

HISTORICAL PROGRESS: ART AS RESPONSE IN FLAUBERT AND WOOLF

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Abstract: The paper aims to examine the contributions of Gustave Flaubert and Virginia Woolf to the ongoing discussion on the history and historical progress during the time of enlightenment and later period explained through a reading of the books Madame Bovary (Flaubert, 1856) and the novel, To the Lighthouse (Woolf, 1927). The paper looks into different philosophers and literary figures and their engagement with the question regarding human derangement during and post-enlightenment period. The paper argues that both Flaubert and Woolf bring art as a response to the void of rationality enlightenment has brought.

Keywords: Historical Progress, Enlightenment, art and, aesthetics, rationality

Immanuel Kant defines Enlightenment as humans' liberation from their self-incurred immaturity. Kant states, "Immaturity is the ability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of others" (Kant, 1784). The process of thinking for oneself, 'dare to know' as Kant puts it, is the key aspect of Kant's notion of enlightenment. One's intellectual capacity in matters of thinking, believing, and acting defines one's epistemological attitude. Kant's epistemological attitude recognizes the limits of rational knowledge and at the same time views reason as a necessary and inevitable faculty of knowledge. However, Kant limits rational knowledge to the realm of natural phenomena. He argues rational knowledge is only possible in the realm of possible experiences since the human mind could only know objects only as appearances, and not objects in them. Thus knowledge of objects, such as God and the soul according to Kant is outside the domain of rational knowledge. Kant calls this realm of unknowable 'noumena'. Kant postulates a phenomenal side of the world- the realm of knowable where human perception plays an important role. However, he emphasized the use of reason while crossing the space between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds.

It is important to note how Kant treats supersensible objects. Kant tries to bring a middle path of philosophy grounding rational, scientific knowledge of nature in the realm of sensible experience and postulates a system that makes room for humanity's practice and religious aspirations. This duality of the sensible and supersensible; of real and ideal is the central idea of the world, of history and of progress according to Kant.

The notion of 'subjectivity' for Kant lies in the ability to use one's own understanding' without any external direction. The idea of subjectivity is linked to the commonality of law. Kant states, "to test whether any particular measure can be agreed upon as a law for a people, we need only ask whether a people could well impose such a law upon itself (Kant, 1784)". The ability of the human being is closely associated with progress, enlightenment progress. Any restriction of this human ability, restrict progress and in turn, is against human nature.

The Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's in his 'Discourse on arts and sciences' states "While government and laws take care of the security and the well being of men in groups, the sciences, letters, and the arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down, snuffing out in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they appear to have been born, and make them love their slavery by turning them into what are called civilized people." Sciences, arts, and literature of the Enlightenment, for Rousseau, are chains that weighted men down by making humans falsely believing that they are civilized by taking up modernity. They, according to him, are veiled inequality and oppression, which corrupted the natural disposition, ethic, and virtue of humankind. These enlightenment factors, he argued creates new needs, thus a new form of dependence; had the power to misguide and misconstrue the innate purity of man's natural reason. For Rousseau human subjectivity occupies the innate nature within and the balance of real and the ideal involves the influencing social factors of Enlightenment along with this natural disposition. While giving importance to reason in attaining knowledge and human progression, Rousseau postulates two principles before reason, self-preservation and natural repugnance at seeing others' sentiments.

Both the philosophers, Kant and Rousseau, stressed the importance of reason in the matter of knowledge and human progress, while recognizing its limitation. Thus both of them recognized the inevitability of Enlightenment. For Kant, practicing rational thought along with or balancing with faith results in a gradual improvement of humankind. For Rousseau, Enlightenment though inevitable and unstoppable would corrupt the natural disposition of human nature leading to the collective degradation of humankind.

Utilitarianism is one approach to normative ethics which held the viewpoint that the action that produces the most good is the morally right action. Maximizing the overall good, both for the individual and society at large, is the key, as Jeremy Bentham, recognized as the founder of Utilitarianism, puts it "the greatest happiness of the greatest number (1976)". He calls this the 'measurement of right and wrong'. Bentham articulated an ethical system in which one could measure outcomes and effects. For, Bentham this is a rational system. Rationality is a key idea in Utilitarianism. "Antiquity is no reason", said Bentham (1789), pointing to the importance of rationality where he rejected any sensibilities that could not be

proven logically and discarded methods and processes that function around notions of custom and norms.

The element of measurability and quantifying is a major notion we could claim Darwin inherited from Utilitarianism. Darwin in his pursuit of understanding the origin and existence of species, meticulously recorded, classified, and archived data concerning the species. He implemented logic and rationality to his judgments in a Utilitarian method and approach. But along with the Utilitarian approach, one could perceive a Romantic approach-maintaining respect, appreciation, and wonderment for the complexity of nature.

Romanticism a historical counter-shift responding to Utilitarianism questioned the later stress on measurable data and stressed the importance of emotion, individual experience. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were the main proponents of the movement in its early years. For the Romanticists the focus was things that one could not measure or quantify; perceived intense emotions, feelings, and sensations as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, preferred intuition, and nature over rationalism. However, reason and intellect are not completely taken away, rather they are understood as a notion of the active intellect and senses in contrast to the arguably more detached nature of Utilitarians who were concerned with rationalizing data passively obtained.

Charles Darwin integrated Romantic Philosophy along with the Utilitarian notion of measurement. While rejecting the metaphysical status quo on the origin of human beings and other species, Darwin argued that origin could be traced through a genealogical approach. In his 'Origin of Species (1859)', he wrote, "This preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, a call Natural Selection." Darwin proposes an evolutionary process locating humans as a product of evolution, a seemingly controversial approach. However, what Darwin had in mind was much more than a Romantic notion where humans are perceived as more organic to nature. In his later text 'The Descent of Man (1871)' Darwin further expands his argument suggesting the human race as descendants from primate ancestors.

From the above approach, one could argue that Darwin perceived history as the realm where the truth lies and that the human race is a living, evolving organism. A similar conception of the human race and society can be seen in Marx. Marx states "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles (1848)". Incorporating Hegelian thought, Marx sought history as a place where one must return to open the truth. Besides much- like Darwin, reason played a great role in understanding modernity for Marx. The idea of synthesis or change after a conflict in Marx resonates with the notion of the struggle of breeding as evidenced by generation and conflict of ideas in the perpetuation of inquiry.

Conclusively, we can realize how Darwin's conception of truth and evolution can be drawn back to theories of Utilitarianism and Romanticism, which in turn can be drawn back to other movements that emerged in the intellectual world.

Sigmund Freud, the renowned psychoanalyst after turning away from social politics moving to intellectual politics after the World War, spent his research on dream interpretation and sexuality. He read history in terms of these major aspects of human beings. Freud states, "Our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences. Their symptoms are the remnant and the memory symbols of certain traumatic experiences"(1909, from a speech Freud delivered at Worcester, Massachusetts). He maintained that through understanding the past that creates the pathology, we can handle the world with repressed senses. He envisioned a conflict within human beings, tripartite - conflict of Id, Ego, and Super Ego. The id is the fundamental and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and suppressed reminiscences. The Super-Ego is the moral conscience. The Ego is that part that operates and negotiates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. Freud further argues for negotiation with these innate contradictory desires, forces, and impulses. He says, "It is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct," (1930). He contends that civilization and morality have perpetuated guilt and frustration toward aggression. Further, Freud by suggesting that human desire is uncontrollable, there is no solution. Freud rather maintains once we recognize the human self as uncontrollable, a life that allows less pain and possible satisfaction in life can be attained.

The early philosophy of Karl Marx was at a time when Hegel and his interlocutors, Feuerbach being the most significant one, dominated the intellectual circle. Marx is greatly influenced by both these philosophers for most of his philosophical positions. Marx saw reason and rationality as a tool to understand and modernity and its historical significance. He was considerably influenced by Hegel's philosophy of history. Hegel considered history as an intelligible process moving towards a particular condition, where human freedom is central- "the ultimate end of mankind, the end which the spirit sets itself in the world" (Hegel, 1857). Hegel states "History is the process whereby its spirit discovers itself and its own concept" (Hegel, 1857). Thus, for Hegel, truth, freedom, and human progress lie in history. Further history manifests a rational process.

Reading history for Hegel involves a dialectic model. The historical present contains the past within (the thesis) and it demands the opposite in conflict (the antithesis), which produces a synthesis, which is a change that brings it the residue of the previous conflict. Truth arises from history and it is rational. Hegel states The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate (Hegel, 1837). Thus for Hegel, progress is advancement in the consciousness of human freedom.

Marx takes up these concepts of reason, conflict, and progress in developing his theories of society, economics, and state, especially his critique of economic injustice, the main aspect by which he rationalizes modernity. Marx states, "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles (Marx, 1848)". The 'class struggle' in Marx's above statement is linked with the concept of conflict. Marx observes the devaluation of Human being 'is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things' (Marx 1844). Thus what labor produces is not just commodities, rather 'it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*.' The resulting feeling is alienation or estrangement. Marx further claims estranged labor is of four kinds, from the product, from productive activity, from species-being, and other humans. What humans accomplish through labor is the opposite of these alienations. It is in this opposite, the non- alienated labor, the human emancipation is closely related. The conflict between alienated labor (the thesis) and non- alienated labor (the antithesis) will be solved by the social revolution (the synthesis) of the proletariat against the control of the bourgeois, as he envisions in Communist Manifesto (1848). Thus history resolves this contradiction through revolution.

History, for Gustave Flaubert, 'is merely the reflection of the present on the past, and that is why it must always be rewritten'(Green 2004). Flaubert regarded history as an inevitable series of repetitions, for human nature does not change much. Historical events such as class struggles, social revolutions are unimportant, banal, hypocritical, and unintelligent, and considering what they obtained, it is hypocritical and very dangerous. His escape from politics located him in arts, which identified the Romantic Period as a response against the Age of Enlightenment. Flaubert advocates art, aesthetics, and literature as reflecting the truth. *Madame Bovary* (1856), the masterpiece work depicted a "commentary on the entire self-satisfied, deluded, bourgeois culture of Flaubert's time period." Emma in Madam Bovary is enslaved by her unattainable romantic ideals falls in the end. The enlightened Monsieur Homais though eventually is successful; he is depicted as an egocentric and conspicuous figure. Neither of them indicates real progress. Here Flaubert tries to depict the imperfection of the world through the perfect form which for him is attainable only through art. Yet he believed progress inevitable. He desired to reignite emotion and imagination as the transcendence of man in the aesthetic realm through which humans could escape the imperfect realities of modernity.

Virginia Woolf, the famous English novelist similar to Freud stressed the importance of looking beyond ethics, conventions, and thus civilization. She emphasized sensitivity to intimacy, family, art, and aesthetics. These fundamental desires, experiences, expressions, forces, and values, for Woolf, can not be explained and restrained through systems of any sort, thus civilizations, morality, etc. Here, She points to an essential conflict between belief and logic and the significance of each play on developing our past experiences and history

and fashioning our present, illustrated mainly through the depiction of Mrs. and Mr. Ramsay in her novel 'To the Lighthouse'. While Mrs. Ramsay represents emotions, Mr. Ramsay represents logic. The decisions that they make for their children in many instances imply the conflict between logic and emotion. The lighthouse itself depicts this conflict. Further, Woolf exemplifies this conflict by portraying Mrs. Ramsay as a figure of beauty that representing hope, connection, and belief while Mr. Ramsay is seen as someone who represents science, objectivity, reason, and law.

Woolf argued that we set aside the bigger question of the meaning of life. At the end of the novel '*To the Lighthouse*' through the character the artist Lily Briscoe Woolf points to this aspect: "What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one" (1927). Humans are more controlled by desire and emotions and thus exist a conflict with reason and law, according Woolf. This is in par with Freud. The world cannot be completely explained through systems and categories. Negotiation might be possible which is placed on the original and powerful connections experienced through intimacy in everyday life, those brief moments that surround our history, present, and future.

To conclude, Woolf and Flaubert, like other philosophers perceived historical progress essentially tied to the progress of human beings. The solution for the harsh reality of man, for Flaubert is in the aesthetic realm aligning to his respective historical movement Romanticism, while for Woolf humans are more controlled by desire and emotions and thus exist a conflict with reason and law. The world cannot be completely explained through systems and categories. Negotiation might be possible which is placed on the original and powerful connections experienced through intimacy in everyday life, those brief moments that surround our history, present, and future.

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