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Sense of Community as a Value of Aesthetic Education in the European Tradition

Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of the sense of community as a value of the aesthetic education theory. The topic refers to the still ongoing search for permanent references to the European cultural heritage. The author poses a question about how inspiring and permanent are the traditions of the European sense of community created by Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Read. They both proposed a visionary perspective of the “aesthetic state” or “saving the humankind through art”. They worked in different historical eras but they both made an attempt to overcome the unfavorable civilizational conditions of their times. They created a different but related category of describing the sense of community, i.e. the “I-We” co-dependency. This paper contains the analysis of their views with the emphasis on the variety of accents in the understanding of the sense of community. In the summary, the author discusses the relevance of their ideas.

Keywords: pedagogical European tradition, sense of community and art, Friedrich Schiller, Herbert Read.

Wspólnotowość jako wartość edukacji estetycznej w tradycji europejskiej

Abstrakt

W tekście podjęto rozważania nad problemem wspólnotowości jako wartości teorii wychowania estetycznego. Temat nawiązuje do ciągle aktualnych poszukiwań trwałych odniesień do dziedzictwa kulturowego Europy. Autorka stawia pytanie, na ile inspirujące i trwałe są przesłania płynące z tradycji europejskiej wspólnotowości stworzonej przez Friedricha Schillera i Herberta Reada. Obaj zaproponowali wizjonerską

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perspektywę „państwa estetycznego” czy „ocalenia przez sztukę ludzkości”. Tworzyli w innych czasach historycznych i obaj podjęli próbę przezwyciężenia niekorzystnych warunków cywilizacyjnych swoich czasów. Stworzyli różną, ale jednocześnie bliskoznaczną kategorię opisu wspólnotowości – jest nią relacja współzależności „Ja-My”. Tekst zawiera analizę ich poglądów ze zwróceniem uwagi na różnorodność akcentów w pojmowaniu wspólnotowości. W podsumowaniu autorka odnosi te utopijne teorie do współczesności.

Słowa kluczowe: pedagogiczna tradycja europejska, wspólnotowość a sztuka, Friedrich Schiller, Herbert Read.

Introduction

In the beginning of the 21st century, many pointed to the need to strengthen the European cultural identity. In her writing on defining European identity Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska (2005) stated that one of the most interesting characteristic is perceiving it as “unity in diversity.” I consider European culture defined through its diversity as “striving to Europeanness, or even unity (cultural, territorial, economic and political) through respecting diversity” (Cybal-Michalska 2005: 74).

In 2007 the Culture and Education Team working as part of the Committee of Prognoses “Polska 2000 Plus” published an edited collection titled *Europa w perspektywie 2050 [Europe from the perspective of 2050]* (Wojnar 2016: 70). To promote the knowledge collected at the time, two conferences were organized: “Europejski sposób bycia człowiekiem” [*European way of being*] and “Osobowa tożsamość Europejczyka” [*Personality of an European*]. Both events were reported by Agnieszka Piejka (Piejka 2009; 2010) in pedagogical journals. Discourses on Europeanness are continued and further developed often under the patronage of the European Union (SGH 2025). As Irena Wojnar wrote, European creative diversity reveals a need for the coexistence of different identities which are connected on the higher level – the humanistic identity of a person.

The problem of the humanistic identity of a person raises concern among “observers with European sensitivity” (Wojnar 2016: 78). They draw attention to the phenomenon of the decline of Europe’s noble ethos and its humanistic mission, which should be associated with a decrease in sensitivity and a threat to fundamental values, justified philosophically or religiously. In a similar way, Justyna Nowotniak (2005: 60) sees Europe’s cultural community as a space of commonly experienced history and tradition, where people from different societies share a co-responsibility for created and emerging values.

Since issues of European identity are currently being addressed in anthropological and axiological dimensions, it becomes important for the pedagogue of art to seek answers to the following questions:

- Which tradition of European theories of aesthetic education fits into the search for stable and universal values strengthening the sense of community?
- In what ways does art as an object of aesthetic education serve the community-building function?
- What is the origin of the issues of community raised by art and for art in European philosophical and pedagogical thought?

In order to answer the question regarding the origin of community in the theory of aesthetic education, I decided to study the works of Friedrich Schiller and Herbert Read. I characterized their theories as art-centric visions of community.

According to the classification of aesthetic utopias proposed by Wojnar (1976: XXVIII), Schiller and Read present slightly different traditions. Schiller is a representative of the idea of elevating life through art, as he referred to historically renowned masterpieces of art as constant sources for elevating an individual. Read belonged to the tradition of interpreting art as a specific form of an individual's activity, and he proposed to abolish the barriers between art and life.

Read knew and valued Schiller's theory, describing his work as a continuation of Plato's philosophy. Firstly, because Schiller presented the science of education clearly, and secondly, because Schiller's thought resonated with him: "as long as a person does not become accustomed to the laws of beauty in their physical and intellectual life, they will not be able to realize what is good and true – they will not be capable of spiritual freedom" (Read 1958: 320). He added that many people could attest to this truth, but only these two, Plato and Schiller, have done so. He valued them the most among others, "enjoying their company that [he] was fortunate enough to share" (Read 1958: 320).

Both scholars lived in different historical epochs. Indeed, it is true that in both cases traumatic historical events – The French Revolution for Schiller, and the outbreak of the Second World War for Read – directed their thoughts to perceiving art in education as a basis for a better vision of society.

Friedrich Schiller – utopian vision of community through beauty and art

Though need may drive Man into society, and Reason implant social principles in him, beauty alone can confer on him a social character. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual (Schiller 1954: 138).

Against everything that divides people, society is united only through contact with beauty. As Jerzy Prokopiuk (2011: 29) explained, the concept of beautiful humanity is an ideal of an authentic community of people. Schiller's vision of an aesthetic state reflected his belief that:

the premise of this external harmony is internal harmony within the individual. The aesthetic state is the ideal of a community in which the interest of the whole does not conflict with the distinctiveness of its individual parts (Prokopiuk 2011: 29).

Before I explain which attributes Schiller gave to art and beauty, it is worth reminding what kind of ideas were popular in Romanticism. There is no utopian thinker in whose visions we would not find references to the surrounding reality, also in the context of the spirituality of its times.

Agnieszka Ziółowicz (2011) presented a very interesting view of an aesthetic that was dramatic towards the problems of community in Romantic literature. She pointed out that "important for understanding the desires of the creators of Romantic ideology is the thought formulated by Novalis: «I am you»" (Ziółowicz 2011: 6), which according to her confirms that Romantics wished to break down the loneliness of the ego, to experience community understood as mutual permeating of people, a complete unity of "I" and "You" (Ziółowicz 2011: 7).

Ziółowicz, acknowledging a certain simplification of the problem of individualism in the Romanticism, argued that Romantics were aware that their proud "I" could in reality turn out to be internally empty, and in order not to become enemies of others, they themselves uphold – with varying intensity – a state of leaning towards community. In the Romantic period, a tension between "I" and "We" is perceivable, but according to Ziółowicz, what is also visible is a striving to overcome it in the name of a specific ideal of community (Ziółowicz 2011: 15).

The idea of an aesthetic state is Schiller's indication of the path toward community through beauty and art. It is a path conditioned on the achievement of freedom by the individual. This happens through the realization of the play impulse which harmonizes sensuality and reason: "a play impulse, because it is only the union of reality with form, of contingency with necessity, of passivity with freedom, that fulfils the conception of humanity" (Schiller 1954: 76).

According to Katarzyna Chmielewska (2004: 10), only the sphere of art has fundamental meaning for freedom. What is characteristic for Schiller is describing art as a beautiful pretense. Art is the kingdom of pretense, which in Chmielewska's interpretation is contrasted with reality, while at the same time providing it with autonomy. It also constitutes a domain of purposeful actions of "seeming," a play attributed solely to humans, granting them the fullness of humanity. A community like the one proposed by Schiller in an aesthetic state is created by people who are free, and who – by engaging in free play, in social communication – are liberated from the determination of reason or sensuality.

There are two consequences for such a community. As the pedagogue and lecturer of Schiller's theories Ignazio Volpicelli notes, "Schiller's aesthetic humanism necessitates a reconciliation of seemingly contradictory dimensions which define the human condition" (Volpicelli 2001: 18). This state can only be achieved through nurturing an instinct for games, desire for play, which can liberate an individual from any form of one-sided submission to opposing forces – it is a state that is brought

on through “the art of beauty.” In Volpicelli’s view it is the only possible objective of aesthetic education. Experiencing beauty, unrestricted play with beauty, brings an individual closer to freedom. It can be thus argued that in Schiller’s view, aesthetic education is an education to freedom. According to this concept, being free means being an artist or also an aesthetic person, i.e. participating in the field of art.

The second consequence of Schiller’s way of thinking about freedom is the belief that artists are indeed the truly free of people. If it is assumed that beauty is the cohesive force in Schiller’s aesthetic state, then what role do artists play within it? To what extent do they contribute to strengthening the community of citizens in the aesthetic state? What about the romantic “ego” of the idols of the era?

For Chmielewska (2011: 11), an artist is a person free from external constraints, one who feels connected to humanity as such, can experience a sense of unity with oneself and the entire human kind. Art restores a sense of safety in an individual, without taking restrictive forms. The artist is a leader of freedom achieved through the creation of beauty. He or she feels satisfied and united with others, and is the creator of community-shaping forces in Schiller’s world.

Is this only a projection of dreams not defined by any temporality? How, then, should we describe e.g. the phenomenon of an artist’s fan page in our times, in a world of dynamically transforming communities? It is a space where a community is also shaped around the artist, and it takes place outside of the real world.

Schiller’s commitment to the social mission of art is a starting point for understanding his theory, in which the fight for freedom remains a central issue. The concept of the aesthetic state is utopian, but still inspires reflection. In the closing paragraphs of his work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller wrote:

Everyone in the aesthetic State [...] is a free citizen [...] Here, then, in the realm of aesthetic appearance, is fulfilled the ideal of equality. [...] But does such a State of Beauty in Appearance really exist, and where is it to be found? As a need, it exists in every finely tuned soul; [...] only in a few select circles where it is not the spiritless imitation of foreign manners but people’s own lovely nature that governs conduct, where mankind [...] has no need either to encroach upon another’s freedom in order to assert his own (Schiller 1954: 140).

The concept of a happy society has in the past inspired and today still inspires many philosophers, aestheticians and pedagogues. It is my belief that its universalism is based on our longing for a more beautiful life, but also a need to live a life free from worries and constraints. Schiller clearly emphasizes the dependency of the “I-We” relationship: if I live among others, I must feel equally free as they do, in order to create bonds of community. This subjective interpretation of Schiller’s conceptualization of beauty, freedom and the happiness of community is in some way consistent with interpretations proposed by other scholars from diverse disciplines of science and art.

According to Mario Gennari (2007: 127), Schiller’s aesthetic universalism is perceived through its grounding in beauty, which guarantees the authenticity of morality

because it expresses the harmony between law and nature. "The aesthetic dimension encompasses the lives of individuals and communities like a cloak that envelops every form of life and every moment of life" (2004: 12).

Antimo Negri, an Italian philosopher, when analyzing the situation of aesthetic education from the perspective of the 1990s, assessed Schiller's theory as the most radical in addressing the position of aesthetic education. "Schiller knows that it is aesthetic education that should point to a total revolution in all ways of human feeling and a reversal of our nature" (Negri 1991: 41). (The reference to the opinions of Italian educators stems from the fact that both Polish and Italian theories of aesthetic education are similarly linked to philosophy and aesthetics in their origin and development).

In Wojnar's view, Schiller's universalism – what is still important for us – presents a concept of an individual's inner harmony:

That which is enduring, timeless, metaphysical, spiritual in humans, and that which is biological, transient, material, mortal. [...] Schiller's great utopia is a belief that art not only harmonizes an individual but is also an instrument for creating new social structures (Wojnar 2010: 17).

Wojnar also recalled the words spoken by Thomas Mann in his famous speech during the Schiller Year, which was announced for 1955 (Wojnar 78: V). Mann stated that contemporary, limited interests enslave and narrow minds, making it urgent to restore their freedom through a higher interest in what is purely human and timeless. This will allow a world fractured by politics to come together under the banner of unity and beauty.

These assessments demonstrate an enormous trust in art understood as the object of aesthetic education, and in reference to social relations, with the significance of the role of "the individual liberated through beauty."

Bases on her own research, Ziłowicz (2011: 9) argued that the 19th century heralded a change in the relationship between individuals and communities. The individual's right to choose a community according to their interests and desires has been strengthened by the position of the "I" in community relations. In her opinion, this is credited to the idea of Romanticism. Under the influence of individualization, a qualitative change begins to take shape in social life: "cultivating community relations begins to represent an individual's conscious spiritual effort, concurrent or even identical with the search for the essence of «I»" (Ziłowicz 2011: 9).

In turn, Mann's wish gained relevance when in 1986 one of Schiller's poems, "Ode to Joy," performed in the finale of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, became the anthem of the European Community, and in 1993, the anthem of the European Union. Schiller's ideas of freedom and fraternity were adapted to contemporary times. Although the unity and the beauty that currently define this community are dynamic and ever-evolving, both the idea itself and its artefacts have remained beautiful: the flag, the music, as well as a certain freedom in the interpretation of Schiller's poetry, left to national communities.

The fact that in different periods of European history countless theoreticians – philosophers, aestheticians, pedagogues – have referred to Schiller’s theory of beauty–art–freedom–community proves its significance for our cultural heritage. Examples of interpretations of Schiller’s philosophy serve as a premise for stating that the Romantic paradigm is present in research on European culture.

Herbert Read – vision of humanity’s understanding through art

It is doubtful whether a worker in any field – be he a poet or a mathematician, a physiologist or a farmer – can work effectively in isolation. He needs the stimulus of association, the sense of community, to call out his highest potentialities (Read 1958: 296).

When presenting his theory of education through art, Herbert Read stated clearly:

the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same time harmonizing the individuality thus educated with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs (Read 1958: 8).

Read correlates art with science, considering art as a representation of reality, and science – as its explanation. If we assume that education means inciting development, then it is revealed through expression, an externalization through signs and symbols. Read believed that education could be defined as shaping modes of expression; therefore, he considered the goal to be the formation of artistically educated individuals, meaning those who are capable of effectively using various forms of expression (Read 1958: 9).

From this perspective, the meaning of expression is on the one hand reflected in articulating one’s individuality, and on the other, as a means and communication with others, while still being one process. Among the five objectives of aesthetic education Read considered three as responsible for the shaping of the processes of expression. Two previous objectives refer to the development of the process of perception, including the ability to mutually coordinate them. Those related to expression clearly demonstrate the need to teach expression of feelings in a communicative form. Only in this way is expression made conscious. There arises a need for education in expressing thoughts in various forms. Read singled out several: design, music, dance, poetry, craft (Read 1958: 8).

Every type of expression demands an act of communication. Its absence is one of the reasons for an individual’s alienation, e.g. in an environment of advancing automation, in overpopulated cities. Another troubling phenomenon is excessive rationalism and the noticeable, interdependent process of emotional atrophy.

Thanks to Wojnar’s popularizing efforts, Read’s theory was made available to Polish pedagogues. Two monographs were published in 1976: *Wychowanie przez sztukę* (Read 1976), with an introduction by Wojnar, and *Teoria wychowania estetycznego* (Wojnar 1976) – the fragment on Read was titled: “Wychowanie przez sztukę jako

obrona przed cywilizacją konsumpcyjną (model brytyjski)” [*Education through art as a defense against the consumer civilization (British model)*]. Wojnar wrote: “The most characteristic action for Read is art’s ability to mobilize in people the highest moral and social values” (Wojnar 1976: 243). She emphasized the significance of shaping an integral individual, since, in Read’s view, in present times the individual is internally torn. It is the effect of the domination of intellect, whereas “the wings of emotions remain crippled” (Wojnar 1976: XVIII).

Read advocated for an education through art, aiming to shape all psychological dispositions: imagination, creativity, sensitivity, aesthetic and social feelings, as well as the ability to communicate and collaborate with others. If humanity can be saved through education, then – according to Read – it will happen through art and consist of three types of mutually permeating activities: expression, observation, and assessment (Read 1976: 231). The latter encompasses an enormous potential for community building, since it refers to an individual’s reactions to others’ expressions directed at him or her. It is a qualitative relation connected with an individual’s reaction to values. This ability is developed as one of the aspects of social adaptation.

In 2010 a monograph was published, focusing on contemporary problems of aesthetic education, and inspired by the fortieth anniversary of Read’s death (Pankowska 2010). In her introduction to the volume, Krystyna Pankowska, already writing from a certain historical perspective, presented Read’s ideas for pedagogy:

In this concept, the primary aim is to shape aesthetic intelligence in people (I feel, therefore I am), which manifests in a creative, imaginative, and sensitive attitude towards the world, fostering a sense of responsibility for it (Pankowska 2010: 10).

Art, according to Read’s desires, should take such a place in society so that we no longer single out works of art, but approach art understood as a way of life. By placing expression in various fields of art so high in the hierarchy of educational values, Read opened up a space for creative actions in all areas of artistic activity.

In the same volume, Joanna Torowska (2010) discussed the present significance of Read’s notion of education through art. In her opinion, the relevance of Read’s theory lies in the universality of the problems he presented:

his concept is relevant for the needs of modern civilization [...] Witnessing the dangers of mass culture, the individual’s alienation in the modern world, Read designates a special role for art – art is supposed to foster communication between people, develop peace among them, teach how to work together (Torowska 2010: 57).

Schiller’s aesthetic education can be considered as a proposal to educate to freedom through the beauty of art. Read’s education through art can be seen as a proposal to educate to peace, which Wojnar emphasizes multiple times in her writings on Read’s work. It was in line with her idea of creativity. Agnieszka Piejka (2023: 57) characterized her conception as sketching out the condition for peace. Referring to the notion of the “I-We” community in Read’s theory, it is crucial to note that the

condition for coexistence devoid of aggression is guaranteeing all participants with the possibility of integral development through general aesthetic education. Only education through art develops a compassionate perception of the world and the community, while also making it easier to communicate emphatically with others.

Is Read's proposal for shaping community utopian? Certainly yes, if we take into consideration the fact of the increasing marginalization of aesthetic education not only in Poland but also in Europe.

Does Read's theory inspire pedagogical reflection and activity? Certainly, this was the case both after the publication of his book and continues to be so today, although, as Katarzyna Olbrycht (2019: 39) notices, it is becoming extremely difficult when reduced to instrumental proficiencies, abilities, and fundamental issues of studies on art. A broader realization of Read's idea of education through art requires respecting the personal qualities and meanings typical of every individual and community. And this requires wise and sensitive teachers.

Conclusions

Ideas about a happy society of people connected through common experiences and values about the world and others, open to mutual communication that is full of kindness and empathy, inspired both Schiller and Read. Schiller's work is an important point of reference for the writings of contemporary philosophers, aestheticians, literary scholars, pedagogues. In turn, Read's work has a lesser range of influence, as it is primarily in the interest of pedagogues of art, philosophers of education, and to a lesser extent, aestheticians. However, it undoubtedly had a profound impact on revitalizing research and educational practice in the second half of the 20th century in Europe and Poland (Zalewska-Pawlak 2001: 159–161).

The theories discussed in this article were created in different times, they are separated by almost 150 years, but at the same time connected by the emphasis on the role of "I" in creating and upholding community life. According to Schiller, an individual's inner freedom conditions the creation of a happy community that is free from constraints. The basic activity directed at others is the play impulse, games with art and the beauty lying within it. For Read, "an elated person," thanks to the values stemming from the sphere of emotions, expressions, and the possibility to articulate and communicate them, is open to connection with others. The basis of activity directed toward other is expression in its diverse forms, supported by education.

Schiller speaks about what will make the individual and the society in which they function happy. Read, on the other hand, speaks about how to make the individual happy so that they can function in society with more satisfaction.

Recalling stable points on the map of Europe's cultural heritage was a journey to the past, pointing to a tradition related to reflections on art and education. If we follow Glinkowski's thought (2008: 124) that the path is a promise of a place, then the places that were shown illustrate the beauty of thoughts of those who care about others.

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