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The ethical implications of resonance theory



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Abstract

In the first part of this paper, I want to look at the ethical implications of Hartmut Rosa's Resonance theory for a critical theory of society. I know that this widening of the scope of critical theory is an important objective which Hartmut has pursued. Then I will look at some of the sources of resonance theory in the poetry of the Romantic period. These still provide the basis for important Resonanzachsen today. At the end of this essay, I deal with the issue of the epistemic status of the convictions this poetry inspires.

Keywords: Critical theory, Hartmut Rosa, Resonance, Romantic movement

Beyond agency

Everybody claims to be critical, but those who espouse to title “critical theory” are generally on the political Left. So it might help to look at the values which have generally animated the political Left in our (Western) culture.

I want to look at these in the light on three major issues, the response to which contributes to defining political (and moral) theories. In each of these crucial domains, the traditions of the political Left tend to fall with greater weight on the one side rather than the other.

First, these traditions tend to find their moral sources principally in **agency**. This is true of the sources of socialism, for instance, Rousseau and Marx, but also of these of Liberalism, such as Locke and Mill. The principal good is, or at least presupposes freedom. The free agent changes the world, finding the operative intentions in the self. Political action should take people from a phase where they are dominated by others, or in other ways their agency has been pre-empted, and takes us to a freedom which is effective self-action (Selbsttätigkeit).

Starting with the sources of liberalism, Locke tells us that we are being exploited, put upon, by élites who claim that certain ideas are innate, there in everyone, hence given by God, hence not to be challenged. This stance then morphs into a basic notion of Enlightenment: people too easily just accept things on authority, where we ought to work them out for ourselves.

At first, this recovery of agency is seen as called for by each individual and then hopefully achieved by the united action of these individuals. But with Rousseau, we get a new twist. We too easily fall into mutual dependence, in which masters and slaves deprave each other. Becoming full free agents requires a collective act where we put our whole

relationship on a new footing; we see freedom, that is, real agency, as residing in the collective, properly ordered; the proper ordering is around the general will.¹

Marx inherits this, but sees (thanks to Hegel and others) how totally inadequate Rousseau's account of human development is. We can't just stop anywhere, throw off the past, and establish our society on the new, proper relationship. We evolve the conditions for this through history, which involves many transitions, which humans pass through only barely sensing, if that, these are the right steps to take. Finally the proletariat, created by capitalism, takes control of its condition "en pleine connaissance de cause".

Before that crucial stage, agency is alienated, in a series of different ways, running from religious alienation right through to the alienation of labour under capitalism. But this is only one possible way of giving meaning to this crucial term "alienation"; one possible resonance of this term in our lives. The image in the Marxist tradition takes off from, say, the way I might alienate a property by selling it or giving it away, or it might be alienated from me by seizure, expropriation. The capitalist, operating in the system, alienates the worker's own labour in something like this sense.

But the word also suggests something very different to many people. Alienation may be a condition in which one cannot but feel alien in the world we live in; or this world cannot but feel alien to us. We are not "at home" in this world. "Alienation" here is not due to the expropriation of an activity; it rather consists in an unavoidable (in these circumstances) feature of experience. This world doesn't "speak to" us; or doesn't "answer" our attempts to find meaning. This experience can only be overcome by changing the circumstances (or perhaps my way of relating to these).

So two rather different experiences are covered by this word. But one could, of course, find a place for both meanings in one's theory and argue, e.g. that people suffer experiential alienation, because they are undergoing expropriation of some crucial capacity or dimension of agency.

Such a combination theory may have some truth, but I want to raise this other type of alienation in order to explore the possibility that what is wrong with our world may not exclusively consist in the frustration or capture of **agency**. Undoubtedly, this is part of what goes wrong and thus what critical theory has to diagnose. But I don't think it accounts for our whole wretched condition, even under advanced capitalism.²

So what gets left out?

Before embarking on an attempt to answer this, I want to bring out two ways in which the wretched condition of contemporary society can be identified. One focuses on the ways in which such conditions can be imposed on some by others: for instance, the way in which the huge incomes of the 1% allow them to jigger the political system so as to ensure that inequalities grow. This involves denying people proper health care, decent housing, etc. But this critique doesn't challenge the hypothesis, shared by many on the Left, that the life lived by the 1% can be perfectly satisfying and morally acceptable—if

¹ The republican or civic humanist tradition, to which Rousseau belongs, obviously gives supreme importance to a certain kind of agency, that of the citizen. At its highest, this kind of agency wins glory and a lasting fame. But the new rewriting of this tradition by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, which redefines the value of republican citizen relations in terms of the negative freedom of non-domination, stresses even more unfettered agency at the expense of notions of the good life.

² For a subtle and perspicuous discussion of the different facets of alienation, see Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung*, new edition in stw, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2016.

they only didn't use the power this confers to deprive others. Here the focus is on (mostly) distributive justice.

The second approach follows Rousseau and Marx (and also some religious critiques) in claiming that there is something wrong with *élite* life in these circumstances; quite apart from the harm to non-*élites* that these economic relations enable, the relations themselves are not properly human relations, not the highest human potential. Even highly successful fund managers are deprived of something.

With this distinction in the background, let me try to answer the question: what is wrong with our existing society beyond its injustice, and its capture of non-*élite* agency?

Well, for one, a really good society needs something more than equality, and an absence of exploitation/deprivation of some by others. Of course, it most emphatically requires these. But it also needs a widespread capacity to see what human life means to others. Think of the way that some of our essential social institutions, of health care, education, social work, can fail in their purpose, even inflict harm, through a lack of attention or even comprehension of the real felt needs of those in their care. And this lack of comprehension may afflict even those who are administering the care. They can become ossified by bureaucratic rules and regulations which fail to help, or even harm their supposed beneficiaries.

Or they may simply be blinded by the culture of their profession to certain crucial needs. I remember when the movement began to offer palliative care to terminal patients for whom no cure could be found. It turned out that many doctors just didn't see the desire that many of their terminal patients had to have someone to talk to about their predicament. They were understandably focused on the goal of curing patients, and many were too concentrated on this to pick up the signals from the patients that couldn't any more be helped in this way. The palliative care movement tried to step in the breach.

From the positive side, think of what an inspiration it can be to come across some really imaginative and innovative hospital ward, or school, where this kind of openness and attention is present, and people can communicate their needs.

What both these experiences show is the importance of the ability/desire to reach beyond one's comfort zone, or zone of familiarity, to be open to lives and experiences outside these.

And of course, when we come to societies which are in fact multi-cultural, whatever the policies adopted, the need for this kind of openness is even more evident, particularly if our society contains strong reactions, and even movements which are militating for exclusion, and strong political movements are tempted to ride to power on such reactions, as we see to our horror today.

We are carried here beyond agency. My agency may be involved if I decide that I want to become more open, and set out to educate myself; but the actual condition of openness is a capacity to discern and be touched by the previously unfamiliar. It involves letting yourself be reached, be acted on, by the lives of others. Of course, to repeat, I can set out to receive training in becoming this kind of person, but the achieved state is in the domain of "passion" rather than action, a matter of *pathein*, rather than *prattein*.

How do people become capable or incapable of this kind of openness? Well, one way of increasing it could be to inaugurate programmes to educate people in openness (here the activist speaks again). But in fact, how open people become in their lives is the result

of a host of different life-experiences. We are all born and brought up narrow to some degree—that is, we are all short of ideal openness, or even of the kind of openness we need to make a success of today’s democratic societies in the present conditions of global migration. But however brought up, we can all have experiences: meeting someone, responding to acts of exclusion, and so on, which make us more open. And there can be negative experiences which push us in the other direction. Jihadis and Islamophobes are in a stance of objective collusion to maximize the negative ones.

But however we and our societies evolve in this regard, what we need here is not primarily a condition of **agency**; however, we might act to enhance it, it is in the dimension of receptivity, the capacity to experience. It is a condition of what we might call **patiency**, except that the concept “patient” has already been invested with too many meanings to avoid misunderstandings.

But philosophically, we have to draw the conclusion that the over-focus of critical theories on the health and pathologies of agency is (a) unjustified and (b) may contribute to a blindness to the importance of “patiency”.

The crucial problem of contemporary democracy

We can demonstrate the importance of the kind of openness discussed above if we look at a crucial problem of contemporary democracy.

Our Western³ democracies are now in danger of being destroyed by what are often called “populist” movements. This seems paradoxical, because by definition such movements appeal to the “people”, and claim to defend them against élite rule. And aren’t appeals of this kind essential to democracy? I believe this paradox can be dissolved by a closer examination.

First, modern democracy is constitutionally vulnerable to critique. What exactly does it mean, that the people rule? It’s clear in the case of a strong authoritarian leader, like Napoleon or Hitler. But the demos?

It did seem clear in the case of Athens, for instance, because the whole people (or all those able to attend the ekklesia) voted on crucial measures. But that’s impossible today, and would have been even then if the franchise had been like ours. (The population of Athens was probably 100,000, maybe more.) We might also give a pass to those other candidates for “real” democracy, the smaller Swiss cantons.

But in most contemporary democracies, the people only rule via a complex system of representatives, with the addition of checks and balances (which are key to modern democracy and the rule of law). And one can always question whether the system REALLY works as advertised.

Secondly, Modern democracy, unlike the ancient Greek variety, is universalist. Everyone is meant to be included. Modern charters are full of non-discrimination clauses. And there is often great controversy concerning whether they are really honoured.

Thirdly, I would like to claim that democracy as it is lived and understood today (I might say, “imagined”, in Benedict Anderson’s sense) is a “telic” concept, that is, really rule by a demos in which everyone counts is understood as a not fully realized goal. It is

³ I speak mainly of Western democracies, although there are strong analogues to such destructive movements in other parts of the world, e.g. Erdogan’s Turkey, Modi’s India, etc.

something we move towards (hopefully), but frequently in fact we find ourselves slipping away from.

In recent history, what the French call “*Les 30 glorieuses*” (1945–75) were a period in which it was felt that we were moving towards; our situation since the 1980s is one where there is a general sense that we are sliding away.

For a whole host of reasons, there are always forces which tend to move us away from our telos: the rich, the politically powerful, the leaders of bureaucracies, the owners of media, have disproportionate potential to control things, and are standingly tempted to use it. And when they do, different factors compound to accelerate and aggravate the movement. Since the Thatcher–Reagan era, the relaxation of various egalitarian measures (decline of progressive taxation, shrinking of income redistribution) has greatly increased inequalities of income and wealth, and this in turn is reflected in increased clout for the rich, which in turn makes it politically harder to challenge neo-liberalism, and so opens a downward spiral. *Élite* clout also means that non-*élites* become discouraged, and thus vote less, which entrenches *élite* power, which in turn depresses turn-out, and threatens further downward movement, and so on.

So popular challenges to *élites* are of the essence of democracy as a telic concept; then why do we condemn “populism”?

There are in fact three reasons: the first and most obvious one is that such movements—Trump’s campaign, the Front National, Brexit, the AfD, Geert Wilders—violate the universalism which defines modern democracy; they exclude certain classes of people: non-members of a favoured ethnic group, recent immigrants, members of “strange” religions, etc.

A second reason to hold out, and challenge the legitimacy of this concept, could be grounded in democracy’s implicit telos. Populist movements offer measures which will not improve the lives of those whom they recruit. Trump is not going to help people in the rust belt. These movements generally fuse two kinds of dissatisfaction: socio-economic decline or stasis, on the one hand, and suspicion or fear of outsiders on the other. They blame the first on the second (or the coddling of the second by “liberal” *élites*). But there is a certain fraudulence implicit in this appeal. Exclusion of the “bad” elements won’t bring back the good old Fordist days. “Populism” will probably make things worse. (Trump won’t get you a job, but he’ll take away your health insurance, and give further tax breaks to the super-rich.)

A third reason—which risks being more and more forgotten today—is that democracy is not just majority rule. A democratic society is a deliberative unit, in which a real exchange of ideas, programmes, affinities and aspirations can take place. There must be decisions, and ideally they will reflect majority opinion of the moment when they are taken, but the deliberative unit will go on encompassing the whole people. The minority can’t simply be treated as an enemy to be suppressed; common membership has to go on being felt as a bond between all citizens (Rosa 2016: 368). This doesn’t just happen by itself; it needs to be cherished, nourished in spite of fierce debates over crucial issues, and multiple conflicts of interest. The tone and manner of the debates and political struggles have to acknowledge and continually re-affirm this common bond. And here is where populist rhetoric, branding their opponents as traitors, is at its most destructive.

The more so in that it tends to rouse the same kind of rhetoric among the “liberal élites”, dismissing their opponents as “deplorables”, ignoramuses, “rednecks”.

In a functioning democracy, the whole political unit has to be from time to time the locus of all-encompassing resonance, beyond the differences of party, interest, aspiration.

How does one combat this kind of destructive “populism”? What are called “Liberal élites”, who generally subscribe to some degree to neo-Liberalism (and thus generally failed to see the imperative need to accompany globalization with redistribution to the losers) generally rely on some notion of universalism as the fruit of reason alone. They castigate would-be populist voters as irrational and backward, and when this doesn’t work, repeat the charges at higher and higher decibel levels. The evidence is that these backfires. Trump gained a lot of ground by just repeating: “I’m not politically correct”, with the implication: “these élites despise you”.

You can’t win this battle by appealing to what you think ought to be axiomatic. You can only counter by somehow creating an over-arching identity which can bind (some, never alas all) people with strong liberal identities (often from the targeted minorities) with those who are tempted by populism. There are strong common interests (both suffer from neo-liberal policies; both suffer from a sense of failing citizen efficacy); but there are also common reference points of identity. Identities are complex. The people cheering Trump have many other references in their self-identity. Some can be the basis of solidarities.

Rhetoric is crucial: No more dismissing the adversary’s voters as “rednecks” or “deplorables”. On the contrary, we need a sympathetic understanding what drives them, and also of the connections between different facets of their motivation, which can be too easily analysed into a multiplicity of unconnected factors.

To take the US case: I mentioned the loss of citizen efficacy, and the need for its recovery. But this a facet of a more general sense of diminished efficacy.

A man’s (this gendered term still applies in many milieux) efficacy is measured not only by his political clout, but also by his ability to feed his family by his work. This is essential to his dignity. Michael Sandel makes the point that the obscenely astronomical “bonuses” on Wall Street, alongside the fact that people on Main Street were losing their jobs, were seen as a statement by élites in government and finance that work has no value for them, no dignity in their eyes. The obvious contrast in rewards arouses strong indignation—which paradoxically and maddeningly has helped produce the solid Republican majority.

But this assault to male dignity (felt as such by lots of men, even though women also lost jobs) connects to one facet of identity, which many men, and the women who shared this view, saw as slighted.

This raises difficult questions of rhetorical appeal for the Left. Many of the aspects of Republican (and Trumpian) electoral appeal are pretty ugly: the real Man who wants to be able to provide for his family through his work may also bridle at the idea that he can’t own a gun. And then he may also be disturbed by feminism, and/or by gays coming out, demanding recognition. And he may think that the old-time religion and morality is essential to a good society. And he may buy into the idea that the line marching towards the American dream puts some people ahead of others, etc.

There are connections here, which the Left has to tease apart.

We have to appeal to the ex-worker who feels degraded because he can't operate as (sole or principal) breadwinner, without buying into all aspects of this identity. But above all, we have to communicate that we "feel his pain" (to recur to [Bill] Clintonese). And there is real pain here. It is possible in fact to feel how devastating this kind of assault on someone's identity can be, without sharing or endorsing all aspects of the (necessarily complex) identity.

This is not just a matter of choosing a rhetoric, but of being the kind of person who can carry this message across.

The impact of Bernie Sanders shows this. Impeccably liberal though he be, he was not identified as part of the « Liberal élite».

In general, maintaining a non-exclusive democracy in an age of growing diversity involves the continuing redefinition of a citizen identity that can bring everyone together. We have to create new solidarities where none existed, or the old ones have been eroded. You have to draw maximally on the kind of openness I described in the Introductory section. Political efficacy on the Left requires more than machismo and manipulation, which is meant to create a sense of "can do" or omnipotence around the leader.

The place of reasoning

A rather different way in which the neglect of patency can distort our critical theory lies in the bias of the agency focus towards rationality of a particular kind, the kind which opposes reason to the emotions. Here is another crucial issue area: the place of reasoning in moral/political thought.

How can our basic values or principles be grounded? Can they be shown to be valid by a mode of reasoning which need make no appeal to feeling? Or on the other side, are they purely based on a kind of feeling? We can recognize here the familiar opposition of Hume versus Kant. Or (what seems to me the correct view) do they originate in strongly felt intuitions (e.g. that human life as such must be respected), which can then be elaborated and defended by various modes of reasoning?

Now it is clear that the openness I described above involves an education of feeling, an ability to experience sympathy, an ability to connect with others. As Paolo Costa explains in his interesting paper "Why Critical Theory Needs a Theory of the Emotions" (particularly the last section: "A Transformational Concept of Reason"), our exploration and clearer definition of the "space of reasons" cannot proceed without careful and critical attention to how we feel about various predicaments that we encounter in our lives and those of others (Costa 2017:14).

This is a message which meets some resistance in the traditions of critical theory. In the original Marxist theory, this took the form of a self-distancing from moral reactions. In defining what socialism was and how to get there, one should examine the actual capitalist system and how it can auto-destruct (with a little help from the First International). Following one's moral reactions, the strong feelings we have about exploitation and the imposition of gratuitous suffering, can only lead to "utopian" schemes which guarantee failure. From that time on, we on the Left have concentrated on a purely "rational" (in this privative, non-emotional sense) analysis of the working of capitalist society (and we're still trying). This is justified enough (although we can't forget that it is "irrational" to exclude a priori felt emotions as part of the explanans of economic behaviour). But it

mustn't make us lose sight of the role of our emotions in helping us define the society we would want to build.

And the idea that "pure" reason suffices to define the good society surfaces again in our day in a common view of the second critical theory that built around discourse ethics, and/or other derivatives of Kantian ethics. These would have us believe that we can establish our universal obligations to all humans by "reason" alone, without reference to the powerful feelings which the dignity of each and every human being arouses in us. The neo-Kantian formulae vary, between say, Habermas on the one hand, and Scanlon, or Korsgaard on the other. But they all have this feature that this universalist ethical basis can be shown to be an inescapable (moral) commitment, regardless of our (ethical) notions of the good life.⁴

I think that in fact all of these arguments fail, or rather that they seem right to those who accept them because they are already moved by this ideal of a universal human dignity. But I also think that this ideal of "pure" reason contributes to the bias which impoverishes critical theory, which consists of ignoring the dimension of patiency in defining the transformations we want to bring about.

By contrast, the resonance theory which Hartmut has been defining brings to the fore the way in which our moral life originates in strongly felt intuitions, of a demand on us to which we are called to respond. To respond adequately is to experience a deep resonance in our lives.

To invoke the image that Hartmut introduces, that of the "Stimmgabel", (tuning fork), in any relation of resonance between two objects, there will be one in which the vibrations originate, which then propagate to the other. In a fulfilled moral life, we might be tempted to see the demands as originating in the agent, who would then be the "Stimmgabel". But this reading tends to occlude the phenomenology, wherein our moral commitments are lived originally as demands made on us. As Hartmut puts it, talking about strong evaluations: "Indem diese Wertungen, sich auf etwas beziehen, die als *schlechtin* wichtig erscheint, ist die Wertquelle stets *in der Welt* angesiedelt" (Rosa 2016: 228).

Resonance

A third crucial dimension of issues concerns the relation between human agency and the non-human world. Should this agency be guided principally, or exclusively, by the requirements of instrumental rationality? Or do we also have to strive for attunement to this world?

It is at this point that my stance towards critical theory overlaps considerably with (and has been greatly influence by) Hartmut Rosa's theory of Resonance. The choice I have outlined in this third dimension can be put in the terms of his recent magnum opus (Rosa 2016): Do we strive exclusively for "Weltaniegung", or also reserve a place for "Weltanverwandlung"?

It is not just that the phenomena of resonance involve the "patiency" dimension, in the sense that an exclusive focus on agency can never do full justice to them. It is also that the focus on resonance, once one distinguishes (as Hartmut does) its different

⁴ I have argued this at some length in *The Language Animal*, chapter 6, section 3 (Taylor 2016).

dimensions or “axes”, offers an excellent perspective from which to identify and analyse the different lacks and maladies of late capitalist society which prevent us from living full lives.

It is understandable that the strong emphasis on agency, which is characteristic of Western modernity, makes it easy for us to drive ahead with projects to remake the world guided by an instrumental reason which is all the more powerful because it is informed with the impressive and ever-growing findings of modern science. This kind of remaking frequently calls for an objectification of our surroundings, by which I mean a bracketing, or utter ignoring of all meanings of things other than the instrumental. And this can mean the loss of vital meanings, which we need to live fuller lives. The drive to control the world can end up making it “stumm”, as Hartmut puts it, that is, silencing it, so that it no longer speaks to us (Rosa 2016: 278–9); it can generate alienation, of the second kind mentioned above, where our relations to our world, profession, family, etc. have become indifferent, meaningless, or even negative (Rosa 2016: 305).

The over-riding concern for control can not only make us ready to sacrifice much that we cannot afford to neglect, but can even make us blind to the sources of meaning we are repressing and negating. One of the great contributions of Hartmut’s theory expounded in this book is that it helps us to map the sources and dimensions of resonance which are essential to the good life, from the needs of the body, as an “*eigenständige Inspirationsquelle oder Klangkörper*” (Rosa 2016: 176), to our relations to nature, to society, to others, and also to the sources of strong evaluation, however these are understood.

One of his goals is to distinguish the different “*Resonanzachsen*”, horizontal (to others and society), vertical (to the world as a totality, including the sources of strong evaluation), and “*diagonal*” (to the world of things) (Rosa 2016: 331).

But Hartmut’s theory is also a sociology. He is not only offering us a language in which we can criticize the wrong decisions we frequently make about what is important in our lives. We also have to be aware of the constraints which can force us to live lives which are alienating and which silence resonance. A crucial theme here is his theory of social acceleration, a process which makes demands which we experience as beyond individual control, and which requires us to function against the rhythms of the body, or outside the time rhythms of meaningful creative action, and which is a prime source of burn-out in our world (Rosa 2016: 180).

Romantic movement as an axis of resonance

In another paper, which some of you have seen, I have tried to trace our contemporary sense of what Hartmut has called the axes of resonance of the vertical dimension to the Romantic movement (Taylor 2017).

The powerful sense of reconnection with the cosmos which we find in the poetry of, say, Hölderlin and Wordsworth yields an experience which convinces us of its importance for the good life (or at least makes this claim). I argued in that paper that this sense cannot be dismissed as merely “subjective”, or “psychological”, that the claim to being central to the good life has to be taken seriously.

But for many, this origin is seen as a disqualification, because the Romantic movement itself is often dismissed as the purveyor of facile illusions. The origin of this dismissive stance is to be found in the post-Enlightenment dissociation of the three

“transcendentals”, the True, the Good and the Beautiful, which was a central dogma of Western civilization before the modern period (and for many people, also after). The Romantics were rather reacting to a deeper split which arises out of certain facets of the Enlightenment. Those trends who made modern mechanistic science, stemming from Galileo, THE road to knowledge, threatened to dislodge first, the beautiful (now understood as the “aesthetic”), and later even the morally good from their high normative status, and relegate them to the subjective reactions of individuals. From which relegation, normativity could be saved either by counting (what’s morally good is what fulfils the greatest number of people’s desires), or though a priori reason (only universal maxims can be acted on).

A main line of Romantic thinking was concerned rather with restoring the link between the three, admittedly on a more fragile basis.

To take a different and anti-Romantic stance to the dissociation of the three, we might look at Flaubert.

In describing the limited, stupid, and illusion-drenched human world, (for instance in *Madame Bovary*), he claims truth, and also “beauty” (for his portrayal, not the reality), but most emphatically not goodness. We can understand the claim to truth, but whence that to beauty? Platonically, we could understand the claim to the Good if the portrayal made the true human potential shine through the failed life of the protagonist. But Flaubert’s message seems to be that this person can’t do better; she is insensitive to real beauty, the beauty in her portrayal. Indeed, the beauty can’t be in the living, but only in the (disengaged) portrayal.

So wherein consists the beauty? In the art with which the situation is rendered. We can take, for instance, the famous scene where her lover seduces her, and their conversation runs in parallel to the public function outside. What is remarkable here is the entire way in which the real nature of their relation is revealed indirectly in this juxtaposition, contrasting with their blindness. Their real, illusion-filled relation to their world and human potential is rendered in this—poetic—juxtaposition of images. This is the beauty in the novel.

And it is true that there is genuine art in the fashioning of this portrayal. But why beauty? I think we might explain the experience underlying this claim through the power of art to transpose what we usually experience as a disturbing, distressing, even frightening, reality and to present it as an independent order we can contemplate unperturbed; rather like the Aristotelian concept of tragedy, where the frightening and distressing destruction of the flawed hero can be presented purged of pity and fear; presented as an independent order, which is just the way things are. Art lifts us to a realm of such unperturbed contemplation. Something analogous is what Flaubert achieves in this novel in relation to the way of the human world, captured as just the way things are with flawed humanity, a portrayal which releases us from the distress and pity we might experience through involuntary sympathy with ordinary human beings (Winock & Elliott 2016).

Something similar is brought about by Zola in *L’Assommoir*; the distancing from these disturbing happenings is achieved and rendered through some beautiful passages, of streets, of fog and lights, of the large apartment building which almost plays the role of a character in the story. But the distancing effect is now rationalized as “naturalism”, a scientific grasp of the way things are in the terrible conditions or working class life. Art is in

the service of science. We have a picture of appalling human destruction, an important component of which is self-destruction. But this objectified world can call for another sort of engagement, the commitment to policies which would do away with the conditions which produce such destruction. Sympathy is not the issue, even though we cannot but feel such sympathy for Gervaise.

If we look at Flaubert in these terms, then his oeuvre offers in fact two quite different kinds of beauty: the deflationary but purgatorial⁵ (*Madame Bovary*, or *L'Éducation Sentimentale*), on the one hand, and the archaic scenes of high and violent deeds in striking décor (*Salammbô*), on the other.

It goes without saying that only the second form has any relation to Romanticism. In the first, the Romantic is rather identified with Emma Bovary's contemptible and tawdry illusions.

(Contrast this with another kind of distancing through art: the way that Baudelaire lifts us out of spleen, the all-invasive paralysing force of acedia, through the music of words-and-images. Here there is a transfiguration of the ugly into a new kind of beauty.)

What light does this discussion of Flaubert cast on the Romantic art of reconnection, and the resonance this reveals? It is clear that Flaubert inaugurates a new relationship between truth and beauty. Beauty is linked to truth, but it is the (utterly deflationary) portrayal of the truth, not the reality itself. (Leave aside the archaic high deeds sort of beauty, which was perhaps conceived as mere fantasy by Flaubert, for all his claims to meticulous scholarship). On this new, post-Romantic relation to beauty, we are on a path which reaches some of its most powerful expressions in the 20th Century—for instance, in the works of Samuel Beckett.

The Romantic tradition by contrast is on to a vindication of some analogue of the original Platonic relation: the goodness and beauty reside in reality itself, not in its portrayal. The joy stems from the recovery of what seemed a precious but endangered connection.

And indeed, these two relations between truth and beauty coexist and cannot but be in relation, in a state of mutual interaction, in modern culture, and sometimes in the same writers. Beckett's sources in rich Joycean language, his alleged love of Hölderlin (Henrich) bespeak this (sometimes underground) connection—as though only the descent into maximum disconnection can legitimate a return to ontic beauty.

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⁵ The deflationary is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the purgatorial.

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