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Notes and Fragments

MORALITY AND ART: THE CASE OF HUCK FINN

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IN THE FOLLOWING ESSAY, I argue that in the case of some works of art, moral evaluation should not play a role in artistic appraisal. While I will reject the strong ethicist's view—the view that moral evaluation may inform the artistic evaluation of any artwork—I will not do so in favor of the aestheticist's position. The aestheticist argues for a rigid distinction between the moral and aesthetic evaluation of an artwork. On this view, the moral status of the work is independent of and irrelevant to artistic value. This view would allow us, for example, to evaluate Leni Reifenstahl's film *The Triumph of the Will* as a superior work of cinematic art, while at the same time condemning it on moral grounds.¹ Rather than support a strict separation of aesthetic and moral elements in an artwork, I will suggest that in the case of certain types of artwork, it is inappropriate to use moral criteria in their artistic evaluation—even though the work's moral content contributes to its artistic value. This is the case in artworks that (1) are “interrogative” in form and (2) have moral dilemmas as their principal theme.

Briefly put, an interrogative artwork is one that poses a question or problem that remains unresolved in the work. I will begin by explaining in more detail what I mean by an interrogative artwork. Using the example of Duchamp's “ready-made” sculpture *Fountain*, I will argue that it is inappropriate to artistically evaluate such works by appeal to criteria that they themselves call into question. I will then turn to the specific issue of morally interrogative artworks. I will consider Mark

Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a paradigmatic case of an interrogative artwork that poses an unresolved moral problem, and will contrast my own rejection of the moral appraisal of the novel to Wayne Booth's attempt to provide a morally informed positive assessment of the novel.

I

The debate about the moral appraisal of art usually centers upon our understanding of what elements of the artwork contribute to its artistic value. The strong aestheticist restricts artistic value to formal aesthetic properties, while the ethicist believes that the moral value of an artwork's content may be a component part of its artistic value, and consequently concludes that moral criteria may inform our artistic judgments. The issue then, is what kinds of criteria should inform artistic evaluation. However, when framed in this way, the question of the moral appraisal of artwork takes for granted a very questionable understanding of what an artwork is or must be. What is assumed is that a theory of art should always be the ground of artistic evaluation. The idea seems to be that the art theorist knows what art generally is, and at least in some respects what it ought to be (what standards it should meet). Armed with theoretical criteria of a work's success, the theorist can tell us whether a work of art is or is not successful. The debate, as it has been set up, is merely whether these criteria of success should include moral criteria.

This perspective eliminates a different possibility that I think is worth consideration. What if some successful artworks are not an attempt to produce an object that meets certain criteria of artistic merit, but rather the exploration and source of those very criteria? Some artworks may be a kind of a concrete experiment, an exploratory activity that runs ahead of our concept of art and our criteria of artistic merit, providing our theory of art with its criteria, rather than running behind it, trying to embody those criteria. Put another way, what if artworks need not be objects that present themselves as instantiations of beauty or merit, but can instead be interrogative in form? Such an artwork would pose in material form the questions: "What is beauty?" or "Is this art?" If an artwork can be an empirical experiment in the theory of art and artistic value, if it can even interrogate and test the concepts of a theory of art, then the appeal to theoretical criteria in the evaluation of a work may in some cases be inappropriate—namely, whenever an artistic judgment

is based upon criteria that the work itself tests or calls into question. To do so would, quite simply, beg the question of the artwork.

An example may help illustrate my position. Consider the notorious case of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, an artwork that consists of nothing more than a porcelain urinal signed with the name "R. Mutt." If we accept it as a work of art, we must call into question many traditional assumptions about the proper criteria of artistic value. For example, Duchamp's *Fountain* does not, as some artworks do, represent another object. It is also not strictly the work of the artist, but rather found "ready made." And while we may attempt to appraise the work's formal beauty, the fact that the object is a urinal strongly discourages of from doing so. That is to say, the work forces us to ask whether any formal beauty it may possess is relevant to its artistic value. Most importantly, it mocks any attempt to invest the object with meaning, and thus to appraise the object in terms of its content as opposed to its form. It is not, to be sure, impossible to interpret the sense of the work. Duchamp may have intended to expose the prudery and pretension of the art establishment by bringing a mundane but unseemly object into the refined atmosphere of an art exhibition. Or he may have wished to expose the superficiality of "pure" aesthetic appreciation by presenting an object that combines formal harmony with symbolic disgust.

The work may have any or all of these meanings as its content, and the artist may have intended any of them, or none of them. Regardless, when the object is appraised as a work of art, it frustrates any confident application of traditional criteria for artistic evaluation. If we are to take it seriously as a work of art, we cannot do so without first allowing the questions of the nature of art and the criteria of artistic merit to remain live ones. Consequently, we cannot consistently appeal to those criteria brought into question by the work when we artistically appraise it. For in order to take the work's interrogative character seriously, we must accept the seriousness of the dilemmas it poses, which we cannot do consistently without treating the criteria it questions as disputable and, consequently, as insufficient criteria for artistic evaluation.

II

Works of art of the type I have called "interrogative" need not pose dilemmas or questions only about artistic value. An artwork can also be morally interrogative. That is, it can have as its principal content the

posing of a moral problem that is left undecided in the work. In the case of such artworks, what becomes of the debate between the ethicist and the aestheticist? Even if the moral content of an artwork can contribute to its artistic value, in the case of morally interrogative artworks it may still be inappropriate to use moral criteria in our artistic judgments. For the sake of argument, I will assume that moral content is indeed relevant to artistic merit. This still would not always justify devaluing a work on the grounds of ethical flaws. A morally interrogative artwork would be one that takes up moral concepts in the same way as an aesthetically interrogative artwork takes up artistic ones—namely, experimentally. It “tries out” a situation of ethical interest, without taking a moral position on the matter. Morality would, then, be of thematic importance in the work, but criteria of moral judgment about the moral issues it raises are left undecided. A work may be morally interested and nonetheless not make moral claims or be an activity that has a moral or immoral value. It can simply present moral problems. And it is precisely insofar as morality is problematic and undecided in the work that it is exempt from ethical evaluation as part of its artistic appraisal. The work, in its problematic aspect, implicitly declares the philosophical issue of “what is the good?” to be a live one; whereas an ethically informed artistic criticism would have to assume that the issue is a decided one—at least in the area for which the work is accused of being unethical. As in the case of aesthetically interrogative art, if we evaluate the work using the very criteria the work brings into question, then we are begging the question.

I wish to suggest only that some, not necessarily all, successful artworks are ones that seek out, rather than embody, the standards of aesthetic, moral, or artistic merit. But it is a possibility ignored from the start by the debate between the strong ethicist and aestheticist views. Both views treat an artwork as something to be evaluated according to previously decided artistic criteria. In doing so, both ignore the possibility that artistic value may, in some cases, consist in calling those criteria into question rather than in meeting them. And by ignoring this possibility, both approaches are in danger of overlooking crucial aspects of a work’s value in their appraisal. What they miss is precisely the value of the work’s interrogative character: the ability of an artwork to provoke its audience into critical reappraisal of artistic and moral prejudices.

I would like to look briefly at one example of what I take to be a morally interrogative work, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The book has long been a source of controversy, and some have

attempted to defend the artistic merits of the book using an aestheticist approach—by bracketing off the morally troubling aspects of the book from its artistic value. Wayne Booth, however, has offered a thought-provoking defense of *Huck Finn* from an ethicist's point of view. Far from excusing the controversial content of the book as irrelevant to its artistic value, Booth makes its moral content central to his appraisal. However, I will suggest that his moral defense of the book fails because, in his attempt to assign a moral position to the book, he ignores its morally interrogative character.

If we accept, for the sake of argument, Booth's view that moral criteria may inform artistic evaluation, then *Huck Finn* should not, in fact, pass the test. However, we shall see that this apparent moral failing is a product of a misreading of the book—of forcing it to fit the picture of the work of art as instantiating morality and ignoring the possible role of artworks in posing unresolved moral dilemmas. Booth attempts to redeem the novel by stressing that our ethical judgment must refer to the ethical positions of what he calls the "implied author," rather than the views of the actual author or the book's characters. According to Booth: "The Mark Twain we live with reading *Huck Finn* is not the complex flesh-and-blood Samuel Clemens but the person who has sloughed off all characteristics except those that strengthen the story; the real Clemens has created the superior Twain that we engage with."² This implied author is a trimmed and purified fiction; he is what is left of Clemens after he has chosen what to include in the work and how the work will be constructed. As Booth says, "It is that chooser who constitutes the full ethos of any work" (p. 377). In other words, the conscious choices reflected in the attitude of the implied author constitute the artwork's true moral commitments—we are, after all, evaluating the artwork as a whole, not its author or characters.

Booth defends the moral status of the novel by arguing that none of what is morally objectionable in the book can be attributed to this implied author. For example, although the characters in the books use racial slurs, Booth maintains that "Mark Twain the implied author never does" and that Twain can be seen to be "mocking and morally condemning those who do" (p. 377). Booth may be correct that the characters' racist language cannot be attributed to the implied author Twain, but his attribution of a moral stance to Twain is questionable. We should be cautious in attributing evaluative attitudes to Twain, especially given novel's preface, a note which is, in effect, the implied author's claim that the work has no implied author: "Notice: Persons attempting to

find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. By order of the author."³

We have in this notice a real author who undoubtedly does have a moral attitude or stance, but who has trimmed precisely that moral stance out of his implied author. The moral condemnation of racism that Booth senses is more likely to be found in the real Clemens, not the fictional one. When Booth attributes this condemnation to the implied author, he may have in mind the passage in which Huck helps his friend Jim escape from slavery, only to become plagued by worries that his action was immoral. The dilemma is, perversely, over whether he should selfishly protect his friend and risk the fires of hell, or if he should do the supposedly conscionable thing by turning over the escaped human "property." Huck comes very close to betraying Jim, but ultimately decides against it. The irony of the passage is overpowering: it is precisely Huck's *moral conscience* that argues for Jim's betrayal.

Surely the author wishes us to see that the situation is actually the reverse, and that Huck's decision is the morally correct one? Yes and no. Twain allows us to see the absurdity of such a moral dilemma, but he has disallowed a conclusion—the one that would give the book a moral stance. The possible choice of betraying Jim is presented as a despicable one, but the alternative is never presented as the moral high ground. As if to underline the point that Huck is not recognizing the moral error of his prejudiced environment, Twain presents the moral crisis as a confrontation, not between Huck and a set of conventional mores, but as a confrontation between Huck and the divine. Huck does reject slavery, but not on moral grounds; in fact, he rejects slavery by rejecting morality. After deciding to protect Jim, Huck declares: "All right then, I'll go to Hell . . . I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again . . . for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog" (pp. 169–70).

This is, after all, one of the central themes of the book—not Huck's attitude toward racism and the institution of slavery, but rather his attitude toward civilization, religion, and morality. The book begins with Huck's rejection of morality and ends with the same; and the "implied author" never condemns his immoralist stance. In fact, it is only the condemnation of morality, religion, and civilization that the narrative preserves; Huck's condemnation of slavery is withdrawn in the book's

conclusion. Huck eventually discovers that Jim had been declared free prior to his actions. He had never defied the institution of slavery at all. The only escape from the law that remains is Huck's. Huck tries one last time to adapt to "civilized" life (which in Twain's worldview seems to be identical to morality), but decides once again to flee. The institution of slavery is left intact, but religion and morality as such are condemned by the book's conclusion.

The careful reader, to be sure, will recognize that such a final state of affairs is morally problematic, and she might conclude that the book is an ethical tragedy, showing us how moral hypocrisy leads Huck astray. But the notice with which the book begins tells us that the implied author will refuse the attachment any moral to the book, and the textual evidence shows that the implied author wants us to sympathize with Huck, not condemn him. In other words, Twain asks us to share in Huck's moral dilemma, rather than see through it.

III

Given Booth's criteria, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be ethically and artistically flawed. By taking the "implied author" into account as he suggests, we find (1) the book condemns slavery only on non-moral grounds, (2) it retracts the implied condemnation, and (3) it ultimately entertains the condemnation of morality as such. It is strange that Booth overlooks all of this; one need only look into Twain's own life, or into works such as *Letters from the Earth* and *The Mysterious Stranger* to verify that this severely pessimistic and skeptical moral stance is one that both the implied author and the real author sometimes share with Huck.

Yet it is precisely what Booth has overlooked—the problematic moral position of *Huck Finn*, and above all the book's resolute refusal to resolve this moral tension—that makes it such an intriguing and compelling work. My concern is that what is artistically and ethically most significant in works such as *Huck Finn* will inevitably be overlooked by both the ethicist and aestheticist approaches to art. An approach that assumes it is the task of an artwork to be good or beautiful (or both) will be incapable of recognizing the value of a work that resolutely refuses to claim that it is good or beautiful—and that resolutely complicates and refuses to resolve the issues of what the good and the beautiful are.

1. For a number of defenses of the ethicist position, see Wayne Booth, "Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 366–93; Martha Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 343–65; and, for a milder form of ethicism, Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223–38. Richard A. Posner has offered a number of arguments in favor of the aestheticist position. See "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 1–17; "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 394–412; and *Law and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), chap. 9.
2. Wayne Booth, "Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake," p. 377.
3. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 2.