form of moral guidance.

Aestheticism

Having now discussed symbolism, decadence and realism, we shall now look at their nexus, which is aestheticism.

"Aestheticism" means, broadly, a devotion to beauty as found in the arts and in whatever is attractive in the world around us. The word "aestheticism" first appeared, however, in the nineteenth century and denoted something new: a conviction of the importance of beauty for beauty's sake. Aestheticism came to stand for certain ideas about life and art particularly in England in the mid-to late Victorian period.

Aestheticism connotes beauty. But what is beauty? Several attempts to define it abound. Thomas Aquinas the great medieval Christian Philosopher, defined beauty, as that which, being seen, pleases. The nineteenth-century French novelist, Stendhal, described it as the promise of happiness (la promesse de bonheur). Yet Walter Pater, the foremost exponent of the aesthetic view of life in the Preface to *The Renaissance* (1873), sees beauty, as something immediately experienced, something felt upon the pulses not a bloodless abstraction. Aesthetics thus concerns beauty. It is thus a philosophical study of beauty and the arts.

Aestheticism can be approached from three different angles: as a view of life; and as a practical tendency in literature and art. The first corresponds to art for art's sake; the second to contemplative aestheticism and the third to a tendency away from moral didacticism.

As a view of art, aestheticism represents a drastic attempt to separate art from life. Most people would accept that art is different from life, but the aesthetic standpoint says that art has no reference to life, therefore no moral implications. Art for Art's sake (l'art pour l'art) finds a basis in the function of poetry.

The Roman poet Horace in his *Ars Poetica* talks about the function of Poetry (as of art generally) as to instruct or delight (aut prodesse aut delectare) but aestheticism

differs from this in that, while it is hard to imagine a work of art from which literally nothing could conceivably be learnt, the instruction is merely incidental, and quite irrelevant to its distinctive value as art.

The work is not to be valued for anything that could influence our conduct or even our general attitude to life; it is to be valued solely for the immediate aesthetic pleasure it affords.

"Art, "as Walter Pater puts it" comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake". Another way of interpreting art for art's sake, is to see it as an attempt to express it in music, ceramics, abstract painting and sculpture. These evoke pure aestheticism.

As a view of life, aestheticism implies taking life 'in the spirit of art'. As something to be appreciated for its beauty, its variety, its dramatic spectacle. According to Pater in *The Renaissance* (1873) "... to pursue the aesthetic life, we must cultivate our whole area of awareness by sharpening our intelligence, our sense of perception and our power of introspection." The aesthete's approach to life is thus contemplative, not active.

The third aspect of aestheticism as a practical tendency in literature and art, and in literary and art criticism is a movement away from didacticism. The critic's task is to enable other people to receive the impression that a given work has the power to afford them. The result is thus "impressionistic" or "appreciative". In the preface to *The Renaissance*, Pater expounds his concept of the critic:

The aesthetic critic (meaning here simply the literary or art critic)... regards all the objects with which he has to do... as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. ... (His function) is to distinguish, to analyse and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure, to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what conditions it is experienced.

In practice, Pater is seeking a re-creation in the reader's mind, of the pleasurable impression a work makes on himself, and relating this to recognizable features of the work. Criticism thus approximates the

condition of art. The critic is to **interpret** works of art, not to say whether they are good or bad. Criticism is thus appreciative rather than evaluative.

CONCLUSION

Symbolism, Decadence and Realism as our discussion has shown were literary tendencies that sought as it were, to move away from conventional ideas of their times. Above all they sought to see art as art not as art having a theological message for mankind. Art should be appreciated for what is it, not for what moral lessons it can impart.

Rather art should emphasise on "delectare" (to charm, please, amuse) and de-emphasise "docere" (to instruct, teach or inform)

Thus Symbolism, Decadence and Realism all sought and still seek Aestheticism. Aestheticism attempts to bring art to a condition of pure love – art for art's sake because it connotes that the value of art is in the reader's immediate experience of it and not in any so-called moral value. This tendency to see the importance of beauty in art is aestheticism, which is the nexus of Symbolism, Decadence and Realism.

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