

A Resonant Humanity: Art, Sacrifice, and the Struggle to Understand

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In Peter Schaffer's radical play, *Equus*, a teenage boy—Alan Strang—drives a metal spike through the eyes of six horses, defying any sense of normalcy, morality, or decorum as he horrifies the community around him. Dismissed as a deranged psychopath by nearly all, he is left in the hands of Martin Dysart, an esteemed psychiatrist. The play revolves around conversations between Alan and Dysart, extending into flashbacks and dreams within Alan's mind. As both Dysart and the audience come to know Alan more intimately—as we come to see his innermost fears, beliefs, and desires—he begins to exist as a real individual for us, a human being like ourselves. Moreover, as the play unfolds, Dysart begins to develop an unexpectedly close connection with Alan's strange philosophies and passions, for he relates to them on a very personal level. With as much surprise and fascination as Dysart, I too, while reading the play, began to feel a strong empathy for Alan's feelings and actions, for his character gradually transformed in my mind from a stereotyped criminal to a desperate, ardent, tormented individual who didn't belong to the particular category to which the world had condemned him. I came to *care about* Alan as a character full of independent life, power, sincerity, and truth. *Equus* profoundly affected my own views about human nature and society, forcing me to challenge beliefs about sanity and comfort that I had formerly taken for granted.

Perhaps it is the artist's ability to form an emotional relationship with the audience, to evoke a change in perspective amongst readers or viewers, that makes a work of art great. In his essay "Vermeer in Bosnia," Lawrence Weschler describes his encounter with a group of Vermeer paintings in a museum in The Hague—an encounter that has startling effects on his perception of the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal and of Dusko Tadic, the criminal on trial. Weschler, who goes to the museum in search of some peace before the continuation of the trial, is struck by "the autonomy, the independ-

ent agency, dignity, and self-sufficiency” of Vermeer’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring*—by the intense humanity of her gaze and her power of independence (277). He feels a dynamic dialogue with the painting and its subject, captivated as he is by the palpable sense of peace that emanates from her face and her individual figure—an inner peace that is both challenged and magnified by Vermeer’s “conspicuous exclusion” of any overt signs of conflict or violence in his paintings (275). The girl becomes real to him; she is “not to be seen as merely a type, a trope, an allegory,” but rather as “a unique individual human being, worthy of our own unique individual response” (278). While staring at the painting, Weschler imagines “the melancholy of the moment with its impending sense of loss” (277), recognizing (in his own interpretation) an emotional life behind it and in that, a ground of empathy toward this delicate figure.

If it is in fact the creation of an emotional dialogue (of a personal bond) that most effectively captures an audience, what aspects of a work of art *inspire* that bond? Why are we so deeply moved by certain pieces and indifferent to others? What ignites our feelings of personal understanding? Gilbert J. Rose examines this question in “Affect: A Biological Basis of Art,” arguing that it is the instinctive recognition of familiarity, the discovery of our own qualities (our own *selves*, whether conscious or subconscious) that gives us a sense of connection with certain art. Emotion is triggered by sensation, by the effects of certain colors, patterns, sounds, words, and images that recall our own memories and experiences. “A particularly effective work may make us feel . . . that the emotion had been ‘communicated’ like a nonverbal ‘message’ directly from the art to the heart,” Rose points out (502). The resonance we feel exists outside logical explanation. Art appeals to human *intuition* far more than to reason, and thus our own individual beliefs, desires, and associations—often those not consciously realized—shape our response to a work of art. Rose references Descartes’ assertion that “what generates in some a desire to dance may induce others to weep . . . for this results only from the *excitation* of ideas that exist in our memory”—for art has the ability to awaken aspects of our own experiences and emotions that have been otherwise repressed (503).

But if the power of a work of art and its influence on the individual depends on instinctive familiarity—even if that familiarity is subconscious—why do the books, paintings, songs, plays, and films that “resonate” with us so often *change* the way we see the world? If our emotional bond with certain art stems from recognition of self, why do the results of such a connection tend to be so surprising? In reading *Equus*, I developed a strong empathy for

Alan Strang, a tormented criminal who bears no resemblance to myself, and I identified closely with Dysart's extreme (and controversial) psychological transformation inspired by his patient. Similarly, Weschler experiences such a profound connection with Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*—a painting whose subject and context could not be further from his own life—that it reshapes his perception of Dusko Tadic, the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal, and the war in Bosnia. On the surface—within the facts of our lives—Weschler and I apparently have nothing in common with these works, no apparent reason for any kind of resonance. However, each of us felt an undeniable, deeply personal bond—and, paradoxically, perhaps it was the very lack of a logical source for this bond that ultimately gave *Equus* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring* such lasting influence on us, for our relationship with the art was intensified by our struggle to understand the connection.

The most powerful forces in human life tend to be those that are unexpected—and often those that are not easily understood. The genius of a great artist in any medium is the ability to show an audience something new about themselves (and about the world around them) that they would not have realized without the art, and perhaps the works of art that we as an audience find most fascinating are those that resonate inexplicably, that seem to speak from our own soul *without any rational understanding of why*. We form a real relationship with a work of art through our attempts to *figure out* the resonance we feel, to join our emotional intuition with intellectual comprehension. And when—through this effort, this battle to find some harmony of feeling and reason—we finally do reach some form of understanding, it is that experience of a *relationship* that produces such a powerful influence on our perspectives and beliefs.

In her essay “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison discusses the nature of fiction as an art form, the dynamic between autobiography and imagination, and the importance of communicating an artistic truth that reaches beyond fact. Though her novels deal with historical material, telling the stories of African-American women in the context of real events, she describes the characters’ “interior life” as the most crucial element of her writing—for that is where the most compelling, intimate human truth is found, the potential for deep resonance with her audience. Morrison describes the craft of historical fiction as “a kind of literary archeology . . . you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (238). Her role as a novelist, she contends, is to take historical information, records of real life (such as slave narratives), and infuse it with the rawness and immediacy of fiction, using the imagination to make her

work as emotionally real as possible. “What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act,” she argues, “my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth” (238). It is this truth that sparks an emotional bond, inspires personal recognition, creates a deep relationship between the work and the audience.

To form such a relationship between the audience and the art, to produce a powerful emotional impression—especially through literature—the artist must make readers feel as though they have *experienced* the story, for through that experience they understand with a fullness that surpasses mere intellectual comprehension. “What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn’t really reading this, that he is participating in it as he goes along,” Morrison explains, for out of this sense of personal involvement comes the crucial resonance, the artistic truth that is *felt* rather than known (241-42). This idea of a truth that reaches beyond fact, beyond rationality, is also a literary trademark of Tim O’Brien, a writer who uses fiction to make his readers feel what it was like to fight in the Vietnam War and to return home a damaged and haunted veteran. In his essay “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien declares that “absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (132). For O’Brien, “truth” is personal meaning and psychological experience—regardless of whether it comes from actual events or the imagination. “A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (129), he asserts—for to create artistic resonance in a reader the author must appeal to his individual senses and emotions, convincing him that the story has become *his own*, in a way.

In my own case, reading and discussing *Equus*, I began to feel this very sensation that the story—Dysart’s side of it as well as Alan’s—was my own, that somehow these characters’ inner psychological worlds had become part of myself, for I identified with them so closely (albeit inexplicably). Alan’s desperate need for raw passion and pain, for living at the highest pitch of life in spite of terrible extremes, both thrilled and frightened me—for as the play delved progressively deeper into the boy’s mind (as he became more real as a character, more complex as an individual), I began to realize that my fascination with this strange criminal came not from horrified wonder at a monster but rather from a subconscious recognition of aspects of myself—of my own needs and desires. Just as his exposure to Alan awakens Dysart to his own nausea at his meaningless life of comfortable normalcy and numbness, my struggle to understand the resonance I felt eventually illuminated my own frustration with the tepid routine of modern middle-class culture and my craving for

rebellion—for life driven by ardor and adventure, even by worship and violence, rather than empty convenience. Through the “dialogue” I formed with *Equus* (as an artistic and philosophical work) and my effort to understand its strong effect on me, my perspectives toward the surrounding world and my own place in it began to change. Whereas before I had assumed that this form of epic, fiercely-vibrant existence was only real in books and movies, I began to realize that life is only monotonous and pacified if one allows it to be—that it is possible to reach this intense vitality by seeing and thinking independent of the majority, by challenging convention and consciously resisting the trap of frozen complacency (even at the risk of judgment and hardship). Furthermore, this judgment and hardship is even perhaps a *necessary* part of true vitality, and the raw vibrancy—that Alan embodies and that Dysart so desires—is worth the sacrifice, worth the price.

While *Equus* revealed to me my own yearning for extremity and passion, Weschler is so mesmerized by the Vermeer paintings in the Mauritshuis Museum because they contain the very order, peace, and radiant humanity that *he* so craves, while surrounded by the War Crimes Tribunal’s atmosphere of horror, tension, confusion, and anxiety. He is particularly held by the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, consumed by the emotion that emanates from her face and filled with a mysterious sense of intimate understanding—of her sadness, her independent dignity, her eternity and strength as an individual confronting a complex world. Just as I found certain features of my own mind in Alan and Dysart, Weschler recognizes aspects of himself in the painting—in the girl’s raw, immediate humanity, her urgency, her vague desperation—and this recognition leads him through a series of reflections and realizations concerning his own memories, the war in Bosnia, and the correspondence between the unstable society of Vermeer’s time and the modern political climate of our own era. The most profound influence of Vermeer’s work comes rather as a surprise to Weschler as he stands in the Tribunal courtroom staring at Dusko Tadic (the criminal on trial for heinous crimes). Weschler suddenly recognizes in this man the same qualities that he found so captivating in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, those that inspired such an empathy in him, such a close bond with the piece. While previously he had seen Tadic as nothing other than a monster, Weschler now observes “a quite specific individual, in all his sublime self-sufficiency . . . stripped of any rationales except his own autonomous free agency” (280). Like the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Tadic becomes *real* to Weschler—a full, complex character with a personal truth that reaches beyond any form of stereotype.

There is an almost uncanny parallel between Weschler's startling change in perspective toward Dusko Tadic and Dysart's philosophical transformation inspired by Alan Strang, for both men undergo a dramatic shift in perception and a growth in understanding once they develop the capacity to view these criminals as real, complex *individuals*. Just as Weschler's encounter with Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* gives him a new awareness of the life behind a face (which makes him able to see Tadic as a human being with a self that exists beyond his crimes, beyond the tribunal), Dysart's intimate exposure to Alan's inner world (his emotions, his motivations, the layers of his mind) reveals to him a raw truth, a deep and primitive humanity that is missing in his own civilized routine of normalcy and decorum. Though each man is greatly and personally moved by his realization, Weschler merely acknowledges the change (and its connection to Vermeer's work) while Dysart goes much further, altering and re-thinking his entire life in order to do justice to the sacred truth he has discovered in his patient. "That boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life," he admits, vowing to find that passion in his own life, that intensity of being—and to suffer its cost, to give up his comfortable security (Schaffer 82). By contrast, while Weschler writes his essay about the effect of Vermeer on his perception of a criminal on trial, he does not let his revelation affect his *actions* in any way, and does not risk any cost. He stops at the recognition that the art has influenced him. What he sees, finally, is that Tadic is to be held accountable for his deeds. In the end, perhaps the realest significance of a work of art is the psychological impact it makes on an audience and *what the audience then does with that impact*. If it is an artist's vocation to craft a work that expresses a deeply human truth, to ignite personal resonance in an audience that leads to illumination, it is perhaps the responsibility of the audience not only to acknowledge art's effect on themselves, but also to bring their emotional experience (their broadened perspective, their personal revelation) to bear on their own lives.

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