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Friendship and *Art*

“We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless.” – Oscar Wilde in his Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

In Yasmina Reza’s play *Art*, three men expose the friction in their friendship to the audience and interact to resolve it. At the center of the controversy is a work of art that one of the friends, Serge, has acquired as his way of entering the art collecting culture. His friend Marc is concerned that this new acquisition confirms that Serge has changed and is now out of Marc’s control. Their friend Yvan, himself in the middle of a stressful life transition, tries to play the referee but ends up being punched in his face. At the center of the play is the fragility of their friendship: nothing holds them together but the desire to continue to be friends despite their newly discovered differences. At the end of the play, the friends try to adapt to the changes around them in order to confirm and renew their lifelong friendship.

The development of dramatic tension builds on Marc’s issue with Serge’s acquisition of a white painting by an emerging painter. Since Marc does not understand

why someone would pay a high price for a rather featureless painting, he tries to confront Serge directly. Their friend Yvan announces himself as “a bit tense at the moment” for being in the middle of change: he is getting married and has a new unexciting job, all of which would be part of his destiny yet devoid of happiness. Yvan’s own tension becomes comedic because of his way to enter the stage and recite a very long neurotic discourse about the behavior of his world outside the stage. One could imagine that Yvan also plays his character in another comedy in which he is at the center of tension between his family, his in-laws, and his new spouse, summarizing it as he enters the present stage. He does not necessarily understand what goes on around him, and his absence of opinion makes him the ideal referee in the quarrel over the art piece: he will let each one of his friends believe that he agrees. But because he agrees with everyone, he implicitly disagrees and his friends team up against him to finally find agreement among themselves. The tension breaks when Marc and Serge realize that they cannot continue bickering because they see what effect it has on their friend Yvan: Serge offers to sacrifice the painting in order to keep Marc as a friend. In the process, Marc creates his own meaning in the white painting.

Marc’s communication of his epiphany resembles the healing of the neurotic. R. May in his book *Love and Will* tells us about how tension is released in the neurotic vs. the artist:

“The relation between the artist and the neurotic, often considered mysterious, is entirely understandable from the viewpoint presented here. Both artists and neurotic speak and live from the subconscious and unconscious depths of their society. The artist does this positively, communicating what he experiences to his

fellow men. The neurotic does this negatively. Experiencing the same underlying meanings and contradictions of his culture, he is unable to form his experiences into communicable meaning for himself and his fellows.” (May)

At play here is our inability to deal with change in our culture and society, resulting in various degrees of neurosis. Yvan internalizes the conflicts which he is called to arbitrate, trying to find meaning for himself. Marc externalizes the conflict, making it Serge’s fault and highlighting Serge’s shortcomings in the process. Serge’s submissive act of passing him the marker is calculated to let Marc realize how unimportant art is in comparison to their friendship, but at the same time serves as a catalyst of Marc’s new artistic interpretation. For what they call the “trial period” Marc is cured of his neurosis. Yvan remains puzzled but becomes unable to “bear any kind of rational argument.” He may be on the way to curing his own neurosis by his recognition of the nature of art:

“In fact I can no longer bear any kind of rational argument, nothing formative in the world, nothing great or beautiful in the world has ever been born of rational argument.”

Ironically, Serge’s final action appears rational and calculated: he knows that the ink is washable, and he knows that by doing this he will initiate the healing of the friendship. Yet as he gets “within an inch” of telling the truth he decides in an irrational moment to create his surrender.

If *Art* is about friendship, it also demonstrates that friendship is related to art. The three friends put their friendship above most of the rest of their lives in a series of irrational arguments because the foundations of the friendship are unquestionable. They need to put as much energy and time in the construction and preservation of their

friendship as it is done with art that survives through the ages. In a purely rational world, they would not need this friendship, art would be like Marc's painting of Carcassone, and criticism would be similar to Marc's. As with a painting that is mostly white, a friendship does not need to mean anything to the people who observe it, but it means a great deal to the friends, themselves the actual artists.

Works Cited

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