Poverty—Bohemian Rhapsody: irony and ideal

Poverty, first of all was never a misfortune for me; it was radiant with sunlight… I owe it to my family, first of all, who lacked everything and who envied practically nothing.
—Albert Camus

The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that come upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many "in shallows and in miseries," are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence.
—Herbert Spencer

There's no lack of void.
—Samuel Beckett

Bruegel (1568) The Misanthrope
The inscription reads ‘Because the world is perfidious [deceitful], I am going into mourning.’

What is the little thief in the globe a symbol of? The Misanthrope, if it is the figure in the cloak, has thorns and fungus before him and his money is being taken behind his back while he is self-absorbed in a huff. Behind him in contrast the shepherd vigilantly looks after his flock. Is it an analogy of an art career? Possibly it relates to a Flemish proverb: ‘The Misanthrope robbed by the World.’ For Sullivan (1992) the painting represented Timon of Athens, the semi-legendary misanthrope of ancient literature (proverbial for his bitter hatred of humanity and retreat into isolation) resurrected in the Renaissance; an example of how the ancient past could be brought to bear on the problems of the present. For Sullivan ‘The Misanthrope’ was a truly Renaissance work geared to the interests of its original audience: humanists in the Low Countries in the 1550s and 1560s.
The nineteenth-century sociologist, Herbert Spencer, blamed poverty on the poor—they had robbed the world. It is a gloomy essentialist argument we still hear today from contemporary misanthropes who turn their backs to reality. Spencer attributed poverty to bad moral character and argued that the State should intervene as little as possible in what he called “the survival of the fittest” in an attempt to sound scientific.

Art has at times seen a more redemptive ‘purpose’ in poverty, but it has also played into Spencer’s type of representation. Thomas Nichols’ *The Art of Poverty*: looked at irony and ideal in sixteenth-century ‘Beggar Imagery’ and observed what happened when those at the very bottom of society became the subject of careful and sustained attention in European art. Here they became an established artistic subject—the main subject of a work. In Alter Pieces in churches beggars were represented more frequently in an expanding range of religious subject matter: wrecked bodies were stylised with references to the formal models of ancient Greece and Rome. Nichols traced its relation to the social reality of poverty in the period and found that the beggar image had the habit of challenging the predominant cultural discourses that appeared to circumscribe its meaning. In late sixteenth-century Italy artists blended the ideal and the ironic and produced images of the ‘false beggar’ a disenchanted and secularised image—a roguish beggar that moved the emphasis away from giving alms, the ‘sacred poverty’ of followers of Christ and ‘good works'; here too I imagine the artists were looking at themselves (via the satires of the Protestant North). After all as Brecht puts it in the ‘Threepenny Novel’ begging is an art: "the profession for those who have learned nothing; only it seemed that even this business had to be learned." The perception of begging was changed to an artful performance, with props, disguises, speeches and an audience—beggars became not ‘Prodigal Sons’ but false tricksters who manipulate innocent almsgivers for monetary gain.

'The Poor ye have with you always,' but not in art according to Nichols (they don't appear in Italian art till the1600s). Rather than be depicted as scroungers, today the poor are looked after via Art according to this web site from the Arts Council of Wales (2011) who are: "putting the arts at the centre of Government strategies to tackle child poverty.” Their strategy for arts and young people “is designed to make the arts as accessible as possible to all children and young people in Wales.” They add that: “We recognise that poverty is a barrier and that many of our children and families in Wales are potentially excluded from accessing the life changing experiences the arts can
are potentially excluded from accessing the life changing experiences the arts can bring.’ What does accessible and exclusion mean here?

The strategy then outlines what it is ‘doing’ to establish that the poor are indeed poor: surveys, evidence bases, far-reaching research gave rise to the phrase ‘The Possible Self,’ so the money was not wasted. Incidentally, the last thing we do here is give money to the poor—that is pointless. It is a far, far better thing to give money to other people working in the ‘Poverty Industries’ (we return to the Brecht quote with this flimflam). A five-year major arts review spent a fortune finding out: "what people think about art" as if the average poor person is actually invited to go to expensive and exclusive exhibitions or their opinion mattered or would survive the mangling of consultants and managerial hordes. The term art is stretched beyond any terminological exactitude so that the figures look good—here is a quote (after 5 years remember)”

We need more interrogation of the data to show a direct correlation between the figures for C2Des and people aged between 16 and 24, but we can reasonably confidently assume that young people in the lower socio economic groups will be attending and participating less than their contemporaries in the higher socio economic groups.

What do we need after 5 years: more time to look at what we can make the numbers say, more marketing jargon, more money for consultants and more assumptions about young people who want nothing to do with their work. Here's another quote:

However, whilst we have detailed information about the work of our community arts clients and are aware of a number of specific initiatives aimed at increasing access for low income families, we do not have a full and comprehensive picture of what each of our funded bodies is doing to tackle inequalities for low income families.

Cool. All those tedious application forms saying something as unintelligible as whatever it is you have to say to conform to intangible criteria is taken as the only empirical reality; in doing so something as intangible as ‘access’ is taken as a target in indicative planning that largely conditioned the language used in application forms so that the targets could be ‘met.’ Hence it says we have no real idea of what anyone we give money to are doing in any material way to change anything in reality. Here's the last page of the short document—the vacuity Samuel Beckett spoke of:

Monitoring and Reporting
We will monitor progress on a quarterly basis, reporting through our Key Performance Indicators. The KPI that refers specifically to addressing child poverty is: “We will develop an action plan to deliver Young Creators, our strategy for children, young people and the arts which includes reducing inequalities in cultural activities between children and parents of children, as required in the Welsh Government Child Poverty strategy for Wales.” We will produce an end of year report detailing progress made, together with revised actions and outcomes as necessary.

Here ‘Monitoring and Reporting’ is literally ‘Cutting and Pasting’ what you are supposed to be doing. The research here is quite something and has been going on since 1997, mostly by Jeanne Moore who is on the board of the Irish National Economic & Social Council that dispenses funding for such activities. We can also scroll through a seemingly endless list of such investigations from 1987 to 2009 and this is just Ireland. The ‘Combat Poverty Agency’ seems to have cornered the market here being close to the people who control the dripping roast of funding. What happens to these reports?

No we will not be talking about opulence driven poverty traps here. An idle inhumanity marks the language: the elaborate return to Spencer that now makes a lot of money out of pretending to drag the poor along to look at something incomprehensible for the sake of audience figures, targets and the benefit of a network—a new Church of funding.
body bureaucrats/consultants. The expense of participation in middle-class culture is simply ignored because the relationship is ultimately exploitative. The ‘road map’ is really towards fads such as: “inclusive capitalism,” “compassionate capitalism,” “virtuous capitalism,” “social capitalism,” and the all-encompassing “enlightened capitalism.” According to Schwittay (2011) what these terms reveal is that by qualifying capitalism with adjectives that endow it with humane qualities, this concedes that the system, left to its own devices, does serve those who can afford its wares at the expense of those who cannot. Authors who use the terms stretch the boundaries of the capitalist system to include the ‘bottom billions’ who have until now been excluded from its gains and suffered from its impacts. Schwittay’s focus is on the ‘Marketization of Poverty’: with a lot of talk about the ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’ who live on less than minimal income. As the parentheses suggest, their exact numbers are unknown. Prahalad (2006), who popularized the term, in his ‘management guru’ book ‘The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid’ observed that “be it four or five billion, [and] if it is only 3.5 billion, so be it.” The capitalists have heard that billions live on less than a dollar a day and they are having all that loose change. One of the effects of aggregating the ‘world poor’ in this way is that they seem to become numerical rather than human entities. Like the Arts Council of Wales Prahalad believes “the world's billions of poor people have immense untapped buying power.” Yes that’s right buying power. The bottom billions are the newest instantiation of the articulation of business and development, whose connection stretches from the imperialist endeavours of colonial companies, to the ‘philanthropy’ of early company towns, to the foreign direct investment strategies of structural adjustment programs of the IMF. That the eradication of deprivation might require more than self-interested firms accompanied by a variation of ‘trickle down’ economics is just not a ‘Key Performance Indicator’.

Arts bodies seem devoted to publications such as 'Measuring the economic and social impact of the arts: a review,' a sort of focus on cappuccino sales quoting from all the other reports. And they all end up with the indicative planning model (targets) that everyone knows are a disaster. Market-generated poverty is an unwanted notion hence the essentialisation of poverty and the idea of state-mediated poverty: is this is a return to Herbert Spencer led by the neo-liberals.

Artists have embraced the idea of poverty in different contradictory ways: sometimes along these ignoble disingenuous lines. In Italy ‘Arte Povera,’ with artists such as Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz, flourished in the late 1960s. The increasing activism of workers and students confronted the alliance of the technocratic state, big business and neo-colonial adventures. ‘Energised’ by the radical movements among the young, Arte Povera was framed as a form of guerrilla warfare. Poverty has effects on people, so does wealth. But Arte Povera was an art movement, galleries let them do uncommercial work on the back of the things that sold (probably to the technocratic state). It was just a pose.

It is with the artist as Bohemian that poverty becomes some sort of self-imposed exile. The word Bohemian describes unorthodox ‘lifestyles’ of marginalized and impoverished artists (and so on) mostly in European and American cities. Bohemians were associated with anti-Establishment politics that meant a form of ‘voluntary poverty.’ More privileged bohemian circles are referred to as the hauté bohème usually to denote pretentiousness. What does the term Bohemia mean today?
Several artists and writers have demonstrated a more profound disaffiliation with materialism. Henri Murger wrote about four starving artists in ‘Scènes de la vie de bohème,’ the basis for ‘La bohème’ by Puccini and Leoncavallo (and it has made a fortune ever since). Franz Kafka wrote a short story called ‘A Hunger Artist’ in 1924 about a man who is world-famous for his public performances of fasting. William Faulkner once said in an interview that: "I was born to be a tramp. I was happiest when I had nothing. I had a trench coat then with big pockets. It would carry a pair of socks, a condensed Shakespeare and a bottle of whiskey. Then I was happy and I wanted nothing and had no responsibility."

John Steinbeck’s ‘Tortilla Flat’ paralleled the Arthurian saga but with an understanding of poverty along the lines Faulkner suggested. The poor are the only characters of the story, and most of the males have recently returned from WWI and intend to do little more than get permanently drunk and avoid all responsibility. Steinbeck was interested in the birth, survival, and ultimate death of the family group, the phalanx — the I which becomes we. Steinbeck, is a true artist, who according to Lipton (1956) without a thought for self: “stands up against the stones of condemnation, and speaks for those who are given no real voice in the halls of justice, or the halls of government. By doing so these people will naturally become the enemies of the political status quo.” One of Tortilla Flat’s characters, ‘The Pirate,’ is a tragic mentally ill man who is followed by five dogs and ends up in the arms of the Medal of Honor and the dogs turn to the grave.
lovingly by five dogs, this is a reversal of the Medieval portrayal of the beggar—the image should be the dogs hounding the beggar. ‘Timon of Athens’ mentioned above is of course also a play by William Shakespeare with dogs as a motif.

A ragged man chased away by a dog is the central motif in two of Bosch's paintings, the exterior of the Haywain triptych (above) and the Rotterdam tondo. His treatment is contrasted to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the far sides and bottom of the tryptych. In both Bosch paintings a shabby, emaciated man walks alone, carrying a walking stick in his hand and a basket on his back. He turns his head to look at the dog that snarls behind him a little like Bruegel’s ‘The Misanthrope’ except the dog is the world. Like ‘The Misanthrope’ numerous attempts have been made to identify the figure in Bosch’s work. He has been called, among other things, the Prodigal Son, the Wayfarer, a fool, a peddler, Saturn (the personification of melancholy), a man endangered by the sin of sloth, a drunkard and Everyman (the Christian pilgrim). Bosch's ragged man is a personification of poverty, a personification that follows conventions established in works of art and literature of the late Middle Ages that then enter the popular imagination by their reference in more ‘mass produced’ versions that draw on their stylistic conventions (Tuttle, 1981).
The image of Poverty as a ragged man with a walking stick, harried by a vicious dog, eventually became part of the vocabulary of popular, secular art in Italy. He appears as Misero, the Beggar, in two series of (Mantegna) Tarocchi cards (above) that were produced in the second half of the fifteenth-century: these were engravings and possibly went on to influence Tarot cards but were used *educationally*. Such images were easily transportable and were, for example, copied by Albrecht Durer. Each group consisting of ten engravings on the ‘conditions of man’ that set out a hierarchy of from beggar to pope not unlike the suits of playing cards: Beggar, Servant, Craftsman, Merchant, Gentleman, Knight, Doge, King, Emperor and Pope. They also consisted of a set of 50 engravings divided into five ‘decades’, which could be characterised as (1) The archetypal social stations of humanity (2) The nine Muses and Apollo (3) The Liberal Arts (4) The Cardinal Virtues (5) The Heavenly Spheres. The symbolism is from the *Hermetic tradition* we met earlier in the Italian Renaissance of the mid-fifteenth century with Pico.

Bosch represented voluntary poverty on the outside of the Haywain triptych as the Christian alternative to, and protection against, avarice. However, the changes that he made in the secondary imagery of the Rotterdam tondo altered the interpretation of poverty from that of the most Christ-like virtue to one of the wages of sin (Tuttle, 1981). What we are talking about is the usage of people: the wealthy want to put the poor to political use—rarely identifying with the poor in any real way: the poverty (stricken) becomes a *solitary* individual. If you think poverty is a disease will you tend to interact with poor people as if whatever they have is contagious? If you think it is related to social structure how differently will you act?

Henry David Thoreau's rhetorical use of the concept of Poverty in ‘Walden’ looked at it in two opposing ways. Poverty is evil, because it degrades humanity, making us the victims of our environment and of ourselves. This is said to be the meaning of “the shanties which everywhere border our railroads . . . where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties... and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked” (Woodson, 1970: 22). We are back to the working poor today. This attitude is that of the social reformers, Thoreau emphasizes the spiritual effects of poverty more than the physical. Therefore poverty as degradation is not a matter of money and property, since the "degraded rich" suffer attrition and paralysis alike with the degraded poor. Thoreau sees victim and oppressor with an equal eye. But more often Thoreau gives Poverty a positive, creative meaning. He distinguishes between "savage poverty" and "philosophy poverty," explaining: "With respect to luxuries and comforts the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. [...] None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty" (Woodson, 1970: 23). The rhetorical emphasis on "we" here calls attention to the distance between the poor and the wise not unlike ‘The Misanthrope.’ “Voluntary poverty” is evidently an inadequate and degraded way of expressing the wise philosopher's condition. There is a similar appeal to "Transcendental" poverty in Aristotle who explained it thus: "One who surpasses his fellow citizens in virtue is no longer a part of the city. Their law is not for him, since he is a law to himself" (Woodson, 1970: 24).
Albert Camus approached the understanding of poverty from the viewpoint of both an internal and an external witness. He had experienced poverty in his youth, as he described in his autobiographical novel, ‘Le premier homme,’ but acknowledged that education, financial security and fame had distanced him from the poor. He did not consider that his own experience gave him the authority to speak for other poor people. Unlike some on the French left, he saw freedom as equally essential to a fully human life as material well-being: the poor and working-class could not be denied basic liberties in the name of social justice, just as they could not be treated as an abstraction to be fitted into revolutionary theory. While Camus regarded himself as an outside witness to the devastating effects of poverty, he maintained that those who suffered silently must be given a context in which they could speak out with their own authentic voices (Letemendia, 1997).

Camus named poverty as one of the initial and most fundamental influences upon his awareness of the world, and once said that he had learned about freedom not from Marx, but from poverty:

Poverty could not be externally measured or described only as a state of systematic political and social disadvantage. It assaulted its victims on an individual level, psychologically and morally, at its very worst curtailing human expression and communication, and destroying individual and collective dignity. In short, severe poverty threatened all that Camus found to be most precious about human existence. (Letemendia, 1997: 442)

Poverty is not seen as metaphysical however, it is seen as something we inflict on each other: Herbert Spencer is wrong: it is neither inevitable nor natural: poverty was a moral and political crime against humanity a product of the ignorance and indifference of society towards the fate of the poor. Rather than stay in the high ground, Camus urged his readers to go down into the valley: “If you think it is an inevitable state of affairs,” he writes, “then say so; if you think it is an outrage, then act; if you do not believe that it is happening, come and take a look.” What annoyed him was the outlook that said: "that these people do not have the same needs as us, and can adapt to anything" (Letemendia, 1997: 445). He did not hesitate to stress that the situation originated in a far larger pattern of systematic political disadvantage imposed upon this population by the government. Education, employment opportunities, political representation and the general standard of living required urgent, fundamental reform. Was he right?

Unlike the Arts Council for Wales, Camus felt that social justice needs no complicated philosophy: he called for the destruction of trusts and other financial monopolies, so that a genuine popular working-class democracy might be built, the middle-class should hand over power to the workers and accept instead the role of: "witness to a greatness it could not create itself.” For Camus the liberal position, offering freedom without justice, would perpetuate the oppression of the many by the few who owned wealth. Was he right?

Riches and poverty have always coexisted: have we any reason to doubt that they always will? The vice of riches and the evil of poverty are by no means so inseparable: is it the responsibility of every good artist to see that these do not coexist, or that they are reduced to a minimum?

One of the most haunting works that dealt with poverty was Swift's ‘A Modest Proposal’ from 1729. It is reprinted to this day for its satirical attack on social injustice. Could a similar work be written today?
Proposal’ from 1729. It is a satire on the kind of writing that the Arts Council of Wales want an endless supply of, where Swift suggests that the Irish eat their own children.

The full title is ‘A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick.’ Its a joke at the expense of the social engineering popular then (and back in vogue now) of which Herbert Spencer or Thomas Malthus were probably the epitome: Swift’s work is satiric use of statistical analysis: at the start of a new industrial age in the eighteenth-century, it was believed that ‘people are the riches of the nation,’ and there was a general faith in an economy that paid its workers low wages because high wages meant workers would work less. In this mercantilist view no child was too young to work in industry, humane attitudes of an earlier day disappeared and the labourer came to be regarded as a commodity. Swift uses paralipsis where writer brings up a subject by denying that it should be brought up. Proslepsis is an extreme kind of paralipsis that gives the full details of the acts one is claiming to pass over (‘I will not stoop to mention….It’s not for me to go into the gory details but…’). Is the Arts Council of Wales’ unconscious humour that the starving consume more art much the same thing?

References


Swift, Johnathan (1729) ‘A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick,’ available at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1080/1080-h/1080-h.htm
