



Life—The Antagonist of Artistic Pursuit?

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Abstract— *The paper aims to talk about how artistic pursuit or passion while indispensable also poses a predicament in life in terms of human relationships and the raising of ethical quandaries. As an ideal that is considered to be intertwined with the creation of meaning in life and its contemporary popularity seeded in its overtaking by the capitalist industry, it becomes pertinent to examine the complexities surrounding the idea of artistic pursuit. The paper will examine Ernest Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Way to Paradise* to further propound on the nature of such a predicament.*

Keywords— *artistic pursuit, capitalist industry, meaning, passion, predicament*

The notion of artistic output providing meaning to life is an old and endless one. In this sense, artistic output is not limited to art or the artist but also permeates in 'action'. The contemporary translation or the capitalist acquisition of this notion can be summed up in the popular platitude, "Follow your passion to find the meaning of life." The lives of great artists, philosophers, musicians, businessmen, etc., are often invoked as strong sources of inspiration painted on banners by the self-help industry. Despite the capsizing of this notion by the capitalist market, its philosophical underpinnings are impossible to deny. It is essential to understand passion in the most fundamental aspects of life, of *being*, and that which structures its intricacies. 'Action' or those particular acts in which the individual finds their self-expression, what in common parlance is also known as the 'pursuit of passion' should then be assessed in terms of *becoming*. As a creation of the Self, it is also the process of harmonizing, the perpetual endeavor to participate in life through the creation of the Self. It is thus, the aim of the paper to examine the predicament that passion poses to life itself. The pursuit of passion demands immense compromise in composite life. Therefore, it begets the question that Professor Jessica Logue (2021) asks, "Does a life's work make up for a life?" (Art & Morality: A Bittersweet Symphony, para. 1) In a similar vein, philosopher Robert Solomon asks in *Living with Nietzsche*, "Can the abandonment of one's family be excused or justified by one's artistic accomplishments?" (Solomon, 2003, p. 8)

Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *The Way to Paradise* (2004) which retells the lives of French artist Paul Gauguin and French-Peruvian socialist writer and activist, Flora Tristan, displays the ethical quandary that artistic pursuit may propel. It is such a delicate intersection of artistic pursuit and the threads of composite life that the paper seeks to deal with.

The question of passion reveals the deeper preoccupation with the meaning of life. What constitutes a being? Where does the meaning of existence lie? It is in this aspect, that Nietzsche's notion of establishing an "aesthetic unity" (Berrios and Ridely, 2013, p. 82) in life gains relevance. His biographer Rudiger Safranski (2002) writes, "Nietzsche called the process of transforming the established canon and strictures of his field into something personally meaningful the creation of a "second nature." (p. 54) It is the process of refinement of self by aligning oneself to 'meta-virtues' which are extracted from one's own character, by understanding one's limitations and weaknesses. In simple words, it is the perpetual endeavor to realise an evolving self by recognising one's talents, skills and potential and honing it through discipline, conscientiousness and perseverance. It is through his second-nature, that man sublimates himself in the realm of human experience. Manifested in action, it is geared towards self-expression and is an exercise of self-configuration. 'First nature' then "reflects the manner in which people have been brought up and what inheres in them and their backgrounds, milieus, and characters." (Safranski, 2002, p. 55) An ascetic lifestyle that places

self-mastery at its center is a life that excavates the highest values of life, according to Nietzsche.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (2014) exhibits a brilliant portrayal of such kind of meaning-making through self-mastery. Santiago, the old fisherman survived on egg whites all through May so he could be strong in September and October for the big fish. He drank shark liver oil everyday despite its taste because it was good for the eyes and for cold and influenza. Even when he went out to catch the fish, all he had was coffee for the day and only a bottle of water to last him for the day. The description of his shack reveals no furnishing except for bare necessities. It is then essential to ponder how such a life can be called rich and passionate, a life representing its 'highest values' and as mentioned above a life of 'exquisite taste'. His bloody struggle to catch the fish only to have it eaten by sharks seems to depict nothing but the hostility and defeat life brought him. Yet, it is beyond doubt that it is this struggle that represents the highest form of engagement with life. His struggle in the sea with the marlin is not an isolated event rather it is a culmination of his trajectory. A culmination even though it signifies the highest point does not necessarily mean the end. Understanding it as the highest point is viewing it as a crucial point of transfiguration—a revolution within the self, within life. It is the recognition of a dynamic self. The 'austerity' that Santiago had adopted as a form of lifestyle is the soil where the power to transform is embedded. Asceticism therefore in the Nietzschean sense means the adoption of the 'second nature'.

Santiago's poverty, age, strength, and weaknesses are 'facts' that cannot be altered. But if the cramp in his left hand is an unchangeable fact about himself so is his indomitable will. Hemingway establishes a remarkable feat by presenting as his hero a poor old fisherman, who has no one, who is like everybody else—a victim of old age and fading strength. This makes one wonder, what does one then have to look forward to? Despite everything, Hemingway's hero has to prove himself over and over again. Is one simply supposed to submit to old age? Hemingway places his hero at extreme points in every situation—situations that are stark in terms of the resources one can resort to. Santiago is not just poor but destitute. He is an old man but he is described repeatedly as a 'strange old man'. Hemingway (2014) writes of Santiago, "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated." (p. 1)

Throughout, Santiago's statements about his old age do not simply serve to express his unwavering awareness of a certitude but go on to echo in the head of the reader. It is

not just his shack and his lifestyle which are sparsely furnished but his resources in the sea, whether food or tools are also extremely limited. From the start, Santiago's awareness about himself also serves to forebode his struggle in an extreme situation. He is conscious of his diminishing strength and states that what he can rely on are "tricks and resolutions" (Hemingway, 2014, p. 13) that is, in short, himself. His age makes him question if he is strong enough for the fish. The only thing that was against the fish was Santiago's will and intelligence.

Hemingway does not provide a mere description of Santiago's struggle. The pages of the novella drip with the blood that flows from Santiago's hands as the line which he pulls harder and consistently at, cuts through his skin. The words start taking the shape of those "blotches" and "deep-creased scars" (Hemingway, 2014, p. 1) that already ran across his face and hands. They become heavy with Santiago's increasing exhaustion and pain as he pulls the cord across his back. Santiago was faint and dizzy and had started seeing black spots before his eyes which issues a debate in his head "I am not good for many more turns. Yes you are, he told himself. You're good forever." (Hemingway, 2014, p. 70) He tries to save the fish from the sharks although the situation slid towards desperation and futility, "I am too old to club sharks to death. But I will try it as long as I have the oars and the short club and the tiller." (Hemingway, 2014, p. 86) Santiago does not appeal to any otherworldly source to transcend his limitations. He only appeals to himself and it is in this that he manages to surpass himself.

Santiago is not born with an inner genius. He develops himself over time as is evident from the blotches on his face and the deep-creased scars on his hands and the ascetic life he ascribes to. Nietzsche calls this process of continuous self-creation, developing a second nature. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) Nietzsche declares, "After all, what would be "beautiful"... if the ugly had not first said to itself: "I am ugly"?" (as cited in Berrios and Ridely, 2013, p. 83) Imposing a second nature on oneself does not imply suppressing the "ugly" or one's weakness. Instead, Nietzsche (1887) urges not only to accept it but that it should be "reinterpreted and made sublime." (as cited in Berrios and Ridely, 2013, p. 82)

The Old Man and the Sea (2014) makes a remarkable case of "giving style to one's character" (Nietzsche, 1887, as cited in Berrios and Ridely, 2013, p. 82). The tribulations of Santiago translate into the act of championing the affirmative values of life which contribute to the richness of life, as he states, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." (Hemingway, 2014, p. 79)

Another example that portrays such kind of artistic pursuit is the popular film *Whiplash* (2014) directed by Damien Chazelle. The famous dinner-time conversation about the ‘idea of success’ demonstrates an idea that is familiar to the present-day mind:

UNCLE FRANK. So that’s your idea of success, huh?

ANDREW. I think being the greatest musician of the 20th century is anybody’s idea of success.

JIM. Dying broke and drunk and full of heroin at the age of 34 is not exactly my idea of success.

ANDREW. I’d rather die drunk, broke at 34 and have people at dinner table talk about me than live to be rich and sober at 90 and nobody remember who I was. (Chazelle, 2014, 0:45:04-0:46:22)

While it is unnegotiable that such kinds of artistic pursuit become the act of establishing an “aesthetic unity” (Berrios and Ridely, 2013, p. 82) in life, it is important to remember that the proliferation of such ideals has been in the midst of a contemporary sensibility that continues to bear the hallmark of the Sisyphean existence as the truth of human existence. While the Sisyphean persistence has been commended by critics like Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, American philosopher Richard Taylor points out that the Sisyphean figure becomes the paradigm of meaningless existence mainly because of the absence of desire. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek states in a different context, “The ultimate melancholic experience is the experience of a loss of desire itself.” (Fiennes, 2013, 1:40:03-1:41:19) According to Taylor, Sisyphus’ repetitive life can be infused with meaning through desire. Thus, even if objectively his existence may be meaningless, his absurd existence still holds the possibility of change through desire. It is through this that “Sisyphus has been reconciled to it [life].” and his life acquires a meaning not as an objective conclusion but through subjective imposition (Taylor, 1999, p. 3). Drawing from this picture arises the question that occupied not only Camus but one that has occupied the contemporary era as well: Is the absurdity of life defined by repeatedly doing something even in the absence of the desire to do it?

Therefore, it still remains important to ask, if it is really through desires that meaning can be established. The contemporary scene bears witness to the merciless exploitation of this thought by the self-help industry. “Find your passion to find meaning in your life”—floats the big banners of the self-help industry. However, this is not always the case. A glimpse into the life of authors like Kafka exposes the redundancy of such an idea. Like the German poet Holderlin who felt that he was annihilated if he didn’t write poetry, the idea of writing being an extreme

necessity was seen in Kafka, as noted by David Constantine. Kafka was filled with a rigour towards his writing, yet he still remained a nihilist. He portrayed the extreme and unhappy possibility contained in the image of the silkworm given by Tasso, “He compared himself to the silkworm, spinning the stuff out of his own body, and having no option, even if it killed him.” (Constantine, 2006, p. 9)

While the affirmative end of such artistic pursuit is easily exalted more so with its overtaking by the capitalist industry, the above understanding of writing points to it being more than a romantic Wordsworthian escape. It is in the context of such an inextricable nature of artistic pursuit, that English philosopher Bernard Williams, takes up the case of the French painter, Paul Gauguin to talk about the ethical and social implications of such pursuit of passion. Framing a story loosely based on Paul Gauguin, in his essay, *Moral Luck* (1982), Williams calls for a re-evaluation of moral judgments. He discusses Gauguin’s decision to leave his wife and children and shift to Tahiti in the hope that he could bloom into the painter he wanted to be. The question that forms the center of the discussion is, “Can the abandonment of one’s family be excused (or even justified) by one’s artistic accomplishment?” (Solomon, 2003, p. 8)

Williams (1982) constructs a situation in which Gauguin’s artistic ambition becomes his “ground project” (as cited in Callcut, *What Are We?* para. 6). This is to say that this is akin to the ‘pursuit of truth’—the truth of who one is, the idea of the authentic self. Santiago echoes a similar thought when he says, “Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive.” (Hemingway, 2014, p. 81) Considering this, the question of it being an egotistic pursuit is turned around. What is selfish—is it the artist’s act of abandoning their family or their family’s preference for them to stay and kill their desire, their passion, which is tantamount to killing oneself?

To say that for a truly passionate person there is no question of ‘choice’, that their passion overrides the personal gratification of their relations, amounts to a gross oversimplification. This reflects an idealistic view, a superficial over-exaltation in which the complexities of the relations that surround a human being are white-washed.

Williams’ Gauguin emerges as a successful painter in the end. The purpose of constructing Gauguin’s success is to push further the unreliability of moral judgments. Mostly moral judgments are made in retrospection. This forms the case not only in the realm of art but also in other aspects of life as well. Often moral errors are simply glossed over in the face of success. It is in the backdrop of such a line of thought that Williams states that Gauguin’s action can be

justified if taken as an example of “moral luck” (Williams, 1982, p. 21) which emphasizes the unfair nature of morality.

In his critical essay on Williams’ *Moral Luck*, author Daniel Callcut (2018) writes, “Williams invites us to see Gauguin’s meaning in life as deeply intertwined with his artistic ambition. His art is, to use Williams’s term for such meaning-giving enterprises, his *ground project*... This is what a ground project does, according to Williams: it gives a reason, not just given that you are alive, but a reason to be alive in the first place.” (What Are We? para. 6) He further goes on to state that here, Gauguin’s artistic pursuit is inseparable from his sense of self or the sense of authenticity. Callcut’s (2018) calling of the ideal of authenticity “an enormously influential cultural ideal” (What Are We? para. 8) only submits to great credence before the capitalist marketing and banalisation of existential philosophy. While Gauguin’s abandonment of his family and shift to Tahiti can be understood as an attempt to lead an authentic life, Callcut (2018) highlights, “The pursuit of authenticity can lead to ‘ethical and social disaster’.” (What Are We? para. 17)

It is such a disaster that can be easily discerned in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Way to Paradise*, which chronicles the life of Flora Tristan and Paul Gauguin. Born in different epochs, both grandmother and grandson are united by their artistic endeavour. To both Flora and Paul, the practical concerns of living, whether monetary or personal gratification through relationships produced an impediment to their artistic mission. Their *becoming* implies a Nietzschean asceticism. Integral to the development of their ‘second nature’, it is both a transformative and interpretive act. It is understood as the metamorphosis of the self into art. Thereby, it is only natural when Paul states that the impotence he felt while painting ‘Haapuani’ was greater than the hardships he had endured due to poverty.

However, the question arises, can an abundance of life be felt in the choice of such despairing lives? Flora’s tour of southern France to establish an international worker’s union is marked by the deprivation of any companionship of family, her pain is exacerbated by her strife to go on despite the progression of her disease. Paul spends his life in Tahiti depending on the meager income from his paintings, grovelling in poverty and later in syphilis. Both strive for a ‘paradise’ that exists only in its ephemerality. Llosa writes of Gauguin that in the end, he became a symbol of injustice that is endured by those who dreamt of reaching paradise.

However, it is also imperative to explore the ethical quandary that the choices demanded by such a life posit. In

view of such a predicament, Callcut (2018) reflects, “The pursuit of authenticity can lead to ‘ethical and social disaster’” and how “The story of moral harm in pursuit of art, with the overall endeavour somehow justified by the art, is a familiar one both in fact and fiction.” (What Are We? para. 4) Flora rightly flees from the clutches of her abusive husband but in pursuit of her artistic mission, she ends up abandoning her abused daughter to the care of a stranger and deprives her of any stability, in terms of physical settlement and familial stability. This causes her to grow up into a repressed and emotionally stunted woman as stated by Gauguin in his later reflections on his mother. It acquires a very serious edge with Gauguin. Not only does he abandon his family but his sexual engagement with Polynesian girls as young as 14 and further objectifying them cannot seem to be justified or excused by his artistic pursuit and success.

Yet it cannot be ignored that both Flora and Paul strove to go beyond the social and moral fixities. His paintings were said to be “painted with the phallus”, they were “art and sin all at once”. (Llosa, 2014, p. 282) As such, transgression becomes imperative to prevent the crystallization of social and moral codes. Transgression becomes integral to expression. It becomes the ‘irrational leap’ which encodes the artistic instinct. But implicit in this is also the inclination to create one’s own morals, the catastrophic ends of which are portrayed by Dostoevsky through the infamous Raskolnikov. On the other hand, oversimplified answers of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to such questions could result in dogmatic moral reprehension or ethical blindness. While it could result in a perversion of the ideal of the *Übermensch*, it could also generate an affirmative ideal of the *Übermensch* as the ‘free-thinking being’ who impels an aesthetic transformation of his life and becomes the ‘artist of his life’.

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