

CREATIVE DISLOYALTY

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On 7 October 1948 the BBC Third Programme broadcast a discussion on the role of the writer in society. The participants were Graham Greene, Elizabeth Bowen, and V.S. Pritchett. It is Greene's contribution I want to think about. After a preamble in which he said that the artist, like any decent human, owed certain general duties to society, he went on to say that there were two specific duties owed by the novelist: to tell the truth, and to accept no special privileges from the State. Greene believed that to artists the kindness of the State was far more dangerous than its indifference. He pointed out that in the Russia of the time artists belonged to a privileged class. They had been given better flats, more money, more food, even a certain freedom of movement: but the State had asked in return that they should cease to be artists. He went on to suggest that this danger did not only exist in totalitarian countries. The bourgeois state, too, had its compromising gifts to offer artists, but in these cases, he said, 'the artist has paid like the politician in advance'. 'One thinks of the literary knights, and then one turns to the plain tombstones...of Mr Hardy, Mr James and Mr Yeats. Yes, the more I think of it, that is a duty the artist unmistakably owes to society – to accept no favours. Perhaps a pension if his family are in danger of starvation (in these circumstances the moralists admit that we may commit theft).'

Some days after the broadcast, he developed the thought in a letter to V.S. Pritchett. Greene, quoting Browning, saw the artist, the writer in particular, as one who stood 'on the dangerous edge of things', and should never commit his soul to any establishment or institution. For the artist, disloyalty was the queen of virtues.

...I would emphasise once again the importance and the virtue of disloyalty. If only writers could maintain that one virtue...unspotted from the world. Honours, State patronage, success, the praise of their fellows all tend to sap their disloyalty...Loyalty confines us to accepted opinions: loyalty forbids us to comprehend sympathetically our dissident fellows; but disloyalty encourages us to roam experimentally through any human mind: it gives to the novelist the extra dimension of sympathy.¹

This reminds me of something Nietzsche wrote in *Human, All Too Human*. Musing on the pressures that help institutions adapt to the future, he comes up with something close to Greene's idea of disloyalty, though he uses a different vocabulary to describe it.

History teaches that the best-preserved tribe among a people is the one in which most men have a living communal sense as a consequence of sharing their customary and indisputable principles - in other words, in consequence of a common faith. The danger to these strong communities founded on homogeneous individuals who have character is growing stupidity, which is gradually increased by heredity, and which, in any case, follows all stability like a shadow. *It is the individuals who have fewer ties and are much more uncertain and morally weaker upon whom spiritual progress depends in such communities; they are the men who make new and manifold experiments...they loosen up and from time to time inflict a wound on the stable element of a community. Precisely in this wounded and weakened spot the whole structure is inoculated, as it were, with something new...*(my italics). Those who degenerate are of the highest importance wherever progress is to take place; every great progress must be preceded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures *hold fast* to the type; the weaker ones help *to develop it further*.²

Nietzsche is stating the paradox that it is those who are the least loyal to institutions who do most to help them adapt to the change and flux of time. An example from recent history is the way a few men helped to overturn male dominance in society by allying themselves with the women who were challenging it. In Nietzsche's dialectic, it was the disloyalty of men to their own privileged place within the power system that enabled the system itself to adapt to the equality challenge and move on. Greene's championing of disloyalty as the prime virtue of the artist helps to explain why artists have often been important change agents in society. In Nietzsche's words, 'they make new and manifold experiments...they loosen up and from time to time inflict a wound on the stable element of a community.' Another example of that artistic process at work was D.H. Lawrence's novel of 1928, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which inflicted a wound on Britain's repressive attitude to sexuality and the censorship laws that buttressed it. The famous action against Penguin Books under the Obscene Publications Act in 1960 was one of those moments when history moved on; but it was a writer who started the process by inflicting his wound on the stultifying prejudices of society. Nor should we forget the courage of the publisher in bringing

the book out; a reminder, if any were needed, that a commercial enterprise is also capable of the kind of creative disloyalty Greene commended.

Greene feared that the State's embrace of the artist would erode his creative disloyalty, that ability to experiment, to say things for the first time. At the root of his fear lay an entirely appropriate mistrust of power, which has an invariably corrupting effect on the frail human psyche. Lord Acton observed that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but it was the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who pointed to a more subtle danger. 'All power co-opts, and absolute power co-opts absolutely'. These are cautionary words, especially for those who are enrolled by the State to do the very thing Graham Greene opposed so passionately: to mediate its support for the arts. The only warning I want to register at this point is that we should bring to our thinking about the State's engagement with the arts a cleansing suspicion of the whole enterprise, and a sense that we are involved in something that is far from being morally straightforward. If we take that as an ethical prophylactic, we may be able to protect ourselves against the cruder forms of co-option by the State.

Though I have noticed the revolutionary impact artists can have on society, I have not yet explored the mystery of creativity itself. It appears to be the case that humans make art in its multitudinous forms almost helplessly out of the imperatives of their own nature. There are many names for the source of this impulse, but the best one is the need to play. One of the most interesting books of the 20th century was a slim volume called *The Comedy of Survival*, by the human ecologist Joseph Meeker, published in 1974, towards the end of the Vietnam War. Meeker compared the tragic with the comic way of life. He said humans were tragic creatures because they pushed their disagreements to extreme and deadly conclusions. By contrast, the other animals followed what he called 'the comic way', which enabled them to divert potentially deadly encounters into harmless play.

It is a common feature of social life among animals that the purpose of intraspecific combat is to gain ascendancy over the adversary, not to destroy him. When animals with the capacity to kill members of their own species reach a point in their battles where death will likely ensue shortly, one combatant will frequently turn aside and ferociously attack some nearby harmless object, like a tree or shrub, or in some other way inhibit the killing behaviour or expend it harmlessly.

“Honour” among animals is often satisfied by the safe discharge of aggression as well as by its more lethal expressions, and battles normally end with maximum face-saving and minimum bloodletting. Slaughter is necessary among animals only for nutritional reasons; when status and the maintenance of social order are at stake, shame and ritualised aggression are more appropriate.³

Meeker argues that the comic way is the clue to an understanding of evolution itself:

Evolution itself proceeds as an unscrupulous, opportunistic comedy, the object of which appears to be the proliferation and preservation of as many life forms as possible. Successful participants in it are those who live and reproduce even when times are hard and dangerous, not those who are best able to destroy enemies or competitors. Its ground rules for participants, including people, are those that also govern literary comedy; organisms must adapt themselves to their circumstances in every possible way, must studiously avoid all-or-nothing choices, must seek alternatives to death, must accept and revel in maximum diversity, must accommodate themselves to the accidental limitations of birth and environment, yet compete successfully when necessary...Comedy is a strategy for living that contains ecological wisdom, and it may be one of our best guides as we try to retain a place for ourselves among other animals that live according to the comic way.⁴

A good metaphor for this approach to living and succeeding is *jazz*. The essence of jazz is making things up on the spot, improvising, responding instantly to other players, creating music never heard before without forethought or planning. Meeker describes this as ‘...a spontaneous behaviour whose only purpose is to please its participants and keep them playing. When goals or objectives appear, or when rules become rigid, play disappears.’⁵ He says that humans did not invent comedy or play. We are the beneficiaries of millions of years of evolutionary history. Play entered the earth’s story in the company of birds and mammals in the Jurassic era over 150 million years ago. He makes the point that play and a highly developed brain go together. ‘The brain gives animals an opportunity to expand their perceptual and behavioural repertoires, and to venture into new and unexpected levels of experience. Play may be one of the ways the newly emerged brain developed in order to accommodate novelty and to explore the unknown.’⁶ The reason play has contributed to our evolution is that it prompts us to take risks. ‘Most play involves risks of some kind. Playful curiosity leads us to stick our noses where they’ve never been before, or to test just how far we can crawl on that limb before it breaks...Art, like play,

sometimes takes risks that threaten the tidiness that civilization values so highly. Art and play are sources of new experience and they encourage change, so they worry people who like things to stay put and be obedient. They are not the kinds of activities that fit into neat categories, and they are both full of surprises.’⁷ That is why tyrants often hate living artists. Art and play are intrinsically subversive of authority and the status quo, which may be the root of Graham Greene’s anxiety about artists allowing themselves to be co-opted by the State, in either its totalitarian or bourgeois form.

Bearing all this in mind, it is instructive to watch children at play, dreaming up new realities, representing and repeating what they see around them, singing worlds into being. Creativity is intrinsic to childhood, though most of us lose it as the shadows of adulthood close around us. Robert Hughes says that genius is the ability to recapture childhood at will, including its terrors and desires, and not just its innocence. Since I do not want to be accused of canonising artists as saints, it is worth pointing out that the flip side of their ability to recapture childhood is often a stubborn refusal to accept the boring responsibilities of adulthood. This is why W.H. Auden said we should separate artists’ work from their lives. Quoting W. B. Yeats, he reminded us that the source of the artist’s work was ‘the foul rag and bone shop of the heart’, but what mattered was the poem, not the squalid life of the poet from which it sprang. It has been pointed out that you can never trust writers, because dedication to their art is their primary loyalty, and you can never tell when you might appear in one of their fictions in a less than flattering light.

If creative irresponsibility often lies at the heart of genius, it is no surprise that the artist is often afraid of being co-opted or controlled by authority. As Greene has already warned us, we see the danger at its most blatant in totalitarian societies, where the artist is only allowed to produce art that conforms to the objectives of the State. We also see it in religious institutions, where artists are encouraged to conform their art to the values of the faith they follow. Greene was acutely aware of this particular pressure.

I belong to a group, the Catholic Church, which would present me with great problems as a writer if I were not saved by my disloyalty...There

are leaders of the Church who regard literature as a means to one end, edification. That end may be of the highest value, of far higher value than literature, but it belongs to a different world. Literature has nothing to do with edification. I am not arguing that literature is amoral, but that it presents a personal moral, and the personal morality of an individual is seldom identical with the morality of the group to which he belongs. You remember the black and white squares of Bishop Blougram's chess board.† As a novelist, I must be allowed to write from the point of view of the black square as well as of the white: doubt and even denial must be given their chance of self-expression, or how is one freer than the Leningrad group?⁸

We also see this pressure on the spiritual autonomy of the artist in the working of the market economy. We have all heard stories of how Hollywood accountants have interfered with the artistic integrity of a film in order to make it more marketable. The way the studios carved up Sergio Leone's epic film, *Once Upon a Time in America*, and turned his masterpiece into a puzzling ragbag is a case in point; as is the number they did on Michael Cimino's great film, *Heaven's Gate*, though it has to be admitted that he nearly bankrupted his studio in making it. The fact that the director's cuts of both movies were later made available to the public, enabling us to see what we had missed, is a perfect example of the way the power of the market can also compromise artistic integrity.

Nevertheless, artists have known from the beginning that they were engaged in a form of exchange. When a child shows you the picture she painted at school that morning she is expecting a return from you in the form of approval or attention. Humans discovered the value to themselves of making space for or entertaining the creations of others. This may have had something to do with the problem of *ennui* or how to pass the time. Making art has always had an instrumental angle to it. As well as being for its own sake, it has served other purposes, if only to entertain us, help us pass the time productively or, as theologians might put it, to *redeem* time, fill it with meaning. Whatever our philosophy of the creative imperative, the State quickly grasped the importance of art to the well-being or even the quiescence of its people. Whether it was the bread and circuses that helped Imperial Rome keep its citizens tame, or the concerts and exhibitions used by the British Government to cheer up people during the Second World War, human creativity has always been exploited by the powers that be, and sometimes that exploitation has been benign.

We find a good example of the benign use of art in the history of the arts council movement in the United Kingdom. In 1940, at the beginning of the Second World War, the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was formally established by Royal Charter to boost morale and provide employment for artists, whose usual opportunities had been reduced by the war. CEMA directly engaged in arts provision by promoting theatre and concert tours. Six years later, in 1946, two years before Greene's broadcast on the Third Programme, CEMA evolved into the Arts Council of Great Britain, whose objectives were to assist and encourage:

- the improvement of professional standards of performance
- selective distribution of arts throughout the country
- local responsibility for promoting theatres, concerts, galleries, arts centres and festivals
- the provision of buildings for arts activities

Though the Arts Council was funded by the Treasury, its autonomy and integrity were protected by the famous 'arm's-length principle', which, in theory, freed it from state interference in its funding decisions. Given that the arts council movement was a response to the cataclysm of the Second World War, as was the founding of the Edinburgh International Festival in 1947, it would be churlish to find fault with what the State had done. It recognised the significance of art's power to offer healing and hope to a nation confronting the aftermath of war; more simply, it wanted to cheer its people up in a dark time, and there is no better way to do that than by promoting participation in the arts. Incidentally, cheering people up does not necessarily always mean providing them with escapist entertainment, though there is an honest place for that. Margaret Drabble said that the poet Philip Larkin cheered us up and reconciled us to our ills by the scrupulous way in which he noticed them. Great artists have always expressed the sorrows as well as the joys of the human condition, and it is through their scrupulous *noticing* that we have sometimes found the courage to accept our ills.

The cheer-up index is still the best argument for the State's support of the arts, and we find it on page ten of the report of the Scottish Executive's Cultural Commission of 2005, where we are told that the Greek government's ambition is to reduce all

measurement of public policy to one indicator – are people happier? The report goes on to quote a plea from the New Economics Foundation for human well-being to be a primary concern of government, and one which would place the arts and human creativity high above economic development. ‘Policy traditionally focuses on growing the economy, when all the evidence suggests that this has little impact on well-being.’ Good ideas never remain static, however, and the State’s engagement with the arts soon developed a dynamic of its own, some moments of which I now want to trace.

In the beginning, as we have just seen, there was the well-being narrative promoted by CEMA in 1940. This is probably the easiest of the instrumental uses of art to justify, and a State that tries to do it should be commended not condemned, provided we pay attention to the spectre of Graham Greene at our shoulder, pointing to the possible perils of the exercise. Intriguingly, new perils emerged, of a sort unanticipated by Greene. The danger to artists and arts organisations turned out to be not that the embrace of the State would extinguish their creative disloyalty – artists have never hesitated to bite the hands that feed them – but that they would become dependent on its largesse for their survival. Arts councils had to learn to manage the conundrum of spreading a finite sum of public money over a potentially infinite number of claims on its resources. Experience, bitter in the recent case of the Arts Council of England, has shown how difficult it is to break-up traditional funding arrangements. It turns out – and why should this surprise us? – that artists and arts organisations are no more immune to the paralysis of institutional dynamics than the rest of us. Clearly, the challenge for this aspect of the State’s support of the arts is to do it in a way that does not freeze funding arrangements, but allows space for surprise, innovation and risk. The challenge for Creative Scotland is to learn from this history, and develop strategies that are less likely to harden into predictable rigidities.

The second element that made an impact on the State’s support of the arts was its recognition of the usefulness of the arts in achieving its social policy objectives. In Scotland, an enduring evil is the persistence of poverty and its devastating impact on the lives of those trapped in it. Research has shown that if you re-connect disconnected children to their creative instincts their skills improve right across the board. One of the most dramatic and effective example of this is Venezuela’s *Sistema*

for children's orchestras. But there are many other examples, using different art forms to achieve similar effects. It stands to reason that if creativity is intrinsic to our nature, its suppression or denial diminishes us, while its restoration may restore us to greater well-being. Any caring state will want to apply this transformative energy to the lives of its excluded minorities, and artistic practitioners should be happy to play their part in working for the common good. Inevitably, as with anything human, there are unintended consequences of the enterprise. It is here that being alert to Greene's suspicion of the State might help us do it better.

One of the difficulties the Scottish Arts Council has encountered is in its management of what are called restricted funds. These are budgets set-aside to deliver particular objectives imposed by government. They are usually based on a good-idea light-bulb going off in a politician's head: 'Let's give every primary school child a year of free music education'. 'Let's appoint co-ordinators who will work with schools to bring art and human creativity back into the education system.' A fund is then established to achieve the objective, whether or not the experts think it is the best way forward. Time moves on, and along comes another government with a different set of light bulbs; out go the old ones, in come the new ones. What would mend the difficulty, without removing the right of politicians to have good ideas, is for them not to impose them on bodies created to deliver public goods, but to share their ideas, describe their dreams, and work with others to come up with the best way to deliver them. This would mean that the State would continue to be a dominant partner with public bodies in trying to deliver social goods, but their approach would be collaborative, not directive: let politicians develop their policy objectives, but let practitioners figure out how best to deliver them without falling foul of the law of unintended consequences.

The most recent notch in the flowing continuum of the State's engagement with the arts is its discovery of the economic benefits of human creativity. This area has attached various labels to itself in recent years, but the most common one is the 'creative industries'. A recent NESTA report offers this definition: 'At a general level, the 'creative industries' is the collective term for those businesses in the economy which focus on creating and exploiting symbolic cultural products (such as the arts, films and interactive games), or on providing business-to-business symbolic or information services in areas such as architecture, advertising and marketing and

design, as well as web, multimedia and software development'.⁹ According to one classification, creative industries are identified under thirteen broad headings: TV and radio; visual advertising; architecture; crafts; design; designer-fashion; film; interactive leisure software; music; performing arts; publishing; arts; antiques. The State is increasingly aware of the power of these activities to generate not only human well-being, but economic wealth. And it is this aspect of creativity that is receiving most attention from the Scottish Government in its ambitions for the new agency. In Scotland, the creative industries account for around 4% of GDP, and it is intended that Creative Scotland will provide them with more strategic support. At the moment, a great deal of mapping of the creative industries is going on, but a recent policy briefing from NESTA has urged policy makers to move beyond industry-based approaches to thinking about the creative economy.

Unfortunately, 'economy' is one of those words that has artistic puritans reaching for their revolvers, so let me try to reclaim the word from the number crunchers.

Economy comes from the Greek noun *oikos*, the word for house or home, and the verb *nemo*, to manage or distribute. *Oikonomia*, managing a household, is close to an even grander Greek word, *oikumene*, the inhabited earth, humankind, and, by extension, *culture*. This is what distinguishes us from the other animals with whom we share the planet. Like them, we manage our need to eat and sleep. Unlike them, our lives are not spent in hunting, sleeping and copulating – well, not all of it. We are restless beings, constantly evolving and changing; finding new and better ways to manage things; never at peace, crawling further out on the limb. And it is all summed up in that word *creativity* – the human thing, the thing that distinguishes us as a species from the other animals. The people who think about these things are telling us to recognise that it is this characteristic that unites us right across the spectrum of human activity. No longer are we to limit our thinking about creativity to the small elite we call artists. While they, as a class, may possess creativity to a heightened degree, it is a basic human attribute: the fact that we are here at all demonstrates that our forebears were the ones that took the risks that enabled them to flourish and get their DNA out there working into the future.

The great thing that is happening is that we are stretching our idea of creativity to include the whole *oikumene*, or human family. We need to unleash it in every aspect

of our national lives. When we do, when we connect with it, everything gets better - from school-room to board-room, from picture house to concert hall, from art gallery to the streets we walk to work on. The human community is catching on to all of this and Creative Scotland should be up on its board, surfing the wave as it builds. But while we ride the wave of the creative economy, we must make sure that the previous two elements on the continuum of creativity are not erased in the process. While Creative Scotland's main purpose may be that of helping to develop enterprises that further the creative economy agenda of the government, it would be tragic if the emergent culture of the new agency abandoned those earlier aspects of the State's engagement with the arts: the well-being index and art's power to transform lives for the better. So, let me try and bring some of these threads together, while resisting the temptation to weave them into a single rope.

I have suggested that play is instinctive and intrinsic to the human animal. Not only is its enjoyable pointlessness good for us, it seems to be one of evolution's instruments for encouraging us to take risks and explore and grow and develop as a consequence. That is why it is subversive of power structures, including those of arts establishments and traditions: it is by definition disloyal and unfaithful, prone to bite the hand that dares to try to feed it. And there's nothing any of us can do - no matter how potent our political power may be - to quench it. We can, of course, kill off our own creativity, our own playfulness; but we can never close it down in others. Artists, especially artists of genius, go on doing it, playing, experimenting, shoving themselves further out on that limb. And just as no government can quench art, neither can any government policy, as such, make it happen or promote its creation in any real way.

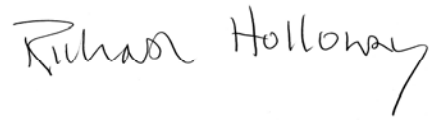
There is, however, something that good government *can* do: it can recognise the fundamental importance of art, play, human well-being, and create the space and resources in which it can flourish. That is what the State has done in Britain since the Second World War, and few would now argue for the removal of all state support, though they might argue for reviewing or improving the mechanisms chosen to deliver it. Given the nature of the participants, there will always be a healthy suspicion of the agencies formed to deliver the support. The arms-length principle was invented as an antidote to Graham Greene's anxiety over allowing himself to be

seduced by the blandishments of the State, but it is far from being a perfect instrument, and it is vulnerable to manipulation by the State.

The new twist in this old and complicated relationship is the emergence of Government's recognition of the importance of human creativity to the economic life of the nation. The good thing about this development is that it offers us an opportunity to make the case for the contribution that the human arts make to the flourishing of the nation, including its economy. For example, as well as delighting lovers of music and drama and dance, the Edinburgh International Festival pumps millions of pounds into the local economy: yet it has to scrimp and save year after year in order to secure its own budget. A wise national accountancy would seek to balance the fiscal injustice of this relationship and guarantee realistic and enduring funding for the Festival well into the future. This means that Creative Scotland will have to assume an advocacy role that will demonstrate not only the intrinsic importance of creativity to our spiritual health and well-being, but the enormous contribution it makes to the economic prosperity of the nation. Purists might dismiss this new role as the final compromise in the artist's relationship with the State, the final selling of the soul. Others might claim that artists and creative practitioners are as enmeshed in the compromises and necessities of life as anyone else, and should get off their high horses and join the rest of the human race. That's fine, as long as we go on remembering that insanely creative people are not quite like the rest of the human race: try to recruit or civilise them and you lose them. That was why Tennessee Williams said he was afraid to exorcise his demons in case he lost his angels. This means that Creative Scotland is going to have to pull off the difficult feat of trying to forward the Government's agenda for growing the economy by unleashing Scotland's creativity, without taming the anarchic energy that lies at the heart of the creative act.

Living with this tension without trying to resolve it will give us edge and keep us on our intellectual toes. But Government, too, will have to recognise that we cannot always be a comfortable ally for them as they pursue their different but legitimate purposes. We will be vigilant in protecting the spiritual integrity of Scotland's makers, including their ancient right to bite the hands that feed them. And we will never forget Graham Greene's admonition that disloyalty is the primary virtue of the

artist. If we can all learn to live within that tension without trying to resolve it, then Scotland will have become a truly creative nation.



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¹ Richard Greene (ed), *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters* (London: Little Brown, 2007), pp. 148-158.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Ennoblement through degeneration', *Human, All Too Human*, Section 224 (*The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books), p.54.

³ Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), p. 40.

⁴ Meeker, p. 20.

⁵ Meeker, p. 20.

⁶ Meeker, p. 19.

⁷ Meeker, p. 19.

⁸ In 1946, Andrey Zhdanov, the Leningrad Party chief, denounced the poet Anna Akhmatova and the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko in a speech to the Leningrad Union of Writers. The two were immediately expelled from the Union and so could no longer publish.

⁹ 'Beyond the creative industries: making policy for the creative economy' (NESTA February 2008).

† All we have gained then by our unbelief
Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,
For one of faith diversified by doubt:
We called the chess-board white – we call it black.