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John Lennon and the Battle in Every Mind between Contempt and Respect

This essay looks at John Lennon of The Beatles to comment on the great need musicologists have for a method of writing biography that is capable of doing justice to ethical dimension of an artist's life and work. The author advocates the use of Aesthetic Realism to achieve this. It is the philosophy founded in 1941 by the great American scholar Eli Siegel. In Aesthetic Realism is a new way of understanding the relation of Ethics and Aesthetics. Central to it is Eli Siegel's comprehension of the on-going debate in every human mind between Contempt and Respect – a debate illustrated in the life and work of Lennon. To give both more immediacy and more dimension to these matters, the author – who, like Lennon, is a composer – quotes from class discussions with him from his study, in the 1970s, with Eli Siegel.

Keywords: John Lennon, Eli Siegel, The Beatles, Aesthetic Realism, Ethics.

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Джон Леннон и противоборство оценок: между презрением и уважением

Эта статья рассматривает фигуру Джона Леннона из группы Битлз и дискутирует о необходимости со стороны музыковедов выработать особый метод написания биографии, способный осветить и в должной мере дать этическую оценку жизни и творчества деятелей искусств. Автор предлагает для достижения этих целей оригинальный метод «эстетического реализма». Это философия Эли Сигеля, созданная в 1941 году. Эстетический реализм предполагает новый способ понимания в сфере этики и эстетики. Основным его элементом является осмысление Эли Сигелем противоборства между презрением и уважением, происходящего в каждом человеческом уме, – противоборства, продемонстрированного на примере жизненного пути и творчества Леннона. С целью придать больше непосредственности и широты этому вопросу, автор, который подобно Леннону является композитором, приводит цитаты из дискуссий между ним и его учителем Эли Сигелем в 1970-е годы, во время занятий в университете.

Ключевые слова: Джон Леннон, Эли Сигель, Битлз, эстетический реализм, этика.

n this short essay, I will be exploring a matter of tremendous importance to musicologists: how to do biographical research in depth. I will be looking briefly, yet I hope usefully, at John Lennon (1940–1980) in order to give evidence that scholars need to study the debate between contempt and

respect – a debate which is in every human mind – to achieve the depth we hope for as we write about the life and work of musicians.

This debate was identified for the first time by the great American philosopher Eli Siegel (1902–1978). He was the founder of Aesthetic Realism,

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which he began teaching in 1941. Its core principles can be summarized in these three statements:

1. The deepest desire of every person is to like the world on an honest or accurate basis.
2. The greatest danger for a person is to have contempt for the world and what is in it. Contempt can be defined as the lessening of what is different from oneself as a means of self-increase as one sees it.
3. All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.¹

I have seen that studying these principles empowers a musicologist to understand, more deeply than ever, how Ethics and Aesthetics are related.

Scholars have certainly done much valuable work showing how a musician's religious, philosophic, and political convictions may affect his or her work. Recent examples include Christoph Wolff's fine study of Bach and Lewis Lockwood's of Beethoven. There has also been significant exploration by our profession of how sociological pressures affect artistic decisions, including decisions of a subconscious nature. The list here is nearly legion; so I mention just one scholar: Christopher Small.

What has hardly ever been done, however, is for a musicologist to ask: How do the *everyday* ethics of a musician affect the quality of his or her art?² Will music remain unscathed if composers or performers have people in their minds with unjust contempt? Asking this question in reverse, that is, in its positive form: Does an attitude of respect for humanity and for the world strengthen one's art? Make it *technically* stronger?

That Eli Siegel saw what beauty is – the oneness of the permanent opposites in reality – is a monumental cultural achievement, of inestimable value to the science of musicology. This article focuses, however, on another of his major contributions to our field: a new understanding of ethics. Music history, after all, is made by human beings; every decision a musician makes – no matter how seemingly “abstract” or “technical” – has inevitably its ethical dimension.

Ethics and Aesthetics in a Song of the Beatles

For example, consider one of the most popular songs of the Beatles – a song which celebrates the joy and pride a man feels through respect: through being happy to show, without limit, how deeply he

is affected by the world outside himself in the form of a particular woman. I am speaking about “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” which Lennon co-composed with Paul McCartney.

The song, which is from 1963, says, in effect: “I want to be close to this girl, and God am I proud of it!” Musically, it puts together, in a notable way, the opposites of assertion and yielding: the beat is assertive, yet the melody in nearly every phrase gently curves downward. Consider, for example, the very opening three phrases: “Oh, yeah, I'll / tell you something. / I think you'll understand.”

Next, consider the song's melodic climax: the high B which arrives on the word “hand” – in a phrase sung out by people all over the globe: “I want to hold your *hand*.” That high note rhymes with its very opposite, the lowest note of the opening phrase, heard just a moment before and a full octave and a perfect fourth lower: “I think you'll *understand*.”

Through the rhyme, opposites are made one: low and high, modesty and boldness, thoughtfulness and exuberance. Even mind and body are made one: “understand” – mind; “hand” – body. Significantly, the same chord, B minor, the mediant in the key of G, supports both words.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney, as artists, had the power to integrate aspects of human emotion that so often are in conflict. Was this an aesthetic achievement only, or likewise an ethical one? It was both. No wonder millions bought their records. As Eli Siegel explained: “The resolution of conflict in self, is like the making one of opposites in art.”³

I also recall him, in a class, giving this concise description – at once charming and precise – of ethics. “Ethics,” he said, “is the art of enjoying justice.” A question therefore worth asking, is whether in every instance of pleasure humanity has gotten from art, ethics is implied. I believe it is; in art justice is given simultaneously to opposite aspects of what reality is; opposite aspects, as well, of the emotional demands of our inner lives.

What I Learned

In several of my scholarly works, I have given examples from my own life about the ethical education I have received, and continue to receive, from Aesthetic Realism, and described its strengthening impact on my work as a composer. I will do so again now for the purpose of shedding more light on the ethical and artistic questions

John Lennon wrestled with. Though this procedure is currently “unusual” in scholarly work, it is completely in keeping with accepted scientific methodology; merely a broadening of it. We expect a musicologist who is commenting on the structure of a piece of music to have studied musical theory; we demand that a scholar commenting on the sociological dimensions of music has first studied the field honorably. So it is with the relation of music and ethics: we should require a scholar to have “dug into” the subject.

And ethics can only be studied “first-hand.” If we are not studying our own ethics – good and bad – we are not really studying ethics at all; we are merely “observing other people” from a comfortable position of ego-distance, and likely ego-superiority. To be truly equipped to look at another's ethics, one first has to be rigorous with oneself – just as one would expect rigor in a scholar's study of any other dimension of music.

Central in my ethical education was learning, through Aesthetic Realism, how I had tried to build a personality by imaging myself superior to other people – beginning with my family. This was contempt, and it is exceedingly common. “There is a disposition in every person,” Mr. Siegel explained, to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world.”⁴

Art, I learned, is the great opponent of contempt. It is the embodiment of the human drive to see the world and other people as having value. Contempt makes the world duller than it truly is; art is a passionate search for meaning, value, and beauty.

In 1975, I was studying in classes taught by Eli Siegel, and in an Ethical Study Conference of September 23, I learned about competition. “Usually there are four things people are competitive about,” he explained to me: “Love; money; social effect; knowledge. Which do you think it is with you?” I said, “I think the last is largest.”

ES: Does anyone stop you from knowing as much as you can?

EG: No.

ES: Do you believe you should try to know all you can or more than someone else you know? The first question for you is, does trying to be better than another person help you be as good as possible or hurt you? Your job is to be as good as you can be and not at war with another. Do you think there is still a world you can know about as much as possible?

EG: Yes.

ES: Stick to that feeling.

In this discussion, Eli Siegel had unbounded good will for my life. One further Aesthetic Realism discussion, and the groundwork is laid for considering how contempt and respect were operative in John Lennon's life. This is from a class of February 4, 1977.

ES: Do you think the desire to let go, to be as intense as one can be is sensible?

EG: Yes.

ES: I don't think you do.

EG: Why?

ES: Because earlier you said you want to be superior to any situation, the master of it. A deep feeling is one that controls you. A lesser feeling is one that you control. Do you think it is ever right to have a feeling control you?

EG: Well....

ES: This worries you as to your attitude to music. Do you think Beethoven wanted to have what he was saying control him? Of course, the two are there – if something controls you, then you control it.

EG: Why am I afraid of that?

ES: Superiority. Have you watched with some amusement seeing other people being intense and feeling superior to them?

EG: Yes, I have watched and felt superior.

ES: If you go into the field of music, if you are really fortunate, the notes will tell you what to do. After all, when you were born, the world told you what to do. Can that be repeated?

These questions shed much light, I believe, on the combat in the mind of John Lennon between coldness and warmth: between keeping the world at arm's length and being deeply affected by it. The battle, that is, between contempt and respect. Eli Siegel understood the debate in every person about the world: Should we be separate from it? Try to conquer it, be cold to it, see it as worthy of our contempt? Or should we do all we can to like it, and have large emotion about it? He explained to me:

No one understands fully what it means to have feeling. Every person has felt they were too God-damned cold, with hearts too much like stone or cold spaghetti. But as a person is afraid of being cold, he is also afraid of being warmer, because God knows what it will lead to. Everyone should ask, what is my greatest question? And the greatest question can be put very simply: Do I feel the world in the right way?

How Do We Choose to Meet the World?

Lennon's popularity was extraordinary. People on the street screamed out when they caught sight of him. In every city, women he had never seen before wanted to be with him. I respect John Lennon for how he tried to retain a sense of proportion and humility in the midst of all this. Even at his most famous, he would speak modestly about his own work, and enthusiastically about others.

But Lennon also suffered from this flood of approval. "If we are praised without being known," Eli Siegel wrote in 'The Ordinary Doom,' "no matter how intense and multitudinous the praise may be, we are not wholly alive. To be taken for someone else is hardly a way to be alive in one's own right."⁵

"I'm a loser / And I'm not what I appear to be," Lennon sang in 1964. Again in songs like "Help!" and "Nowhere Man," he sang with candor about himself. It encouraged people; there was a feeling, which I remember well: if John Lennon can be so open about his doubts of himself in public, maybe I can be free, too – free to be honest.

If any theme was central to Rock music in the 1960s, it was freedom: personal, cultural, political freedom.⁶ Freedom was defined by Eli Siegel as "the being able for a thing to be as it wants to be, while changing as it wants to change." And he noted, "Whatever stops a self from being as much as it can and changing as much as it can, is against freedom."⁷

People can feel – and most often do – that the "right" to have contempt for things is an essential component of their freedom. Without the ability to sneer, many people would feel unsure just how to have a conversation! Social life, unfortunately, often illustrates the point: when two people, in private, speak about a third person who is not present, the motive sometimes is to understand that person with depth and justice, but all-too-often the motive is to catalogue what the two conversationalists feel are the inadequacies of the absent person.

God save all three of them!

So, we need to ask: Does establishing a personality for ourselves on the basis of contempt add to our freedom, or enslave us? As Aesthetic Realism sees it, the desire to scorn the very world we need to complete ourselves is the most common tragedy in history.

How Much Feeling Does the World Deserve?

As the class discussion I quoted indicates, like many people, I wanted to be in control of how much the world would matter to me. "There are some people who feel strength is not to have too big a feeling," Eli Siegel explained, "and if they do, to hide it. Every now and then you show a great deal of feeling. But are you sure it is the tough thing in you that has done it, or the weak thing?"

I said I was not sure. This meant, he explained, that I was "a feeling adjuster." He asked: "Do you think you have tried to have feelings come into their true strength, or tried to hush them into neutrality?"

My whole life was present in this kind and beautiful discussion. I also think they were questions John Lennon was desperate to hear. There was a strong ethical fight in Lennon, which few if any of his fans took seriously. He never made up his mind about what the world and people deserved.

Lennon's parents had a turbulent marriage, which ended in divorce. John was five when he went to live with his aunt. When he was 17, and just reunited with his mother, she was killed by a hit-and-run driver. It seems he did not see his father again until 1965, when he came to ask his son, now famous, for money. Given these facts, it was easy enough for Lennon to see the world "as an impossible mess."⁸

To his credit, he fought against it. From an early age he was interested in the arts, and wanted to see beauty. "Books were his passion," writes Ray Coleman in his 1984 biography, in which he also describes how the young man spent hours drawing, and working on his music.⁹ Yet Coleman notes that Lennon's sense of humor was often caustic and cruel. A college girlfriend told how they would walk the Liverpool streets, mocking the elderly people they saw. And Peter Brown and Steven Gaines, in *The Love You Make: An Insider's Story of the Beatles*, write:

He derived special pleasure from ridiculing street beggars and cripples. His typical behavior would be to walk up to a hapless paraplegic he encountered on the street and make cruel jokes about his useless limbs. "Where's ya legs go, mate? Run away with your wife?"¹⁰

John Lennon, who had art and kindness in him, who would show great tenderness in the song "In My Life," and who stirred the world singing, "All You Need Is Love," and "Give Peace A Chance,"

punished himself ferociously for his unjust contempt. He was driven to portray himself as deformed. Many of his self-portraits are horribly distorted. In one, he pictures himself with claws, not fingers.¹¹

I think what was going on in Lennon is explained by these words by Eli Siegel in *Self and World*: “Obsessions are symbolical punishments that we give ourselves.”¹² The fact that a man is against himself for his unjust scorn is a beautiful fact. It shows our deepest desire is to be fair, and that we will never be at peace or feel free until we are.

Art is Integrity; Contempt is Disintegration

Aesthetic Realism explains that we can – indeed, we should – learn from art how to put together opposite emotions in ourselves. A question for everyone is how to make a one of our anger with the world, and our desire to love it; our sense of beauty, and our sense of ugliness.

There was confusion in John Lennon about this, as there is in all of us. But his confusion played out on a world-wide stage, for all to see. In many interviews, he had the courage to criticize himself, and men in general, for our injustice towards women. Yet he also used women, and a certain notion of freedom as to sex, to praise himself for his amorous prowess, and in the process to diminish the meaning of the rest of the world. For example, in the song “God,” written after the break-up of the Beatles, after first listing all the things he no longer believes in – including Elvis, the Beatles, and Jesus – John Lennon continues “I just believe in me / Yoko and me / And that's reality.”

No it is not. The shrinking of the world down to two people is not love, but vanity. “The true purpose of love,” Eli Siegel explained in *Self and World*, “is to feel closely one with things as a whole.”¹³

As his career went on, Lennon increasingly wrote songs which present the world as something to get away from. Take “I Am Walrus,” a song from 1967. In it, both words and music sneer. The melody is limp and also constricted, and the words – full of self-pity and yet, at the very same time, superiority – present life as an ugly, meaningless jumble.¹⁴ He sings:

I am he as you are he as you are me
And we are all together
See how they run like pigs from a gun
See how they fly
I'm crying

Here, Lennon glorifies ugliness while praising himself for his own verbal cleverness. That is something many people do. I did it as a High School and college student in the late 1960s, and it is why I believe this song once appealed very much to me. And though I am not dealing in this short essay with “Reception Theory,” I hope readers can see the relevance of what I have just said in broadening, and making keener, that branch of musicological research. Put simply: music can appeal to the most ethically beautiful thing in us, but it can also appeal to something repulsive.

Why Are We Interested in Music?

I think it would have strengthened John Lennon's life to have heard questions like the ones I was privileged to hear from Eli Siegel when I studied with him in the mid-1970s:

What are you interested in music for: for the glory of Ed Green or for the glory of the possibilities of reality? The question still is: What do you want to praise, your own ability? Or do you want to find something in the world to praise?

These questions enabled me to rethink some very bad decisions I had made early in my life, and the rethinking made for a new freedom.

That Lennon could mistake contempt for true creativity is illustrated in “I Am A Walrus.” As Walter Everett writes in *The Beatles as Musicians: Revolver to Anthology*, Lennon “decided to confound his scholarly and journalistic audiences by writing a song so inscrutable that it could only yield the most laughable attempt at analytical parsing.”¹⁵ Which means that the song was written with the specific and very conscious hope to make other people look ridiculous. Even worse is the fact that the song arose from Lennon learning that students in the school he attended as a young man were, with the enthusiastic encouragement of their teacher, trying to see the meaning of the lyrics to his songs.

Instead of gratitude, rather than being moved by their care for him and interest in him, Lennon told a friend that in response to this news he would purposefully create a song to frustrate these young people: a song whose lyrics would be as incoherent as possible. In my opinion, enjoying one's power to punish people – let alone people sincerely trying to understand you – is a sign of mind losing its integrity. Such actions arise from the ugly hope to be superior to the world different from oneself. Art does not emerge from such a cruel state of mind.

In his book, Everett also notes:

This incoherent manner carried on after the “Walrus” joke in “Glass Onion,” “Happiness Is a Warm Gun,” “Dig a Pony,” “Come Together,” and others, as if Lennon were masking his true nature, taking refuge in obscure personal jokes.¹⁶

This, I believe, is largely true. Still, to be fair, each song needs to be evaluated on its own. “Come Together,” for example, has a crisp, bracing, edgy sound that is very different from the slovenly sound-world of “Walrus.” It has a sound that is honestly critical, not ego-soothing. Where “Walrus” is largely incoherent, that song has a very taking relation of mystery and clarity.

An Instance of Musical and Ethical Integrity

I conclude with a song in which Lennon attempted to bring integrity to the very difficult opposites of pain and pleasure. It is “A Hard Day’s Night,” a rock masterpiece from 1964. Perhaps with the exception of “A Day In The Life,” Lennon never wrote a greater song.

A very important moment in “A Hard Day’s Night” occurs when, in a major key, he sings, more than once: “You know I feel alright” – with the

word “alright,” each time clearly making use of the conflicting minor third. Hearing this cross relation, one simply cannot help but experience pleasure and pain at once. It is technical respect for the world: the desire to feel that the contradictions in reality – even the most difficult contradictions – can make sense; *beautiful* sense.

And then there is that powerful beat, driving us inexorably forward. But where? To a sudden fade-out. By means of this surprising coda, hardness meets gentleness in a surprising yet convincing manner. And where is that fade-out situated tonally? A major second lower than the key we have been in throughout: F major rather than G major. Through this new (and deeper) tonal perspective, we get a sudden feeling of going out wide into space.

“Music tells what the world is like,” Eli Siegel wrote in 1975.¹⁷ By giving us a sight of the world where it begins, in its permanent scientific and philosophic structure – the oneness of opposites – music shows us a world we can authentically like and have large emotion about. It is a world we can honestly respect; and through respect, become truly free.

NOTES

¹ URL: <https://aestheticrealism.org/about-us/eli-siegel-founder/> Contained within a short biography of Eli Siegel presented on the site of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, New York.

² It is notable that in the index to Edward Lippman’s classic text *A History of Western Musical Aesthetics* (University of Nebraska Press, 1992), the word “ethics” never appears. It is similarly absent in the index of perhaps the most significant recent philosophic text on music, Roger Scruton’s 1997 *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford University Press). Plainly, a scholarly gap exists to be filled; a conceptual separation of Ethics and Aesthetics cries out to be bridged.

³ <http://www.aestheticrealism.net/tro/art-and-your-life-the-same-subject.html> Originally published as issue 1686 of the journal *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* (February 21, 2007).

⁴ Cited in *Aesthetic Realism: We Have Been There – Six Artists on the Siegel Theory of Opposites*. (New York: Definition Press, 1969), p. 14.

⁵ <http://www.aestheticrealism.net/essays/ordinary-doom-with-preface.html> Published earlier in Eli Siegel’s *The Frances Sanders Lesson and Two Related Works* (New York: Definition Press, 1974).

⁶ See “*Takin’ it to the streets*” – *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁷ URL: http://www.aestheticrealism.net/definitions/Definitions_Freedom.html *Definitions and Comment: Being a Description of the World*, in which this discussion of freedom first appeared, was written in 1945-46.

⁸ This phrase is found in the Preface, “Contempt Causes Insanity,” to Eli Siegel’s *Self and World: An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*. (New York: Definition Press, 1981), p. 14. The book was written in 1942.

⁹ *Lennon* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company), p. 26.

¹⁰ (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1983), p. 30.

¹¹ See Coleman (op. cit.), p. 4, where he writes of how Lennon, in art school in Liverpool in his pre-Beatles days, “quickly developed a bizarre obsession for cripples, spastics, any human deformities.”

¹² Siegel (1981), op. cit., p. 148. This is within a chapter titled “Imagination, Reality, and Aesthetics.”

¹³ Siegel (1981) op. cit., p. 171. Within the chapter “Love and Reality.”

¹⁴ That the band sensed there was something deeply wrong with the song is tellingly described by Geoff Emerick in *Here, There and Everywhere: My Life Recording the Music of The Beatles* (New York: Gotham Books, 2006), p. 214: “Listening to the record today you can hear that they’re distracted, that their minds are not really on what they’re doing. I distinctly remember the look of emptiness on all their faces while they

were playing ‘I Am The Walrus.’ It’s one of the saddest memories I have of my time with the Beatles.”

¹⁵ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 133.

¹⁶ Everett (1999) op. cit., p. 134.

¹⁷ URL: <http://www.aestheticrealism.net/tro/music-tells-what-the-world-is-like.html> Originally issue 93 of *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* (January 8, 1975).

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