

Art, Hypocrisy and Poiesis
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Luke 12:1-3

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. ² There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ³ What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

When most of us think about hypocrisy we think of the symptom rather than the cause. The symptom is something along the lines of being guilty of what you condemn in others. But the roots of hypocrisy are something profoundly different. It is your authoritative text, held up there – at a safe distance from who you really are as a person. And this is the normal standard of ethics in the modern world. Principles, laws, values, duties, or morals up there – and then you learn them, and subsequently apply them. All of these overarching laws – at a safe distance from who I really am.

But it’s not only true of religious people... is it. Political Correctness is the perfect example – without ever having to be exposed to the harsh realities of the other, you can just learn to couch misogyny, bigotry, and racism beneath an acceptable veneer of peer-approved language. Instead of lifting a finger to do anything about the plight of persecuted minorities – all you need do is sneer at people who haven’t learned or won’t use your deodorised discourse. Behold, hypocrisy: moral rules up there, that don’t interfere with who I really am in here.

Or... you might consider how teaching and learning happens, even in Cambridge. Of course, teachers love it when students ask questions. Especially the question, ‘will this be in the exam?’ If education is designed to form and reform you as a person, this kind of question would not even occur to you. But to learn hypo-critically, is to learn how to critique, without learning how to think critically. You can learn methods of criticism that might get you through an exam – but does it shape who you are?

If that’s how you learn, then in real life outside academic supervisions it is possible to read and to write reports and articles in which all your critical faculties are turned off. If you

learn hypocritically, it doesn't matter how intelligent you might be or how convinced you might feel. You're a soft target for mass manipulators, cannon-fodder for Cambridge Analytica, and might even find yourself nodding along with the nattering nay-bobs of negativity in the student press. Real education doesn't happen up there – it reaches into who you are as a person.

For a first century Jewish believer, the Law – the Torah – was the authoritative text. So to be a hypocrite, is for this law to be removed from who you really are. For the prophet Jeremiah, he longed for the day when the Law up there, the Torah, would be written on the human heart. And it is here that we approach a Christian ethics – that something has gripped you, who you really are, at the core of your identity. Rather than having some kind of heart bypass between rules and their application – the New Testament speaks of bearing fruit.

The word for this, is sometimes translated 'to do' or 'to make' – but it really means to bring to fruition. The notion is that something has gripped you in the core of your being. And it cannot help but work it's way out in your life. That is the original meaning of belief. And that is the meaning of the Greek word, *poiesis*. The idea is that something at the core of your being has come to expression. Not something at a safe distance from you, no heart bypass, but something in here has found expression. (*'There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known'*). But that is only half of the story. This term we are looking at Art, from a variety of perspectives – and *Poesis* also happens to be a Greek word for art. And for some philosophers of art, yes – art is the manifestation of what lies at centre of your identity. But it is a 2 way street: *poiesis* also entails exposure to something that reaches into the core of your being. In this sense, art is a traumatic encounter – it opens up a space you didn't know existed, it accesses who you really are as a human – it exposes you to the universe, to otherness, to the unfamiliar. *Poesis*. You are confronted with the uncomfortable other, confronted with yourself, confronted with beauty. Not a beauty that is nice to look at look, but a beauty that changes to the way you look at everything else, changes the way you see everything else, changes the way you encounter everything else. As Jeremiah said the Torah could be written into the human heart – so *poiesis* is precisely this process in action.

Of course, it is possible to wander around an art gallery hypocritically. Observing, objectifying, keeping art at a safe distance from who I really am. No matter how profound or how beautiful or how perfect, regardless of my technical appreciation and my interpretive competence – keeping art enframed, up there, away from the core of my being is hypocritical: a denial of *poiesis*.

In academia, of course, hypocritical learning can be profoundly insightful, and sophisticated, and terribly interesting – and all of it remain up there, at a safe distance from who I am. But there are examples of course, of those who have learned 'by heart'. In sciences and in humanities – who have learned not methods to achieve ends, but who have learned by heart – who have inhabited new ways of seeing that generate genuine insight. Who have undergone the traumatic encounter of otherness to which art gives birth – that leaves them seeing what others cannot. *Poesis*.

Poesis is the root of the modern English word, poetry. As a former hitchhiker, I once had a lift from a man driving a vegetable van along the A47. After the obligatory few minutes of being told I'd never be picked up from the very place I had just been picked up from – we

ended up discussing poetry. And this middle-aged rough market trader, confessed that he wrote his own poetry – and he began to recite some – and then he was reduced to tears. Now – the poem itself was terrible. But in the passenger seat of that vegetable van, I encountered real poetry, in all its multi-dimensional fullness. That. Was. Art. The artist made himself vulnerable. And he left me seeing the world differently. *Poesis*.

I have family members who are disgracefully and disgustingly politically incorrect – Brexit-voting, trump-supporting, climate-change-denying racists. And yet, they work in food banks, have given up their own security to fight on behalf of asylum seekers, and commit themselves at great personal cost to supporting the very people – that the vast majority of liberal pc moral crusaders will never dirty their hands with. PC morality is safe – up there, not interfering with gritty reality, unwittingly defending a herd-mentality status quo. (Its crusaders can be Cambridge students and yes, Cambridge academics.) Biblical morality – even in its crudest manifestations – has the capacity to reach into the human heart. Changing people's lives. That. Is. Art (from a biblical perspective). The artists make themselves vulnerable. It leaves the world a different place. *Poesis*.

To witness art is to be exposed, to expose who you are to that which can pull the rug from beneath your feet. *Poesis*.

To produce art, is to be exposed, to allow what has shaped your being to find expression somewhere in your life. *Poesis*.

To confront that which is intolerable but liberating – To expose oneself to that which is terrible because it is beautiful.

To express that which cannot be articulated but cannot be contained. This is a Biblical way of understanding art – and will occupy us for the rest of this term.

INTERCESSIONS

God and Art

God of the world under our nose, and God of the world beyond our knowing.

Open our eyes to see the world around us, with a sense of compassion – that we might be exposed to the world as it is, and liberated from the falsehoods that comfort us.

Forgive us for following our heart – without considering the motives of our heart.

Forgive us for seeking fulfilment outside the disturbing inconvenience of those who challenge us.

Forgive us for seeking to be individualist without ever seriously questioning our conformisms.

May we encounter others, and hear Scripture, and listen to music and view artwork – so as to find ourselves and our world re-created.

May we learn what it is to give a voice to suffering. To get our hands dirty with practical care. To risk breaking our hearts by offering political love.

Help us to support others not merely from the safe distance of charity support, or correct language, or clinical sympathy. Help us to sit alongside those who are homeless, and friendless and hopeless, and bereaved. Help us to listen to the real stories of real people. Help us to hear what we don't want to hear, to see what we might not want to see, to go where we might not want to go.

Help us to hear you, and to practice Poesis – to the Glory of Your name.