

On Cruelty as a Part of (Artistic) Life

James Camien McGuiggan

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Comments welcome at jamescamien@gmail.com.

Abstract

The blistering review, wherein the critic cruelly twists the knife to the applause of onlookers, has fallen out of favour. But is there something to be said for this sort of cruelty? In this paper, I argue for a space for cruelty. In art, there is a sort of cruelty—that can be employed by artists and audiences as well as by critics—that is a pointed disregard for the feelings of the audience: a telling of deep or hard truth without coddling. When, as often, this is invited by the criticised person, it is respectful towards them. Sometimes the cruelty we invite is callousness, but sometimes it is more: if an artist, for example, creates bad art, they give an insult, and this insult invites an insult in return—such as would be a review that twists the knife. Giving this insult, then, is at least *prima facie* the respectful response.

Introduction

Philosophers and artists both are familiar with the really harsh criticism: the review of your philosophy book that says you’ve missed something “blindingly obvious”¹; the music review wherein the critic admits to being unable to tell whether the performers made mistakes, so incomprehensible is the music.² It is dreaded, and there has been a drive in philosophy at least to put an end to the practice of hatchet jobs that used to be valorised. This is not to say hatchet jobs no longer exist at all. In 2014, Nina Strohminger wrote a review of a book by Colin McGinn on disgust, which opens: “In disgust research, there is shit, and then there is bullshit. McGinn’s

¹ As I said of Scruton’s criticism of Nirvana in his *Music as an Art* (<https://journalofmusic.com/opinion/closed-hearted-ranting-pop>).

² As a blogger said of some music I wrote and had performed in 2009-ish.

theory belongs to the latter category.”³ Brian Leiter actually collects such reviews on his blog.⁴ But perhaps the greatest exponent of cruel criticism is Nietzsche, who, in his later years, turned the full force of his intellect and rhetoric against Wagner, fashioning him as a symbol and symptom of all that is decadent and degenerate about modernity.⁵ He minces no words: “Is Wagner a man at all? Is he not rather a disease? Everything he touches he contaminates. *He has made music sick.*”⁶

The examples just now are examples of critics being cruel to artists, and for the sake of simplicity of expression I will often speak this way, but my argument is broader. Art itself can also be cruel. There’s something cruel, I think, about the “shut up” chords that open Beethoven’s “Eroica,” as there is about the way Michael Han-ke shocks his viewers with extended, quiet scenes of torture, and as there is about James Joyce using living people’s real names in *Dubliners* in order to give his compatriots “one good look at themselves”⁷ in his “moral history” of a “centre of paralysis.”⁸ And the cruelty I will talk about today is also found in a relationship break-up, when a pair’s habits of relying on each other must be sharply arrested; and in competitive sports, especially when the better team does not let up when their lead is unassailable. But I am primarily interested in cruelty as it appears in art, because art is a space of relatively pure or deep communication where distracting issues of material or social gain are somewhat set aside—and because Collingwood, whose account of art I assume, is a guiding star throughout this paper, although I will keep him mostly in the background.⁹

³ Strohming, “The Meaning of Disgust: A Refutation,” in *Emotion Review* 6(3): 214–16, URL: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRTMO-14>.

⁴ Websearch “did not like” site: www.leiterreports.com/.

⁵ See Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner* (1888) and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1889); for commentary, see Ryan Harvey and Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche’s The Case of Wagner and Nietzsche contra Wagner* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Harvey and Ridley argue that Nietzsche’s animus towards Wagner motivates much of his later philosophy.

⁶ *The Case of Wagner* (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (London: T. N. Foulis, 1911)), p. 11. Emphasis in original.

⁷ From a letter, dated 23 June 1906, to Grant Richards, who would have been *Dubliners*’s publisher but for his fear of libel suits.

⁸ Letter to Richards (5 May 1906).

⁹ Collingwood advances his account in his *The Principles of Art* (1938). I have defended it in my *This Is Art* (2016).

In this talk, I will not be giving any sort of defence of cruelty in general. There are many instances in which it is inapt and immoral, and I would not be surprised if it were *normally* inapt and immoral. However, if you do a PhilPapers search for “cruelty” then you only find it as a shorthand for immorality, and I don’t think this is right either. I think cruelty is not *always* immoral, so I want to carve out a precise understanding of cruelty and argue that in some cases, it’s not only amusing to spectate, but both called-for and, ironically, a way of respecting the person to whom you are being cruel: of treating them as a free, responsible agent. In other words, I’m curious about the paradox of the common phrase, “Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.”

1. Definitions and Examples; Waugh and Nietzsche

In the passage of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* that has probably stuck with me most vividly in the many years since I first read it, Anthony Blanche, hearing that his old friend Charles Ryder has made a break with his suffocating English charm, and created, after a trip to a Central American jungle, not art that is (in Blanche’s estimation) “a dean’s daughter in flowered muslin” as before, but excitingly “unhealthy,” is disappointed. Instead of a new Gauguin, Anthony finds at Charles’s new exhibition “a very naughty and very successful practical joke.” He goes on:

It reminded me of dear Sebastian when he liked so much to dress up in false whiskers. It was charm again, my dear, simple, creamy English charm, playing tigers... Charm is the great English blight. ... It spots and kills anything it touches. It kills love; it kills art; I very much fear, my dear Charles, it has killed *you*.¹⁰

Charles, as Anthony knows, has gone to great lengths to rid himself of this “charm”—as far from civilisation as an actual jungle. He thinks himself successful for causing a minor scandal with this exhibition. And then Anthony swans in and immediately sees that it’s still just a joke, not art; that it’s as much a game of dress-up as literal dress-up is—and breezily and cordially tells Charles that he’s dead. And then invites him to a drink.

¹⁰ Pp. 259–60 of one edition. Emphasis in original.

Anthony, here, is up to something fascinating and important. For lack of a better word, I call it cruelty. He is cruel to Charles because he tells him the hard truth without any regard for how Charles feels about it or what Charles can do about it. Why doesn't Anthony just smile and nod like everyone else, and let Charles keep on digging his grave that he is clearly intent on digging? If he were to do so, would he be less cruel? Or would he rather be less loving?

The cruelty inflicted by Anthony is what Nietzsche (not the champion of cruelty as he sometimes seems to want his readers to think, but a connoisseur of it nonetheless) calls "artist's cruelty," and he gives an evocative definition of it. It is the

desire to give form to oneself as a piece of difficult, resisting, suffering matter, to brand it with a will, a critique, a contradiction, a mockery, a 'no,' this uncanny, terrible but joyous labour of a soul voluntarily split within itself, making itself suffer out of the pleasure of making suffer.¹¹

The same cruelty recurs later when Nietzsche praises "we" scientists and philosophers: "We violate ourselves these days, no doubt, we are nutcrackers of the soul, questioning and questionable, treating life as though it were nothing but cracking nuts."^{12,13}

We will be in a better position to understand these electrifying if cryptic passages by the end of the paper; we will plod a bit to get there, though. The type of cruelty that primarily interests me I will call "cruelty as indifference."¹⁴ This cruelty consists not in trying to turn the screw on the object of one's cruelty as in what we might consider a distinct attitude of malice or sadism, but in just not thinking of the object at all. You're not going out of your way to hurt someone, but you don't consider whether what you're saying or doing might hurt them. Now, this is not a

¹¹ *On the Genealogy of Morality* (trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 2017)), §2.18.

¹² *GM* §3.9.

¹³ My examples in this paper involve two parties whereas these quotations involve only one. The difference is superficial: the artist-critic relationship exists microcosmically within every artist, and literal artists and critics are engaged in a shared project.

¹⁴ Perhaps "callousness" is more accurate to this phenomenon than "cruelty." But, as will argue later, these two phenomena overlap and I am interested in how they connect with one another, so it's worth calling both "cruelty" even if it might also sometimes be worth distinguishing them.

straightforward attitude. It has two subcategories: firstly, it might simply not occur to me to take an interest in the other's welfare. Secondly, I might *refuse* to take an interest. This, importantly and perhaps ironically, is *not a refusal to regard the other*: in order to *refuse* to regard someone as a person with feelings that might constrict my treatment of them, I must first regard them *as* such. Instead, the refusal is a way of saying that something is "none of my business"; but to do this, I must first know *what it is* that is not my business. Now some things indeed *are* none of our business (try to mediate between neighbours and their son, whose vivid disagreements you can hear clearly through your party wall, and you will be dismissed as a busybody), but the feelings of those with whom we're engaged in anything like serious conversation (i.e., art) plausibly always are our business.

2. The Paradox. The Invitation to Cruelty.

Let us return to Charles's paintings and Anthony's dismissal of them in *Brideshead*. What's relevant today is not what Anthony thought about Charles's paintings but how he communicates this. It has an air of, "*Charles, just wonderful to see you again. I saw your exhibition! It was as terrible as ever. Care for a drink? You're dead inside. Oh you must meet this new friend of mine.*" Anthony is merciless towards Charles, but he is light: he acts as if it's common knowledge (which it is between the two men), as if it changes nothing—even though it does. At the same time, though, and even, as we shall see, by the same token, he's loving: he sees Charles as he is, for all his "charm," and still takes the time to come up and chat to him—and speak truthfully to him. Anthony has no respect for Charles's art, but he has enough respect for Charles himself that he thinks Charles also sees, or can be brought to see, that his art is mere "charm." For this criticism not to fall on deaf ears, there must be a part of Charles that is not just charm—that is not yet dead—and Anthony is trying to reach out to this not-yet-totally-suffocated kernel of a man, to at least show it the light of another face and so rejuvenate its hope that the genuine communication of real art is possible. Somewhere Charles still aspires to create real art, and Anthony encourages him to keep that aspiration alive.

This is surely the opposite of cruelty: from this perspective, cruelty is to never dare regard or encourage Charles's deepest and noblest ambitions, whether because Charles is deemed beyond redemption or (worse?) from lack of interest in

his redemption; cruelty is to keep Charles afloat in a superficial world of genteel smoothness in which he is able to drift off to sleep.¹⁵

But doesn't the deeper lovingness in Anthony's criticism of Charles bely the superficial cruelty? If cruelty is *disregard of the other*, then it seems that Anthony is not *actually* being cruel to Charles. How, then, can Anthony be loving to Charles *by means of* cruelty?

The answer will present itself if we turn up the microscope a bit. When I criticise you or your work, I'm mindful of the effect of my words on (at least) three levels.

1. Firstly, I'm mindful of how my words *directly* affect you: whether you find them interesting or helpful or hurtful or encouraging or reassuring or whatever.
2. Secondly, there's a "meta-"level: I'm mindful of how mindful you want me to be of the first level. You might signal to me, for instance, that you don't want me to be mindful of whether you find my words encouraging: you rather want me to think only about whether the words are true or appropriate to what's under discussion. For example, *Finnegans Wake* mostly goes over my head, but I wouldn't have it any other way: I don't want Joyce to compromise his artistic vision for my sake.
3. Thirdly, there's a more general or impartial meta-level. If we share a commitment to some ideal—such as art or philosophy—then we will know (or trust or hope for) each other to expect ourselves to live up to the demands that this ideal makes of us. For example, art makes huge demands of us in terms of spiritual honesty, and if I aspire to be a true artist then I will keep myself open to anything that could help me with that—such as criticism. Consequently, if you are a critic, and you trust that I will take your criticism constructively, this gives you the license to tell me straight how it is instead of wasting both our time putting on kid gloves.

What this all means is that there are actually three independent, compatible ways in which I can be cruel (or kind) to you, corresponding to each of these levels. Firstly, obviously, I can say mean things to you. (Or I can focus on what you did well, or say you did better than I think you did, and thereby be kind.)

¹⁵ "[T]he person who feels contempt is always someone who 'has not forgotten how to respect'" (Nietzsche, *GM* §3.25).

But it's the second and third ways of being cruel/kind that are interesting. Out of respect for you, I can tell you the unvarnished truth, even if the truth is that your attempt failed. Cruelty on the first level is required by kindness on the second, more abstract level.

If I am cruel to you because I sense that you, particularly, are serious about art, I'm still engaging intimately with you. More peculiar is (3), the "impartial" meta-level. Here, an *abstract* commitment to a shared ideal demands first-order cruelty of me. Rather than being kind or loving to you in *any* sense, I'm looking straight past you, as it were, to our shared ideal. But this, again, is something I can¹⁶ do precisely because you ask me to do it, and when this is so, it is again something I do through love for you, albeit a very "thin," abstract love: not love for you as a particular artist, but merely as an artist "in general."

An example: you have created an artwork which not only fails, but which also evinces an abject artistic unseriousness. (As Anthony Blanche would put it, it's a joke.) But you protest your seriousness, and I take you at your word (i.e., I respect you enough to take you at your word) or at the promise you have given of seriousness, or I treat you as you ask to be treated rather than how you deserve to be treated and rather than how I might think you really want to be treated, or perhaps even I take your self-identification as an artist or putting forward of your work as amounting to a claim to be treated as a serious artist; and it is by responding to *that* that my cruelty is underpinned by love.

2.1. Kisses, Insults, and Art Invite a Response *in Kind*

Up to this point, I have talked about "cruelty" and "honest criticism" as if they are closely connected. But we can obviously criticise each other honestly but also kindly. It's not more honest to call a glass half full than to call it half empty; similarly, we can use rhetorical strategies to soften criticism, or refocus the substance of it on the successes of what we're critiquing, without falsifying them. Finally, if we honestly critique something we find entirely excellent, then our gushing praise will hardly come across as cruel. So Anthony Blanche is not cruel just because he's honest; something else is going on.

To see what else, remember that art and philosophy are not just about "dry" or intellectual truth, but also emotion and spirituality. The stakes are both high and personal. When I go to a concert hall, I don't just hope to be amused or to learn

¹⁶ *Can* but might not; (3) itself subdivides in two as (2) and (3) are two.

something new: I go in a state of vulnerability, open to the possibility of hearing something *that is difficult for me to bear* and that leaves me transformed. When the art fails, therefore, it doesn't just miss truth: it also disrespects its audience's making themselves vulnerable. The audience's (and critic's) response, then, arguably can and even should be moral and emotional as much as intellectual.¹⁷ I want to explore this possibility now.

If you, in camaraderie, tell me a good joke, and I respond, not with laughter, but with the crisp assertion that that was indeed a good joke, then I have in some important sense missed the sort of communication and communion you were aiming for.¹⁸ We tell jokes to make each other *laugh*. Laughter in response to a friend's joke is not just a response to the joke itself, but an expression of our respect for our friend. Similarly, a lover's kiss is not just supposed to inform of facts about love or desire, but to share an experience of them, to kindle a reciprocal love and desire. To respond in this bodied, emotional way is not just natural but communicatively more appropriate: it is "to pick up what's been put down." And more than this again: it's only if we respond in this way that we can even know what exactly has been given to us. How am I to know whether I find a joke funny, except by whether it makes me laugh? How am I to know whether a kiss arouses desire in me, unless I kiss back and let myself feel it?¹⁹

This is all plain enough—but if it's the case for nice things such as jokes and kisses, why is it not the case for nasty things such as insults? Consider: if I insult you, then I ask you to be hurt; so, for you to be hurt by this is for us to be in

¹⁷ This thought is somewhat analogous to that about "anger" in political philosophy. On this, see, e.g., Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," in *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26: 123–44 (2018); Myisha Cherry, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle* (OUP, 2021); for a response, see Tyler Paytas, "Aptness Isn't Enough: Why We Ought to Abandon Anger," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2022). There is an important difference, though, in that anger is not as such a response to an *invitation*, and so however "apt" it is, it is not as such a contribution to a commun(ica)tion as cruelty, as I use the term, is.

¹⁸ I note the parallel with what Srinivasan calls "recognition" in connection with anger. But I stress that we don't just want our interlocutors to *recognise* our jokes as funny, but to actually laugh.

¹⁹ [I should try to remember some good citations for this! I think Collingwood argues it in Bk. II, and I think maybe "mirror neurons" in psychology and philosophy of emotion point in the same direction. Maybe anger-aptness stuff relevant here too?]

communion with one another (albeit a “negative” communion, the communion of both of us *feeling* what a reprobate I am). If you rebuff me (suppose you laugh off my insult as pathetic, or are just totally neutral about it while acknowledging *that* I insulted you), you refuse my invitation, which is a cruel thing to do to me. (Which is not to say it’s unjustified!) The response called for by an insult is normally not just “being hurt,” either, but some sort of action, such as another insult in return.²⁰

Finally, remember that insults do not need to be “intentional” in the sense that they occupy front and centre of the insulter’s mind. An insult can also be given through, e.g., neglect. I insult my wife if I don’t trust her to settle our baby to sleep. The reason this is still an insult is that it is still in some sense intentional. In these examples, I don’t ever think “I would like my wife to feel miserable,” but what I *do* do is neglect to develop myself and our relationship together in such a way as to not stumble into such insults, despite knowing the importance of such development.

The relevance of all this is that bad art is a sort of insult.²¹ As I said above, it disrespects not just the time and expense its audience took to attend to it, but also and far more importantly disrespects the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual openness they give. It is hard, and a gift, to render oneself vulnerable. For an artist to respond to this gift of vulnerability with unserious art is to show that they don’t respect the value of that gift, or of the people who gave it to them. If bad art is an insult, and if insults invite a response in kind, then the response bad art invites is something like cruelty.

Add to this one final, particularly Collingwoodian consideration: when artists put themselves out there, they are striving to do something the success of which they cannot judge alone (*viz.*, be honest), and so they see in the response of their audience whether they succeeded. They *ask for* this response, because only thus can they be as honest as they strive to be. But as with humour and kisses above, the audience misses the point if its response is to mark the artist out of ten: the respectful, fuller response is emotional, somatic, and spiritual. The music makes me move in a certain way, and so I know it has that certain sort of life in it. To communicate

²⁰ Cf. the game “the dozens,” although in general I want to put aside mere performances of cruelty: these are to cruelty what a stage kiss is to a lovers’ kiss.

²¹ [Or perhaps a sort of mockery (possibly spurious Nietzschean resonance here, but otherwise I think the description works just about equally well)?]

this back to the artist, I have to *move*.²² By the same token, though, if the art fails, it fails in this multimodal way, and if I want to continue the conversation the artist opens with her work, it has to be a multimodal response.²³ It has to be one that allows her to understand how I *felt* in this multimodal way, and the only way I can do this is by inviting *her* to feel something like the same way. How else can the artist know what exactly what the insult into which they've stumbled *is*? And so how can they revise that insult out of their work (and their heart) in the future? Which is to say: for this reason too, the artwork invites cruelty.

Anthony's response to Charles's exhibition is captured better by this deeper understanding of cruelty, too. Anthony doesn't just tell Charles the truth, he does so glibly, casually. I see this as a tiny revenge on Charles for inviting him to the exhibition: Anthony's carelessness with Charles's feelings mirrors Charles's carelessness with Anthony's. Similarly, I see the cursory inspection Anthony grants Charles's paintings as him "clamming up," and I see inviting him for a drink as connoting that Charles has done nothing to turn from that superficial level of communication to a deeper, more sober one.

3. A Broader Perspective: To Be Cruel?

I have been arguing heretofore in a rather stern manner, but this is because I have been *thinking* in a rather idealised and indeed one-sided way. In truth, probably no artist fully justifies the vulnerability shown them, and for that matter probably no audience is fully vulnerable, which is the response demanded of them by the artist who renders herself vulnerable through her work.²⁴ But partial failures are also partial successes and if, as I have been arguing, sometimes our artistic interactions are

²² Not move to or at the artist, mind: I only need to move on initially engaging with the art. I can later translate this response to whatever medium I use to respond. (As Scruton (*Aesthetics of Music*??) points out, this "movement" is not always literal even initially.)

²³ "My objections to Wagner's music are physiological objections. Why should I therefore begin by clothing them in æsthetic formulæ?" (Nietzsche, *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1889), trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (London: T. N. Foulis, 1911), p. 59; URL: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25012/pg25012-images.html>).

²⁴ Beethoven's "Eroica" chords are a criticism of, an insult to, an audience that refuses to give him the respect of their undivided attention despite inviting him to bare his soul to them by calling him a great artist.

insults, inviting cruelty, so also they are honest dealings, inviting honesty in return, or even gifts, inviting nothing but filling us with gratitude.

It is easy for Waugh to portray Charles's Central American jungle paintings as abject failures meriting Anthony's utter dismissal of them, but outside of novels there is rarely if ever a failure as unredeemed as those paintings—which are, after all, thinly described stand-ins for total failure—and so correspondingly rarely would an Anthony-like total dismissal ever be appropriate on my argument. What *would* be called for, perhaps, would be a few harsh words mixed with praise—in other words, an overall balanced response.

Perhaps even less than this is called for. Let's go back to the "insult" analogy. I argued there that if person A insults person B, A is inviting B to feel hurt and to reciprocate, such that B is respecting A by accepting this invitation. But maybe this is to trust A's surface-level desires too much. Desires can be perverted, for example by abuse or trauma, and sometimes the respectful thing to do is to refuse them and instead respond to the deeper desires of which the expressed desires are perversions. To continue our example: maybe the respectful thing for B to do on receiving A's insult is to ask A why she is insulting him and try to repair the rift between them. Another possibility: maybe the nature of persons is such that there is some general prohibition against cruelty to us, regardless of what we invite or desire.

I leave these possibilities open, with just a note that as I haven't offered any arguments for them, they are only possibilities. Notice, though, that they make cruelty inadmissible by going outside the scope of communication between persons. In this talk I have restricted my focus to what, in art and criticism, we directly if implicitly ask of each other. It is perhaps already surprising that "cruelty" is one of those things.²⁵

²⁵ Acknowledgements: Heather Peterson and Aloysius Ventham for conversation; Aloysius for also reading an earlier draft; James Tabbush for making me excited about the density of human communication (in particular second-person address); audiences at workshops in Newcastle and Oxford; and everyone who has made me a better philosopher and a better person by not coddling me.

4. Connections

4.1 Collingwood and the Socio-political Value of Art

As a coda, I want to briefly fulfil my promise made at the beginning to explicitly consider how all this relates to Collingwood.

A *sotto voce* theme in *The Principles of Art* (OUP, 1938) is the looming Second World War, which started a year after the book was published. Collingwood was a politically sensitive liberal who saw art as a bulwark against the barbarism of Nazism and anti-Semitism that was driving whole countries insane. There is thus an immense and still-invigorating urgency about *The Principles of Art*: the artist, for him, occupies a role of huge responsibility. The peroration of the book is a discussion of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which poem

depicts a world where the wholesome flowing water of emotion, which alone fertilizes all human activity, has dried up. [...] No one gives; no one will risk himself by sympathizing; no one has anything to control. We are imprisoned in ourselves, becalmed in a windless selfishness. The only emotion left in us is fear.[.] (p. 335)

Eliot, Collingwood goes on, “must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts” (p. 336).²⁶

Note how strikingly Eliot resembles *Brideshead's* Anthony. The present paper is an expansion on this similarity by reflecting on what exactly the audience's “displeasure” is, and what that has to do with the artist. As Collingwood notes, Eliot dropped his poem, through which he made himself vulnerable, into a desert wherein it was liable to be ignored or wilfully misinterpreted. *The Waste Land* was

²⁶ The connection between Collingwoodian prophetic art and cruel art could be dwelt on at some length. Recall Joyce's *Dubliners*: Joyce also wrote to Richards that “in composing my chapter of moral history in exactly the way I have composed it I have taken the first step towards the spiritual liberation of my country” (20 May, 1906) and that “you will retard the course of civilisation in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass” (23 June, 1906). But all Joyce did in *Dubliners* to justify this sort of claim was *depict* it as frankly (the phrases he uses are “scrupulous meanness” and without “deform[ity]”) (letter of 5 May, 1906) as he could. This all sounds to my ears exactly like the kind of thing Collingwood was interested in calling true art.

liable to be misunderstood, could cause “displeasure,” *because it was cruel*. It was so only as a response, to be sure—it was a response to the cruelty done by Eliot’s contemporaries by their failing to be properly “living”—but nevertheless, it (a) makes his contemporaries’ cruelty explicit, *draws attention* to it; and (b) *returns* it, in much the way Anthony Blanche does. But being cruel is hard: even if, on the deeper level I have described, it can break down the boundaries between us, on the more superficial level it pushes us apart. Employing it is risky, as our interlocutor may not have the courage to engage on the deeper level—indeed, the more cruelty is needed, the harder it is for them to do so. So cruelty can cut us off from our friends and peers.

In addition, Eliot could not be sure that *The Waste Land* was honest in the way it proved to be.²⁷ If *The Waste Land* had not been honest—and for Eliot that was a possibility—it could have turned out to evince the cruelty he was railing against; a cruelty that he would have turned out to be hallucinating in others. And then not only would the breach the poem constituted be done, it would have been for nothing.

So when we say, after Collingwood, that the courage art requires is the courage to do something that might “displease” someone, what we concretely mean by this is not that it requires the courage to risk inadvertently making some strangers sad, but that it requires the courage to actively do something that might be an insult in which we cut others off—and worse, that it might be so pointlessly. Remembering this adds a sharpness to the artist’s lot.

One last thing: you might find it tempting to say something like this: “Artists should have license to tell the truth, because thus do they fulfil their role of keeping society sane. However, they should not have license to be cruel, for that goes beyond honesty.” Or you might find it tempting to say of critics or of audiences. But if, as I have argued, cruelty is sometimes precisely part of the artist’s and her community’s vocational obligation to be honest, then cruelty also needs protection. And part of this is having the courage to do it ourselves.

4.2

4.3

²⁷ This is for reasons Collingwood gives in ch. XIV, “The Artist and the Community.”

Notes