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The Artist and the Self

Paul Bruno

Richard Rorty claims that “[t]he paradigm of a [Nietzschean] narrative [of overcoming] is the life of the genius who can say of the relevant portion of the past, ‘Thus I willed it,’ because she has found a way to describe that past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self...” (Rorty 1989, 29). Rorty’s use of the past tense of find—“found”—is clever in that it bears with it connotations of construction and fabrication that a word like *founding* naturally invites. Indeed, Rorty’s insistence on the importance of redescription is meant to convey the idea that the self is constructed or becomes autonomous according to the measure that one is able to “construct a vocabulary” or create the taste by which one judges himself. His invocation of Harold Bloom’s “strong poet” further shows that Rorty’s model for the self is fundamentally an aesthetic one.

The question that will be addressed in this essay concerns just how we arrived at the point where the artist and the self forge an identity. Or put another way, how is it that modern depictions of the self, like the one just mentioned by Rorty, rely so much on an aesthetic sensibility? For a reply to this question, I shall try to establish an historical framework by examining the pivotal work of Immanuel Kant. Specifically, I will show how his work set the conditions for a series of machinations that

make contemporary theories of the aesthetic self possible. I will close with some questions about the implications of Rorty's definition of the self.

In *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, Robert Pippin asserts that the problem of Modernity has its philosophical roots in "the modern attempt at a genuine self-determination." Immanuel Kant's famous challenge, issued in the name of the Enlightenment,¹ that one must think for oneself typifies this spirit of self-determination and autonomy. Pippin goes on to say that there is a noticeable way that the spirit of self-determination and autonomy is interpreted after Kant. That is, the artistic or aesthetic life became the dominant mode for determining one's self, the paradigmatic manner of accepting Kant's dare to think for oneself. He writes,

The question is what [the modern attempt at a genuine self-determination, in both a sweeping historical and an individual sense] came to mean by the mid-nineteenth century, why its social manifestations came to be perceived as so objectionable, and why it seemed to so many that only one form of such self-determination, a radical act of imagination, or a complete, aesthetic self-definition, would fully realize the otherwise discredited notion of a 'free life.' (Pippin 1991, 30)

The prominence of aesthetic self-definition does not immediately follow from Kant, but, as Pippin shows, Kant sets up the problematic for his successors. The problematic shows itself most dramatically in Kant's attempt to come to terms with the concept of nature. In "Kant and the Terror of Genius," William Desmond points out that Kant's depiction of nature has some conflicting elements that are most evident in nature's relationship to the cognitive subject. Desmond writes, "In the earlier picture of nature in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the self gives the rule to nature. Now, in a reversal, it seems that nature is giving the rule, and through genius" (Desmond 1998, 598). This assertion begs the question how does this reversal play itself out?

The seeds of this conflict appear in the first *Critique* when Kant asserts that nature is unified by the subject—recall that he relates the "the possibility of knowing *a priori*, by means of the categories" to "prescribing laws to nature, and even of making nature possible" (Kant 1929, 170). The subject plays the fundamental role

¹ See "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Trans. Hans Reiss. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 54-60.

in constituting nature or the self as an “active source of intelligibility,” as Desmond puts it.

Kant’s understanding of nature is essentially mechanical in the first *Critique*; in Ernst Cassirer’s words, it is “the expression of the highest objectivity, the expression of order and lawfulness” (Cassirer 1981, 89). That objectivity, order, and lawfulness are bound to the light of human reason Kant also makes clear. In other words, the manner of questioning sets up the parameters of possible answers. Kant explains the decisive role of reason in such pursuits:

A light broke upon all students of nature. They learned that reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and that it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s leading-strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining. (Kant 1929, 20)

Kant uses as strong a word as “constraining” (*nötigen*) in explaining reason’s role, but this is entirely in keeping with the idea in the first *Critique* that “objects must conform to our knowledge” (Kant 1929, 22). Kant acknowledges how strange it is to presuppose that our minds will no longer conform to objects out there in the world, but that the objects must now conform to our minds. He writes, “That nature should direct itself according to our subjective ground of apperception, and should indeed depend upon it in respect of its conformity to law, sounds very strange and absurd” (Kant 1929, 140). Despite the strangeness, the subject remains occupied with putting nature in his “leading-strings.”

The reversal of which Desmond speaks is apparent in the third *Critique* where one learns that nature works through genius, as opposed to in the first *Critique* where the subject is constitutive of nature. Kant introduces the notion of the *technical* which is concerned with “the art of bringing about something that we want to exist [*sein*]” and the *technic* of nature which concerns those occasions “where we merely *judge* [certain] objects of nature *as if* they were made possible through art” (Kant 1987, 390). These are enigmatic concepts that must be understood in relation to the stark mechanism of Kant’s nature in the first *Critique*. Kant realizes that a mechanistic understanding of nature cannot account for the myriad manifestations of existence and thus, he sees the need for this new way of conceiving of nature.

In addition, Kant leaves some hints in the third *Critique* that it is our very ability to produce something that can mediate between nature and freedom. The third *Critique* attempted, among other things, to mediate between that part of nature

determined by laws and that part of nature concerned with bringing something into being. That the third *Critique* served such an intermediary function is supported by Kant's somewhat cryptic table shown at the end of the second introduction.² Kant states that "the concept of a purposiveness of nature... makes possible the transition from pure theoretical to pure practical lawfulness, from lawfulness in terms of nature to the final purpose set by the concept of freedom" (Kant 1987, 37). Judgment, and specifically the *a priori* concept upon which it rests, i.e., purposiveness, is the cognitive power that pivots between understanding and reason. Furthermore, the respective application for each cognitive power is crucial for understanding genius because art is the pivot point between nature and freedom. Thus, the maker of fine art (and it would seem art in general) serves as a vital link between nature and freedom.

Not only does Kant leave provocative suggestions regarding the role of art, but he also is a leading figure³ in transforming the way in which imagination was conceived. As Mary Warnock points out in her *Imagination and Time*, René Descartes set up a problem for western philosophy that challenged philosophers for many years. The imagination was introduced to try to overcome the subject/object split. If the world is made up of *res cogito* and *res extensa*, how then does the thinking subject get outside of himself to the objects around him? The imagination takes on an important role in responding to this question. In fact, although Warnock may be overstating it a bit when she writes „We may fairly claim, then, that imagination can dissolve what had seemed to Descartes and his successors the insoluble problem of the relations between the inner and the outer, the mental and the corporeal“ (Warnock 1994, 21), it is the case nevertheless that the imagination began to play an increasingly significant role in epistemology in the eighteenth century. In *The Wake of the Imagination*, Richard Kearney writes,

What most distinguishes the modern philosophies of imagination from their various antecedents is a marked affirmation of the creative power of man. The mimetic paradigm of imagining is replaced by the

² See Kant (1987, 38). In this table that ends the second Introduction, Kant suggests that art mediates between nature and freedom just as judgment mediates between understanding and reason.

³ I use the somewhat ambiguous term of "leading figure" where others would be more emphatic in crediting Kant with the shift to the productive imagination because there is the too little explored influence of Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Genius* on Kant's idea of the productive imagination. Gerard, who was writing in the 1750s and 60s described the importance of the productive imagination. Kant most certainly read and was influenced by Gerard's work.

productive paradigm—at best imitating some truth beyond man—the imagination becomes, in modern times, the immediate source of its own truth. (Kearney 1988, 155)

We can see that the imagination became a means of accessing truth. Originally, the imagination may have had a strictly epistemological function, but the productive imagination proved well suited to expressive ends, and soon the association between a work of art and the truth was severed.⁴ The traditional understanding of the artist as imitative was superseded by an understanding of the artist as originary (an understanding that can be fairly said to persist today). Creativity takes center stage, and growing out of creativity is the propensity to celebrate those who are particularly creative in their endeavors. As Charles Taylor points out,

Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artistic becomes in some way the paradigm case of the human being, as agent of original self-definition. Since about 1800, there has been a tendency to heroize the artist, to see in his or her life the essence of the human condition, and to venerate him or her as a seer, the creator of cultural values. (Taylor 1991, 62)

Thus, the artist came to be seen as not only the self-expressive creator, but also as a model for how to live one's life. Kearney remarks that “[i]t was really only with Kant and the German Idealists in the late eighteenth century, that the productive imagination became, as it were, officially recognized by mainstream Western thought” (Kearney 1988, 156). And as Warnock reminds us, “From Kant's time on, imagination was increasingly recognized to be an essential part of making sense of the world, even for those without the elevated powers of genius” (Warnock 1994, 30). Kearney and Warnock show that the imagination is “recognized,” Taylor goes further by stating that the imagination and artistic creation become *the* mode of self realization.

To review then, Kant's struggle with nature sets the stage for what becomes a total dissolution of nature as a touchstone for the real. Pippin puts it this way: “[Kant's attempt at a fully critical account of reason], first, gave the fullest philosophical expression to a claim that struck deep at modernity's own early optimism: that reason could not know, represent, imitate, or use as an ideal, Nature, substance, being as it is in itself” (Pippin 1991, 60). In other words, once reason was

⁴ See Gadamer (1995), pp. 42-100.

determined to be unable to get at the „thing in itself“ or that nature escaped a purely mechanistic explanation, the cat was out of the bag as it were. Furthermore, the productive imagination coupled with the human capacity for making (in Kant this might be best observed in his discussion of genius⁵) established a certain pride of place among some of his immediate successors for artistic pursuit.

For evidence of this, one needs look no further than the Romantics. The artistic impulse did not sever ties with nature immediately for nature remained a ballast for many of the Romantics. Despite celebrating the impulse of creation, someone like Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives nature a defining role. He picks up on Kant’s idea of “nature gives the rule to art through genius” in a way that accentuates the creative impulse of nature—rather than the mechanical aspect. Consider here Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” (1796). He writes,

And that simplest Lute,
Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!
How by the desultory breeze caress'd,
Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover,
It pours such sweet upbraiding, as must needs
Tempt to repeat the wrong!
(Coleridge 1967, 399, lines 13-18)

The immediate cause of the sound is the “desultory breeze.” An undisciplined, unstructured nature caresses the sound from the harp sitting idly in the window. Nature, in the guise of the breeze (like a lover), strokes the sound into being. Later in the poem the speaker says,

Traverse my indolent and passive brain
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!
(Coleridge 1967, 399, lines 41-43)

Coleridge exalts nature and its unique ability for creativity. The brain is merely a passive receptor, hardly the centerpiece of the autonomous, enlightened subject.

I started out by saying that Kant, in the name of the Enlightenment, dared his contemporaries to think for themselves. After isolating Kant’s contribution to dismantling the traditional view of nature, I suggested that Kant’s depiction of the productive imagination was immediately influential for the Romantics, in particular

⁵ It must be noted that Kant did not surrender to some form of unencumbered genius. Taste and judgment always play an important role in the creativity of genius.

Coleridge, even though they retained some semblance of a foundational nature. In such a sketch, Kant appears to be entrenched in *both* the Enlightenment and Romanticism and at odds with both. Pippin's point regarding reason's inability to find an ideal in Nature⁶ shows this. When nature loses its constitutive function, the imagination is in a prime spot to take over. This has far reaching consequences for the plight of each, and it points to a persistent tension that is still with us today. Desmond recognizes this when he writes, "We might say that Romanticism is the truth of Enlightenment relative to the self: it sees that the self cannot be rationalized in the same way as a supposedly mechanistic nature. Inevitably, the question will arise as to whether the self can be rationalized *at all*?" (Desmond 596, 1998).

Perhaps it is with the rise of the post-Nietzschian⁷ philosophy of hermeneutics⁸ in this century that the aesthetic model of self-determination and autonomy comes into full bloom. As Gianni Vattimo points out in his *Beyond Interpretation*, hermeneutics has become the "common idiom" or *koiné* of modern philosophical thought.⁹ While recognizing that the very commonness of hermeneutics results in a certain dilution of its original meaning, Vattimo rightly points out that aesthetic experience is what hermeneutics takes as a model for interpretation. In opting for an aesthetic model of interpretation, hermeneutics decisively embraces the human sciences (*Geistwissenschaften*) over the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Vattimo writes,

Truth as the opening of the horizons within which all that is true or false in the propositional sense can be given has nonetheless always already occurred, given that our every act and conscious thought is made possible by it; yet not being a transcendental structure (for the reasons already stated, that is it is not stable and given once and for all, like the objects it makes accessible), nor ahistorical, it is something that occurs, though not on account of a deliberate act. The model for this occurrence is the creation of a work of art, which the tradition, at

⁶ I might label this the change from Nature with a capital "N" to nature with a small "n".

⁷ Nietzsche's famous remark in *The Will to Power* that „facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretation" (Nietzsche 1967, 267) is regarded by many to be rallying call of hermeneutics. See also Pippin *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, esp. Ch. 4 and Vattimo *Beyond Interpretation*.

⁸ Hermeneutics is understood as that mode of interpretation that was inspired by Heidegger and espoused most eloquently in Gadamer.

⁹ I realize that this is hardly an unarguable point. Vattimo groups together in a "very generic sense" such thinkers as Habermas, Rorty, Derrida, Taylor, Levinas, Apel, and Heidegger.

least in modernity, is united in regarding as radical newness, and for which reason it speaks of genius and of inspiration by ‘nature.’ (Vattimo 1997, 17)

The belief in a radical newness or even the ability to create prepares the way for tenets like Rorty’s redescription. But, as Pippin writes, “Artists, poets, novelists and philosophers...do not just begin experimental, ironic attempts at radical ‘redescription’; they do so in response to a common view of their historical inheritance and with a clear view of what has ‘now’ come to be understood about that legacy and, presumably, its pretensions” (Pippin 1991, 44). Vattimo writes that Rorty emphasizes the “irreducibility of redescriptions to any kind of continuity. What is valued is the new, the unheard of, ‘the stroke of genius’ that has its roots precisely in the Romantic notion of genius” (Vattimo 1997, 36). What has happened with the likes of Rorty is that nature has fallen away completely, and all that is left is the free floating creative subject trying to redescribe his life in such a way that others will buy it. By “buy” I mean both in the sense of believe it and in the sense of purchase it. Rorty writes that “the difference between genius and fantasy...is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people—happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time” (Rorty 1989, 37). Indeed, such a catching on is a marketing person’s dream.¹⁰

The way I see it, Rorty’s insistence on redescription and “the strong poet” should be subject to a critique in the name of the philosopher to whom Rorty is most indebted, namely, Nietzsche. I think it is imperative that a full accounting of Nietzsche’s aesthetic sensibility is given. In the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche says of artists that

their position in the world and *against* the world is far from sufficiently independent for their changing valuations *as such* to merit our attention! Down the ages, they have been the valets of a morality or philosophy or religion: quite apart from the fact that they were, unfortunately, often the all-too-glib courtiers of their hangers-on and pa-

¹⁰ Axel Honneth, in “Pluralization and Recognition: On the Self-Misunderstanding of Post-modern Social Theories,” writes that „a media and advertising industry...whose most pointed forms of expression today are the computer and television, increasingly appropriates the cultural achievements of the aesthetic avant-garde and profitably incorporates them into the mechanisms of reproduction” (Honneth 1990, 221).

trons and sycophants with a nose for old or indeed up-and-coming forces. (Nietzsche 1994, 76)

This one comment does not militate against the many positive things that Nietzsche attributes to the artist,¹¹ but it does suggest that Nietzsche was also suspicious of the artist and the likelihood of their becoming “valets” of a particular world view. This is precisely what I am suggesting in regard to the commercial, cliché driven acts of difference that are so prevalent in our commercial culture. What Nietzsche’s comment points up is the necessity for some kind of signpost. The danger of becoming merely a “valet” is great, this, of course, in the name of individuality or autonomy. What must be remembered is that, as Vattimo puts it, what founds a work of art is neither “simply the artist’s faith in themselves,” nor the “wholly arbitrary assumption of total responsibility” (Vattimo 1997, 36). Is it possible to dismiss such a powerful constitutive concept as nature simply because “I willed it”?

In closing, I just want to make a comment regarding some of the questions that must be raised if the emphasis on art is to persist in the modern conversations about the self. As I tried to point out, the emphasis on art (a phenomena that is peculiar to the modern age) surely has its roots in the conflict between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. To understand this emphasis, we must examine questions about art itself. One question considers where modern notions about artistic production come from. It is not uncommon, in our time, to see an artist valorized to such a degree that his works of art become secondary. As Vattimo points out, the “fully fledged mythicization of the figure of the artist can only be understood in the framework of a culture in which religion is substituted for art...” (Vattimo 1997, 71). The consequences of the mythicization of the artistic figure show themselves in the “increasingly remoteness of a lot of art to the masses; the masses, in turn, remain prisoners of kitsch” (Vattimo 1997, 71). The aesthetic self, the self that can say, “Thus, I willed it,” finds himself in one of two positions: First, he must posit his elite status. The model for this self is the outcast, eccentric, unreachable artist/self. Second, he is awash in pop culture, a “prisoner of kitch.” Such an artist/self

¹¹ See *The Gay Science, inter alia*. In section 290 of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes “To ‘give style’ to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature removed...” (Nietzsche 1974, 232). For further discussion of the critical stance that Nietzsche takes toward art see Pippin (1991) and Peter Berkowitz (1995).

enacts difference in ways that are flush with consumerist, clichéd labels of difference. One only has to take a brief look at MTV or on the streets of any city for examples of this.

Furthermore, I think that there is real question about the activity of artistic creation. Ever since the Romantics, we have been wedded to the idea of creativity and production rather than the idea that has more weight when thought strictly in terms of historical time, that is, mimesis and reproduction. What about Aby Warburg's insistence that artists are generally involved in situations of "choice and conflict in their work?" Warburg preferred to think of artists as in positions of resistance to the "spirit of the age."¹² This notion of resistance is consistent with the aforementioned comment of Pippin. That is that "Artists, poets, novelists and philosophers...do not just begin experimental, ironic attempts at radical 're-description'; they do so in response to a common view of their historical inheritance and with a clear view of what has 'now' come to be understood about that legacy and, presumably, its pretensions." Such acts of resistance suggest a creativity that recognizes that artists and selves always already live in a world that is constitutive of their individuality. This is a creativity that cannot take refuge in the often shallow stances of "difference," but rather recognizes that difference is negotiated in a common sense, to use Kant's term, or a common view, to use Pippin's. This creativity recognizes that so many attempts at "difference" are thoroughly grounded in a consumerist and media driven culture—the very thing that needs to be resisted. Such a creativity recognizes that the creative acts coming from productive imagination are always commingled with elements of imitation.

¹² See E. H. Gombrich (1986).

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