Art and Ethics?—
The (F)utility of Art

BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

Nothing beyond the State, above the State, against the State. Everything to the State, for the State, in the State.

—Benito Mussolini

All art is quite useless.

—Oscar Wilde

The issue for the artist, of course, is: whose ethics? whose morality? whose standards of propriety? whose community? whose censors? whose judges?-prosecutors?-jailers?-executioners? whose State?

The customs of the tribe may seem to outside witnesses to be as arbitrary as language itself—language, in which words for things are understood to be not-things—but, within the tribe, they are rarely negotiable. Still less are they violable by the individual except at great risk. (As the distressing case of Salman Rushdie has made clear.) Whatever “taboo” is, out of what chthonian darkness it arises, one thing about “taboo” is clear: you violate it only at a price. The reigning ethics of a society is the stone wall against which the individual may fling himself, to no avail—or be flung, and broken. As the poet Frank Bidart says in one of his poems from In The Western Night: Collected Poems 1965-90:

1. Man is a MORAL animal.
2. You can get human beings to do anything—IF you convince
them it is moral.

3. You can convince human beings anything is moral.

Even if one does not incur the wrath of the authorities, or, in a "free" democracy like our own, the wrath of elected or self-appointed censors, the artist's relationship to ethics is always problematic, paradoxical. Always there is the question not only of whose ethics but the issue of art's purpose in the community: If art exists as a medium by which "ethical" messages are conveyed, an implicit morality sanctioned, why trouble with "art" at all? Why the ambiguous—and ambigious—strategies of "art"? "If I had a message," Ernest Hemingway is said to have said, "I would send a telegram." This witty rejoinder makes us laugh, suggesting as it does a naive question or an impertinent demand; yet, in more elevated quarters, where the artist is not under attack but indeed may be highly respected, it is common to encounter questions of "theme," "vision," "world-view," as if such might be extracted from the body of the artist's work; as if such were somehow distinct and separable from the experience of the art-work itself, available for a sort of economical freeze-drying. What was your purpose in writing this? What were you trying to convey? Is this how you see the world?

In the artist's own experience, of course, art is fundamentally indefinable, unsayable; there is something sacred about its demands upon the soul, something inherently mysterious in the forms it takes, no less than in its contents. Henry James's metaphor of the art of fiction as a "dim underworld, [a] great glazed tank of art" in which "strange subjects float" is a compelling one, in the parable-like story "The Middle Years," as is his rhapsodic insistence upon the essential "madness" of art at the conclusion of that story. Here is a contemporary novelist, Marilynne Robinson:

The novel cherishes what is unuttered, uncountenanced, uninvolved—the heart's darkness and bitterness. It will not embarrass the guiltiest secret with revelation. All sorts of questions flourish in this murky atmosphere. What is the self? How does identity take shape? ...What is guilt and how is it to be borne in the absence of justice or expiation? These questions change as soon as they are put into words because they have their most
profound meaning as sensation, in aching discomforts like loneliness, awkwardness, emptiness, and dread.

All writers know this truth: *things change as they are put into words because they have their most profound meaning as sensation*, the heart's passion and conviction prior to any linguistic effort to explain, express, summarize, dramatize. We know—before we comprehend the terms of our very knowing. We violate the beautiful subtleties of our art by speaking reductively of it, yet how else can we speak of it, at all? Or perhaps we cannot, and should not, except in the very terms of art:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind.
(Emily Dickinson, 1129, c. 1868)

"Art" does after all suggest "artifice"—even "artificial." Certainly it stands in a pertinent relationship to "nature"—"natural." But the enemies of art deny this metaphysical distinction, equating what is metaphorical with their perception of what is "real," as if a photograph of a landscape were the landscape, or a word the very thing or concept it indicates, with the power, too, to do harm. And the artist's power to question authority, expose hypocrisy and fraud has always evoked fear in the custodians of the State.

Yet the artist is the perpetual antagonist of what is fixed and "known"—what is "moral," "ethical," "good." If it is suggested, however obliquely, that the artist should do x, y, z, he or she instinctively responds, like Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist*, "I will not serve." In its earliest energies in the individual, art is likely to be expressive of adolescent rebellion, for the typical artist begins in adolescence, defining him- or
herself against family, authority, a world of elders. Here is the voice of the young rebel, in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*:

Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new... I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it.

Thoreau, born David Henry, switched his given names about as a young man; the most primary act of self [re]creation is naming.

The voice of rebellion runs through our classic American literature, which is on the whole a youthful, idiosyncratic, defiant voice. It is the voice of which Melville approves so passionately in Hawthorne’s Mosses from an Old Manse: “There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say yes.” Unheroic in every way except the most crucial is Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener, whose response to every reasonable suggestion put to him is the terse, “I would prefer not to”—Bartleby, formerly of the Dead Letter Office in Washington; who eventually, like Kafka’s Hunger Artist, starves to death out of sheer stubborn isolation from mankind. Our most subversive poetic voice of the nineteenth century is surely Emily Dickinson, whose stubborn sense of her own worth sustained her through the composing of 1,775 remarkable poems, most of them unpublished and unknown during her lifetime. Dickinson was the only member of her family not to declare herself a Christian; her quick, sly observations on the subject of God suggest a skeptic’s detachment and bemusement:

Drowning is not so pitiful  
As the attempt to rise.  
Three times, ’tis said, a sinking man  
Comes up to face the skies,  
And then declines forever  
To that abhorred abode,  
Where hope and he part company—
For he is grasped of God.
The Maker's cordial visage,
However good to see,
Is shunned, we must admit it,
Like an adversity.
(1718, ?)

This is hardly the sort of genteel ladies' verse, whether written by female or male poets, likely to have been published in general interest magazines like *Atlantic Monthly* in Dickinson's time. Nor

God is indeed a jealous God—
He cannot bear to see
That we had rather not with Him
But with each other play.
(1719, ?)

The very look of Dickinson's poetry on the page, its breathless word-clusters that suggest, not the ponderousness of polished lines, but the rapid flight of thought, is boldly iconoclastic; her slant rhymes, perverse off-rhythms and fading or broken-off cadences suggest a virtual metapoetry, a poetry of a heightened self-consciousness, starkly contemporary with our own time. This is a poetic imagination capable of expressing, in the most compact space, the most expansive emotions. Dickinson's "I" narrator is both an individual of singular ferocity and a representative figure, most frequently, though not exclusively, female:

They shut me up in Prose—
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet—
Because they liked me "still"—
Still! Could themself have peeped—
And seen my Brain—go round—
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason—in the Pound—...
(613, c. 1862)
Here the "female" is trapped within the "feminine." There is evidence in certain of the poems that, for all her reclusiveness, Emily Dickinson had a sense of her own genius; she inhabited so intense and all-consuming an interior world, how could an "exterior" world compete?

Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?
Then crouch within the door—
Red--is the Fire's common tint—
But when the vivid Ore
Has vanquished Flame's conditions,
It quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the light
Of unanointed Blaze...
(365, c. 1862)

This is the interior drama; the exterior, all that the poet chooses to reveal—

I hide myself within my flower,
That fading from your Vase,
You, unsuspecting, feel for me—
Almost a loneliness.
(903, c. 1864)

The fading cadences, the diminished final line: this is an exquisite art, in which subject and language are perfectly fused. In other, seemingly rawer poems, turbulence is the subject itself; the mind's terrifying autonomy, the poet's self-surrender to passion, dissolution, madness:

The Brain, within its Groove
Runs evenly—and true—
But let a Splinter swerve—
'Twere easier for You—
To put a Current back—
When Floods have slit the Hills—
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves—
And trodden out the Mills—
(556, c.1862)
Emily Dickinson is our great American poet of inwardness; kin to, if anyone, Rainer Maria Rilke and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The quintessentially visible poet of rebellion is the dandy; the androgyne; the celebrant of fin-de-siècle excess who, in the style of Baudelaire, Huysmanns, Wilde flouts not only authority but good taste, prudence, "common" sense. Who else but Oscar Wilde is our exemplar?--he who made the observation that, when giving a public lecture, it is not what one says but what one wears that matters. (Touring the United States and Canada in 1882, lecturing to promulgate "beauty," Wilde chose his eye-catching costumes with care: a great green coat that fell past his ankles, collar and cuffs trimmed with sealskin; another coat lined with lavender silk; shirts with wide Lord Byron collars; brightly colored neckties and handkerchiefs; black velvet suits with puffed upper sleeves and frills of fine lace; knee-breeches, black hose, patent leather shoes with bright buckles.) As Wilde's mentor Walter Pater offered a "vision" in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) to "regard all things and principles...as inconstant modes or fashions"—"to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy"—to realize "the truth of aesthetic culture...as a new form of the contemplative life"—"for art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake"—so Oscar Wilde, with a self-publicist's flair for the provocative, pushes aestheticism to a sort of inverted, or perverted ethics. "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art," Wilde says in "The Decay of Lying"; and, more famously elsewhere, in the prologue to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), "No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style... Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art... Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril... All art is quite useless."

In "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader* (1919), Virginia Woolf states boldly that "any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what we wish to express, if we are writers." This is the very soul of Modernism, the declaration of the artist's independence from all prescribed forms of art; the virtual elimination of any awareness of, let alone concession to, a community of readers, an audience whose sympathies should be courted. The artist constitutes his own audience and, in
Goethe's terms, is the sole inhabitant of his universe. Voice, style, sheer language become subject: "What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent upon nothing external,—which would be held together by the strength of its style," writes Flaubert in a letter of 1861. The self-determining artist becomes an obvious enemy of the State, less in political terms than in moral terms, for nothing so arouses the fury of the puritan temperament as a violation of "taboo"; through history, from the time of Homer to the very present, depictions of violent acts of savagery can be accommodated in art in a way that depictions of sexual acts of even "normal" proportions evidently cannot. The censorious American missionary spirit empowered a crusader named Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in the waning years of the nineteenth century, to arrest writers, publishers, and booksellers for "violating community standards of Christian decency"; this, the virulent puritanism, whose "democratic" power should not be underestimated, interfered with the publication of various editions of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, all but banned Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in 1899, and destroyed Chopin's career; eviscerated Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, banned Joyce's *Ulysses*, served summonses upon booksellers as recently as the late 1950's (in Syracuse, New York) for stocking Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*; and threatens writers, publishers, and booksellers at the present time. The hatred of the most reactionary citizens for those citizens perceived as "free-thinking"—as enemies—is always astonishing to the artistic temperament, for it seems so disproportionate to our perception of our own power, political or otherwise. One violates "ethics"—whatever, in the community, "ethics" precisely is—at one's own risk.

From other quarters, in different epochs, have come other demands upon the imaginative artist, other expectations of the uses to which individual talent might be put. From the ideological camp of Mussolini et al. on the Fascist right, from the ideological camp of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky et al. on the Communist-Socialist left, the insistence is that art is a function of society; the artist's soul belongs to the state. And if the artist rebels?—the state can respond with censorship, imprisonment, exile, death. Plato, lover of the Good, nonetheless argued for the banishment of the poet from his idealized totalitarian Republic; by his own cruel logic, how could he
have disapproved of the execution of Socrates? Always there have been artists who are themselves ideologues, and some of these are major talents; George Orwell, for instance, who declared that his work was written “against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism.” In this context, it is not surprising that other artists reacted with aristocratic disdain. In his essay “Art as Establishe...
the Wildean premise that all art is quite useless, the reader is tempted to turn aside from experimental fiction altogether. Younger writers, particularly those whose experience of America differs significantly from the largely unexamined experience of the dominant majority, of white male heterosexuals of the middle, educated class, have returned to other forms of fiction, poetry, and drama. Race, gender, class emerge as perspectives of vision as well as subjects and "issues"; the work of our gifted contemporaries, too rich, too diverse, too many to even begin to name, frequently combines experimental method with storytelling of a traditional sort, "poetic" and "realistic" simultaneously.

If we persist, we come full circle. The shifts and currents of prevailing aesthetics are a great Mobius strip forever turning upon itself; stimulated by, and reacting against, and again stimulated by the politics of the time. If we are told that art is only for the State, we rebel; if we are told that art is useless, futile, we rebel; we are creatures of self-determination, yet creatures of our time, deeply connected with one another, nourished by one another, defined by one another, in ways impossible to enumerate. Consider, for instance, the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, creator of "antiart" images in the 1920's and 30's; the dedicated experimentalist who claimed that, for him, art was a "lamentable expedient" by which thought might be produced. Magritte's most characteristic canvases are thought-parables, paradoxes unrelated to the visual world and explicable solely in terms of ideas (in one famous painting, for example, a canvas depicting a landscape is set before a window opening out upon the "real" landscape; in another famous painting, "The Treachery of Images," a pipe is displayed above the caption, This is not a pipe). Magritte rejected as worthless the kind of art designed to evoke emotion in the viewer, as well as art displaying painterly effects. During the Nazi occupation of Belgium, however, the artist found himself suddenly painting in a different mode. Where his art had always been flat, his images generic, monotonic as wallpaper, in this phase of his career, which lasted from the spring of 1943 to 1946, Magritte's canvases erupted in color; the tone of his paintings became bright and joyful, his brushwork took on an Impressionistic quality. In this "Renoir period," Magritte obsessively painted warm, sensuous figures, images clearly intended to evoke emotion, even eroticism. Magritte, the most cerebral of artists, believed that this work was in
reaction to the Nazi tyranny and the horror of war: "My work is a counter-offensive."

The artist as perpetual antagonist; the artist as supremely self-determined; the artist as deeply bonded to his or her world, and in a meaningful relationship with a community--this is the artist's ethics, and the artist's aesthetics.