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Beauty and Truth, Imagination and Expression*

Let us begin with truth and beauty, the two keywords of our volume. As we know, they constitute, along with the third concept of goodness, not mentioned here, the triad of transcendentals; and that this triad has a tradition dating back to Plato and to Plato's *Phaedrus*. We also know that these three concepts have remained in specific relationships, either replacing each other or combining into greater notions, such as *kalokagathia*, the unity of beauty and goodness.

All this was once clear and simple. Questions and doubts started to appear with attempts to apply these transcendentals to works of art and to study their relationships with the reality beyond the work. In fact, even Plato, in his discussion of art, had to employ the concept of "illusion" (explained by W. Tatarkiewicz as an "appearance" or a "misapprehension" of reality). Aristotle came up with the theory of *mimesis*, of art as imitation of nature. With time, new points of view began to emerge, increasingly distrustful of the straightforwardness of the initial situation. According to St. Augustine, all is as true as it is false in a work of art ("*in quisbusdam vera, unde in quisbusdam falsa [est]*"). For Dante, poetry was quite simply "beautiful falsehood". In Goethe, truth and falsehood already meet in the title of his well-known essay *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. In recent times, with the dominance of avant-garde trends of the 20th century, both transcendentals, those of beauty and truth, have been deposed. They have been seen as improper, inadequate, indeed discreditable.

Ignoring for a while all extreme and peculiar positions, let us try to present an overall, bird's eye view of the situation, adopting

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the perspective of high culture, one which does not succumb to the temptations of Postmodernism, i.e. one that does not allow "the death of truth and beauty."

1. In one of his later texts, Witold Lutosławski invokes a statement he himself saw as evident: "Beauty is the ultimate goal of art, just as truth is the ultimate goal of scholarship"¹ (12 Dec. 1981). This view goes together well with a somewhat earlier assertion by Rev. Józef Tischner. In very much his own metaphorical style, Tischner asks the rhetorical question: "What is the relationship between thinking within the element of truth and thinking within the element of beauty?"² His answer is: "It seems impossible to define the essence of philosophical thought without the concept of truth, and it seems impossible to define artistic thought without the use of the word beauty" (1981).

Thus, in the sphere of high European culture, these two things seemed certain: the relationship of scholarship and philosophical thought with truth, and that of art and artistic thought with beauty. This could be easily confirmed with any amount of significant statements. In his *Letter to Artists* (1999), John Paul II reminded us that "the artist has a special relationship to beauty... Beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of 'artistic talent'"³. Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the Polish philosophical school of the 20th century, somewhat hyperbolically defined "the quest for truth" as not so much the most important as the only valid duty of scholarship (1895)⁴.

2. The above-quoted statement by Lutosławski had its significant continuation. The composer went on to say that "just as [the presence] of a variety of beauty can be found in mathematics, astronomy and, surely, in many other scholarly disciplines, we will unavoidably encounter the issue of truth in art"⁵ (1981).

1 W. Lutosławski, *Wokół zagadnienia prawdy w dziele sztuki* [in:] *Postscriptum*, (Warszawa 1999), p. 25.

2 J. Tischner, *Myślenie w żywiole piękna* [in:] T. Malecka (ed.), *Zeszyt Naukowy Zakładu Analizy i Interpretacji*, 7, Kraków 1984, p. 15.

3 John Paul II, *Letter to Artists*, 3, Vatican, 4 IV 1999.

4 K. Twardowski, wykład inauguracyjny na Uniwersytecie Lwowskim [opening lecture at Lviv University], 15 XI 1895.

5 W. Lutosławski, *wystąpienie na Kongresie Kultury* [speech at Culture Congress], Warszawa 11 XII 1981 [in:] W. Lutosławski, *Postscriptum*, Warszawa 1999, p. 25.

This view, too, finds its confirmation in opinions on the presence of truth in art (the thesis on the presence of beauty in scholarship has also found occasional confirmation).

„I have not written a single note that would not have been absolutely true“ („Ich noch nie auch nur eine Note geschrieben habe, die nicht absolut wahr ist“⁶), Gustav Mahler wrote in 1896. “Music should not be decorative but true“ („Die Musik soll nicht schmücken, sie soll wahr sein“):⁷ Constantin Floros, in the title of his presentation, brought to mind for us the words of Arnold Schoenberg. Finally, it was Martin Heidegger who came up with the final formulation: “Thus, art is the becoming and happening of truth“ („Dann ist die Kunst ein Werden und Geschehen der Wahrheit“).⁸

Things became complicated. Now truth, as well as beauty, is seen as an attribute of a work of art. But what is it then that constitutes the truth in art? This is an issue that, in Polish philosophy, has been dwelt on in some detail by Roman Ingarden (1947), Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1972) and Władysław Stróżewski (1978).⁹ The list of the ways in which truth expresses itself in a work of art has proved to be long. Its most evocative version comes from Tatarkiewicz. He identifies such categories as authenticity, originality, adequacy and validity of the work of art, or those of naturality, inner harmony and sincerity of artistic expression. A related category, that of “faithfulness to oneself“, appeared among the many discussed by Ingarden: the faithfulness of a given work to the worldview of its author. Lutosławski deemed this to be of particular import.

3. No wonder. This aspect of the relationship between the artist and his work was particularly tested in this part of Europe in recent years. Works appeared that called for a classification of musical creation from the point of view of its relationship to truth understood as sincerity.

It is in this part of Europe that the particular phases of history produced a situation in which the author was forced to take sides. The first choice

6 In an April 1896 letter to Bauer-Lachner, quoted in C. Floros, *Mahler, I*, Wiesbaden 1977, p. 137.

7 A. Schönberg, *Probleme des Kunstunterrichts. Musikalisches Taschenbuch* (Wien 1911), quoted in: Th.W. Adorno, *Filozofia nowej muzyki*, (1950), Warszawa 1973, p. 78.

8 M. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt 1963, p. 59, quoted in: Władysław Stróżewski, “O prawdziwości dzieła sztuki“, *Studia Estetyczne XV* (1978), p. 167.

9 For a broader discussion see M. Tomaszewski, *Prawda w sztuce* [in:] Sz. Drzyżdzyk (ed.), *Wymiary prawdy*, 1, Kraków 2006.

was between independent (autonomous) and committed music. Stefan Jarociński differentiated these two modalities by calling them *musica libera*, or free of extra-artistic commitments, and *musica adhaerens*, or dependent on conditions higher than purely the autotelic, the purely tonal: humanist, religious, patriotic. For much of its history, Polish music – the music of a nation deprived of its statehood for many years – often had commitment as a moral obligation.

But commitment to which side? This ushers in the second aspect, one that leads to the differentiation between the music which could be considered “true,” and that better described as “false.”

Certain differentiating factors have to be introduced for a better understanding of the discreteness of the two categories. A committed work could be reduced to this formula: a value exists (be it idea or person) to which tribute, *hommage*, praise, respect, approval is due. For a start. Secondly: this quality may be positive and praiseworthy, or negative. The homage, the respect can then be expressed in a work either sincerely or insincerely – untruthfully.

This can lead us to four discrete categories of artistic creation, so characteristic for the recent past:¹⁰

(1) Authentic art. Art produced as a manifestation of tribute, earnest and personal, to an unquestioned value; a *musica vera* of sorts. I have no doubt that this category would include such works as Górecki's *Beatus Vir* or Penderecki's *Credo*.

(2) Rhetorical art. In other words, tribute paid to a true quality, yet conventional and not entirely personal. There was a time when virtually all composers of this place on earth wrote pieces dedicated to John Paul II.

(3) Hyperbolic art. Possibly spontaneous homage to spurious or negative values. Works motivated by the poetics of a *nil nisi bene* toast.

(4) Panegyric art, some sort of *musica falsa*. Insincere or even cynical tribute (even if possibly dictated by fear), paid to a spurious or simply a negative value. There is no denying the fact that five Polish cantatas were dedicated to Stalin in the early fifties. They belong to the trend defined by Krzysztof Droba as “Polish Soviet music.”

10 C.f. M. Tomaszewski, *O twórczości zaangażowanej. Muzyka polska 1944-1994 między autentyzmem a panegiryzmem* [in:] *Interpretacja integralna dzieła muzycznego. Rekonesans*, Kraków 2000.

4. It is quite possible that the sphere of beauty could be seen to display similar diversity. This differentiation would then be confronting the undoubtedly and truly beautiful, i.e. the congruous and harmonious, with the undoubtedly ugly and revolting. Yet there is more: beauty that is empty in its banality and conventionality, and hyperbolic beauty, i.e. excessive in its “niceness,” contemporarily identified with *Kitsch*. There was once an attempt made by Carl Dahlhaus to take a closer look at this issue in the musical work, but with little by way of a final conclusion¹¹. The problem of the beautiful and the ugly in a work of music remains a barely-studied field. Roman Ingarden worked on a “system of aesthetically-significant qualities” in the 1960s, but then abandoned this pursuit¹².

5. Thus, in art, we are faced with a confrontation between the true and the false; between the beautiful and the ugly. But, as has already been said, this is not all-important. The problem is anything that has been described as fiction rather than falsehood.

Now it seems sensible to treat this category as one that has its well-defined place within the system of art. It could be one of complementary qualities, those that complement the fundamental values. By analogy, one could complete the picture by including the other complementary quality, the one that sometimes “replaces” the category of beauty: that of expression. One would then be left with a complex of four values (a “tetraxis”) that complement or replace each other: the truth and fiction, the beauty and expression, of a work of art; with the additional stipulation that the word “fiction” – due to the pejorative connotations of one of its meanings – be replaced with a more neutral and somewhat broader term: imagination.

Each of the four values defined here has had its own phase of special significance in the history of music. In periods of classical sympathies, the fundamental qualities of beauty and truth would gain in import; periods of romantic tendencies would emphasize the complementary values of imagination (fiction) and expression in a work. As each came to the fore in its principal function, it has had its own and unique impact on

11 C. Dahlhaus, *Trivialmusik und ästhetische Urteil* [in:] C. Dahlhaus (ed.), *Studien zur Trivialmusik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Regensburg 1967.

12 R. Ingarden, *Wykłady i dyskusje z estetyki*, Warszawa 1981.

the character and the style of a given period. It triggered a different view of the work of art with different associations and different reactions.

Beauty. The fundamental and primary quality of a work of art, especially that of music, Lutosławski's "ultimate goal of art." Its mode of interaction is uncontroversial; already in Plato, beauty "holds one in awe, causes admiration..."¹³ I think, too, that we could all agree with the first part of Norwid's definition: "For beauty is there to delight..."¹⁴ In his study *Wokół piękna* [Around beauty], Władysław Stróżewski summarises the views on the interactions of beauty in a work with a single sentence: "It seems that there is one spontaneous and, at the same time, the most adequate 'answer' to beauty: delight."¹⁵ (Ex. 1, p. 549).

The delightful has usually been described as harmonious, clear and lucid – a fulfilment of the rule of *claritas*. For the ancient Greeks, beauty appeared whenever a work of art was produced in accordance with the principles of the *nomos*.

For the very same Greeks, including Pythagoras, Aristoxenus, Philodemus and Sextus Empiricus, there also existed the other side of any work of art: the principles of the *ethos*. While the *nomos* described objective, mathematically-measurable proportions and relationships, the *ethos* defined the subjectively-perceivable expression of a work, in accordance with its given function: one leading to euphoria or one inducing lamentation.

And just as the beauty of a work was to delight, **expression** was to become a moving, an agitating force. And it has, for ages, in the particular romanticising historical phases and in genres and pieces of a particular type of emotion (Ex. 2, p. 550).

Truth. As fundamental a quality in a work as beauty, although not primarily ascribed to it, expected, first of all, in scholarship and philosophy, yet, as has been discussed above, present in a work in a variety of ways. One of these ways: as a quality described as "authenticity," "originality," or as testimony to the author's "faithfulness to himself." But the primary understanding of the presence of truth in a work has its roots in the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis*. The adequacy principle ("*adequatio rei*

13 W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki, I. Estetyka starożytna*, Warszawa 1985, p. 117.

14 *Promethidion*.

15 W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna*, Kraków 2002, p. 191.

et intellectu") assumed different names and characteristics in different eras: from *imitatio della natura*, through *Nachahmungs-Aesthetik*, to the poetics of the symphonic poem. In art, the true is anything that evokes an extra-historical reality with its striking similarity (Ex. 3, p. 551).

Adagio.
SOLO.

Klav.

Klav.

10

cl.

Fr.

Klav.

vi.

vla.

Vic. e
Cb.

Ex. 1. W.A. Mozart, *Piano Concerto in A major, II. Adagio*.

Andante non tanto (♩ = 60)

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 90-100) features a horn part with dynamics *mf* and *p*, and string parts (VI, Vle., Vc., Cb.) with dynamics *ff* and *p*. The second system (measures 100-110) features a horn part with dynamics *pp*, *f*, and *mf*, and string parts with dynamics *pp*, *mf cresc.*, *f*, and *ff*. The third system (measures 110-120) features a horn part with dynamics *mf* and *mf*, and string parts with dynamics *mf*, *ff*, and *ff*. The score includes performance instructions such as "1. 3." and "2. 4." and dynamic markings like *cresc.*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *pp*, and *p*.

Ex. 2. P. Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 6, Adagio lamentoso*.

29

Ev. Sie spra-chen:

Pil. ich euch soll los-ge-ben?

Cnt.

31 **Recitativo**

Evangelist. Pi-la-tus sprach zu ih-nen:

Pilatus. Was soll ich denn ma-chen mit

Organo e Continuo.

33

Ev. Sie spra-chen al-le:

Pil. Je-su, von dem ge-sagt wird, er sei Chri-stus?

Cnt.

Coro I. II.

Soprano. Ba-rab-bam!

Alto. Ba-rab-bam!

Tenore. Ba-rab-bam!

Basso. Ba-rab-bam!

Organo e Continuo.

Soprano. Ba-rab-bam!

Alto. Ba-rab-bam!

Tenore. Ba-rab-bam!

Basso. Ba-rab-bam!

Organo e Continuo.

Ex. 3. J.S. Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, "Lass ihn kreuzigen!"

Coro I. II. 36

Flauto traverso I. II.

Oboe I. Violino I.

Oboe II. Violino II.

Viola.

Soprano.

Alto.

Tenore.

Basso.

Laß ihn kreu - -

Flauto traverso I. II.

Oboe I. Violino I.

Oboe II. Violino II.

Viola.

Soprano.

Alto.

Tenore.

Basso.

Laß ihn kreu - -

Organo e Continuo.

Coro I. II. unis.

5 6 7 7 6 # 6 7 8 6 6 6 6 6 7

5 5 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 4

Ex. 3. Cont.

The true is confronted with the **imaginary** – derived from imagination rather than memory. Truth enlightens, explains, identifies. Imagination flies away from “the here and now,” elevates, liberates from immediate reality. Instead of truth, it proposes “fabrication” (according to Goethe) or fiction (in the English sense of literary prose), a “fantasia” instead of a sonata form, the former allowing its creator to wander according to the whims of his own imagination rather than to external and objectivised principles.

An Robert Schumann
SONATE LISZT Ferenc

Lento assai

p sotto voce

Allegro energico

f marcato

Ex. 4. F. Liszt, Sonata in B minor, introduction.

Thus **expression** and **imagination** are just as valid as **beauty** and **truth** as participants of the “discussion” that has been going on within the space of the work of music as well as that of the work of art. At times, the upper hand in this discussion seems to be taken by the arguments for fundamental values; at times, in a different phase and sphere, those for complementary values. Sometimes, even, one of the values has the upper hand and defines the character of an entire genre as well as that of a work. Thus the principle of expression is sovereign for the genres of the lament or the threnody, while the principle of imagination does the same for the genre of the ballad, the tale, the poem.

6. We live in difficult times. Adorno has already remarked that “new art ... no longer allows us to ... demean ourselves with truth, beauty and goodness.”¹⁶ These three qualities have been left to what is usually dismissed as philistine art. Although Charles Ives had a point when he wrote that “all too often, the beauty of music is identified with nothing but repose for your ears in a comfortable armchair”¹⁷; but all trends that ignore the import of the categories of truth and beauty in a work of art seem to be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. One could easily subscribe to the view that, in post-Holocaust times, it is difficult to find a place for pure, classical beauty in one’s work; that escaping the truth, at times all too cruel, might be a natural impulse.

Quite possibly, all the extreme reactions offered by the art of our times can be explained away by the fact that, at the end of the 20th century, culture entered a phase in which the decisive voice shifted from beauty to expression, from truth to pure imagination and its conscious rift with actual reality.

All ideas expressed here have been made as conditionally as possible. The only certainty in this statement has been its longing for a fullness of truth and beauty in art, and the hope that, indeed, it will come. And, as I listen carefully to contemporary music, I think I can say: the dawn is upon us.

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Translated by Jan Rybicki

¹⁶ Quoted in: A. Jarzębska, *Spór o piękno muzyki. Wprowadzenie do kultury muzycznej XX wieku*, Wrocław 2004, p. 92.

¹⁷ Ch. Ives, quoted in: H. and S. Cowell, *Ives*, Kraków 1982, p. 140.