

THE CHALLENGE OF ART

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Talk to many a contemporary artist—especially an aspiring artist—read a review, listen to some professor in a MFA program, and you’ll quickly get the idea that the point of art is somehow “to challenge people.” About what? Apparently anything goes. I go to the theater, and someone is challenging my views on race or gender, in the galleries someone is challenging my views on religion, and God knows what they’re trying to challenge in the symphony halls—perhaps just must my patience?

Now, don’t misunderstand me: I have the highest regard for art, and for artists as well...when they are good. But it is an objective fact (outside of academia and the art world) that there is not a lot of good art today. And I submit to you that the dearth of good art in our culture has something to do with this bizarre notion of challenging.

I don’t have space here to get into a lengthy discussion on the history of the role of the artist vis-a-vis the audience, James Joyce, Schoenberg, and all that. But it will suffice to recount a conversation I was fortunate to have recently with a young, talented, and sincere Christian playwright. In discussing her new project—about which I am personally excited—I revealed my lack of sophistication by asking the very unartistic question: “What’s the point?” Of course, she was ready with an answer: to challenge x, y, and z. But when I asked her why on earth I would pay good money to go and have my views challenged by a playwright—well, she hadn’t thought of that. And people wonder why the arts are suffering! The art schools teach students to challenge the audience; but no one has taught the audience to appreciate it. Many critics even decry this fact, blaming the poor state of the arts in our country on an audience that just doesn’t “get it” —whatever “it” is. And indeed, we do not get it. We do not want to get it.

The notion that the artist’s duty is to challenge the audience is offensive to the audience. It is arrogant and condescending. Learning how to paint, sculpt, write, or compose, does not make one a moral authority on art or anything else. There is no moral value in being transgressive for the sake of transgressiveness. And there is no merit in challenging people just for the sake of a challenge. The old “devil’s argument” is, after all, a very poor argument.

It is noteworthy that this aim of the contemporary artist is absent from most great art. Whatever the point of a great work of art, it certainly is not to challenge people. Of course, no one will dispute that art does challenge people: the moral difficulties in Shakespeare and Aeschylus are challenging, Hardy’s war poems are challenging, Górecki’s *Third Symphony* is challenging; any great work of art demands an appropriately great response, and that is

always challenging. But the real challenge of art is not just some point of argument—there are no shortages of those; and I don't need art for that—the real challenge of art is something immeasurably greater. The challenge of art is beauty. And the challenge of beauty is truth. Truth is challenging. But it is also inviting. It is also glorious and liberating. Truth is wondrous, not scandalous.

When trying to figure out what the real point of art is, I find it always a good idea to consult the poetry section before the philosophy section. Did Homer challenge? Did Pindar? Dante? Milton? They are all challenging, to be sure. But one would be a fool to say that the point, the telos, of any great art or artist is primarily to challenge. What, after all, is the challenge in Mozart or Bach?

So what is the point of art, then, if not to challenge? Rilke gives one of the finest answers; in an inscription to a book of poems, he writes:

Oh speak, poet, what do you do?

- I praise.

But the monstrosities and the murderous days,
how do you endure them, how do you take them?

- I praise.

But the anonymous, the nameless grays,
how, poet, do you still invoke them?

- I praise.

What right have you, in all displays,
in very mask, to be genuine?

- I praise.

And that the stillness and the turbulent sprays
know you like star and storm?

: - because I praise.

Praise. Celebration. Despite any self-satisfaction, any arrogance, and rebuke or condemnation, you find always in great art something to celebrate! Art is about celebration—not desecration. And it is just this mistake that misleads so many of today's would-be artists. Rilke is not unaware of the moral failures of his culture; he is not blind to the Great War around him. Rilke, and every other great artist, had to confront the same sorts of tragedies, hypocrisies, and injustices that today's artists confront. But there is a world of difference between the way great artists and today's artists respond to these problems. The artists who endure do so because they see beyond the problems they face, they look to what is eternal, realizing that the evils of today are here but for today. Today's artists would rather hold up—almost celebrate—the evils. Take, for example, one of our finest playwrights, whom I generally admire both as a playwright and a person: Stephen Adly Guirgis. In his plays *In Arabia We'd All Be Kings* and *Our Lady of 121st St.*, he gives us a gruesome, heart-wrenching picture of the underbelly of our society, of the often (willfully) unseen results of corporate and political malfeasance, of drugs, of hope and lost hope, of

dignity shrouded in darkness; and he does this with great empathy and humanity. But he stops there. There is no solution. There is nothing to be praised. He gives this hell to the audience, and we are supposed to do something about it—that is the challenge. The difference is that in great art, when Dante gives us Hell, he also leads us through Purgatory and into Paradise. It is precisely this which is lacking in art today. Our artists are content to give us hell. That is their challenge.

What we find in truly great art, however, is not the challenge of hell, but a glimpse of heaven. The artist does not come with demands and accusations, but comes offering praise, delight, beauty, hope, truth! Perhaps it is because our artists lack these very qualities that they do not offer them? Or perhaps they have merely been taught poorly? Whatever the cause, it seems to me that the solution is the same. The artist's vocation—like all vocations—must be understood as a call to love and humility. This should be at the forefront of the artist's mind: love your audience as yourself.

This is especially true for the Christian artist. When I talk with Christian artists, I always ask: "Where are the beatitudes in your art?" Now that is a challenge. Christ is always the real challenge. We—artists and audience—are called to serve, to be last, to carry a cross for our neighbor. We are not called to challenge or accuse, but to love—that is the challenge! And art will only regain its proper and necessary place in our culture when artists begin to meet that challenge, when they no longer see themselves as judges, but as servants.

But that will not happen unless we, the audience, also do our part: we must also serve the artists. We must support good art when it is found, and we must cultivate in our schools and communities the sort of environment in which great art can flourish. Beauty is relational; and great art is a two-way street. So perhaps the challenge of art belongs to all of us.