

CONFORMISM VERSUS NON-CONFORMISM AS A QUEST FOR THE GENUINE IN ART IN GEORGE BOWERING'S "THE HAYFIELD"

JUDIT NAGY¹

ABSTRACT. *Conformism versus non-conformism as a quest for the genuine in art in George Bowering's "The Hayfield"*. Gordon Featherall, the art historian protagonist of Canadian writer George Bowering's short story, "The Hayfield" aspires to become a genuine painter through his knowledge of art. Contemplating literary and pictorial aesthetics of the twentieth century and having studied the oeuvre of famous literary figures and painters, he makes an attempt at painting his subject, the hayfield. Will he succeed in his endeavors to achieve something genuine? Building on a detailed analysis of the protagonist's painting-, and literature-related remarks, the paper aims at exploring the connection between conformism/ non-conformism in art and genuine artwork.

Keywords: *conformism, non-conformism, genuineness in art, painting and literature, literary criticism.*

REZUMAT. *Conformism versus non-conformism, mijloc de căutare a autenticului în artă, în "The Hayfield" de George Bowering.* Gordon Featherall, istoricul de artă protagonistul al povestirii "The Hayfield" de George Bowering, năzuiește să devină un pictor autentic, prin cunoștințele sale din domeniul artei. Contemplând estetica literară și picturală a secolului al XX-lea și studiind, în prealabil, opera unor autori și pictori celebri, acesta încearcă să picteze subiectul ales, o fâneată. Va reuși el în demersul de a realiza ceva autentic? Bazându-se pe o analiză detaliată a picturii protagonistului, dar și pe aspecte ce țin de analiză literară, lucrarea își propune să exploreze conexiunea dintre conformism și non-conformism în arta autentică.

Cuvinte cheie: *conformism, non-conformism, autenticitate în artă, pictură și literatură, critică literară.*

¹ Judit Nagy is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Linguistics of the Budapest-based Károli Gáspár University of the Hungarian Reformed Church, where she teaches courses in North American Studies and applied linguistics. She graduated from the Modern American Literature PhD Program of Eötvös Loránd University in 2009; her dissertation focused on weather images in Canadian short prose. Her current fields of research include East Asian Canadians, cultural metaphors, and teaching material development in Canadian Studies and applied linguistics. In 2012, the Central European Association for Canadian Studies awarded her with the CEACS Certificate of Merit for her contribution to Canadian Studies. As of 1 October 2016, she is also Vice-Dean for International Affairs at the Faculty of Humanities. Contact address: <nagy.judit@kre.hu>.

The issue of conformism and non-conformism in art can be approached from the point of what constitutes genuine artwork, a question which has been preoccupying artist and critic alike. Gordon Featherall, the art history teacher protagonist of Canadian writer George Bowering's short story, "The Hayfield" aspires to become a painter producing genuine artwork. "Get[ting] right down to it – not only on weekends after marking papers and preparing lectures" (Bowering 193), he makes an attempt at painting his subject, the hayfield. Will he succeed in his endeavors to achieve something genuine?

Building on an analysis of the protagonist's painting-, and literature-related remarks, the paper aims at exploring the connection between genuine artwork and conformism/ non-conformism. This connection will be examined from six different perspectives: the artist's vision of the landscape, the landscape itself, the artist's schooling, audience and critic, time and, finally, place. The term 'conformism' will be understood in a general sense, as 'correspondence or similarity in form, character or mode' in order to cover all the relevant contexts of the above connection the text provides.

Images of the sun as the artist's non-conformism/ conformism

In the opening passage of the story, Gordon Featherall stands at the edge of the hayfield, catching a glimpse of the sun, which becomes the first detail of the landscape for him to observe. He proposes three different yet interconnected ways of looking at the sun. First, the sunbeams say "yes, yes, yes" in a "forceful whisper," "propelling it in beams, overpowering with great oldman wisdom," defying all human-made petty bans: "no parking, cycling, hunting, stopping, spitting, talking, fishing" (Bowering 193). This is the artist's first impression of the subject, reminiscent of the nature-as-mightier-than-man cliché (Pache 149), yet original in the employment of the actual man-made rules (no parking, hunting, spitting) in the juxtaposition.

Through references to Van Gogh and D. H. Lawrence's depiction of the sun, the initial image is extended. Thus, on the one hand, after the first impression the subject makes on the artist, images others have associated with it emerge from the back of his mind, that is, someone else's way of seeing the sun is drawn into the artist's image, which could be observed as artistic conformism. On the other hand, he uses these images to argue for his own aesthetics, that is, non-intervention.

Van Gogh's "insane sun, rings of solid orange paint around it" (Bowering 193) appears through the transitory thought of insanity triggered by the enumerated string of man-made bans. These bans also form an impediment in the artist's way of creating genuine artwork. This can be best illustrated with the artist's reference to D. H. Lawrence:

D. H. Lawrence's sun growing warm orange rings around the inside hearts of men, making them speak to one another on the streets [...] the discarded cigarette

package in the same place for months, bleaching in the sun, never stepped on or swept up. Park with no signs in it, a man can spit if he wants to, nobody to say No, only the sun in the wide prairie sky, whispering yes through the air, the warm lapping on a man's bare shoulders once he has discarded his shirt, or at least stuffed it in his bag. That was where Gordon set up his easel and little canvas-top stool (Bowering 193).

Here, the shirt is symbolic of all human-made petty rules. To create a genuine work of art, the artist needs to discard this shirt, or "at least, stuff it in [his] bag," that is, bracket it, put it aside. In addition, Nature itself whispers "Yes" in a reassuring gesture of affectionate encouragement in order for the artist to disregard what is represented by the shirt. Finally, the author's choice of the artists itself is suggestive of the aesthetics of non-intervention as both Van Gogh and D. H. Lawrence are known to have obeyed their own impulses going beyond the limitations of 'petty rule reality.' Indeed, commenting on Van Gogh, among other artists, Freeland confirms that "genius[es] obey a sort of law or inner duty" (89), while Dalal suggests that "spontaneity in art was the first principle with Lawrence, and therefore, he was impatient of art 'too much cooked in the artistic consciousness'" (59)².

Conformism/ non-conformism in depicting the landscape

From the sun, the artist's focus will shift to the hayfield and the horizon: "A man wouldn't even have to bring paint if he could dip his long-handled brushes in the colour of the yellow hay and blue horizon" (Bowering 139), he remarks. This, in the given context, implies that the artwork lies there in nature, ready-made for the artist. All he has to do is find it, and then copy it onto the canvas. This approach limits the artist's originality to seeking out the right subject and/or composition through his vision, realizing the pictorial version of the Woolfesque "moment of being."³ On the naïve-reflective axis⁴, this is closer to the naïve perceived as the perfect imitation of the real (=nature).⁵

² Additionally, Eyman reveals another way in which D. H. Lawrence did not conform to the contemporary literary tradition. He states that "in essence, Lawrence was the primary transitional figure between the literature of the 19th century -- which insisted that sex, as such, did not exist -- and that of the 20th, which insists that little else, as such, exists but sex. He was obsessed, to almost a Nietzschean degree, with primal things and the power of the individual, and with how the only complete loss of self comes in sexual communion" ("Genius...").

³ "For Woolf a moment of being is a moment when an individual is fully conscious of his experience, a moment when he is not only aware of himself but catches a glimpse of his connection to a larger pattern hidden behind the opaque surface of daily life" (Urquhart, "Moments of Being...").

⁴ Schiller's categories as put forward for poetry in his work "On Naïve and Reflective Poetry" are equally applicable to fine arts.

⁵ The naïve and the pictorial "moment[s] of being" are the theorem and the corollary behind the "art is mimesis" axiom of imitation theory, which Freeland characterizes as "one of the most persistent theories in art" (20).

To furnish painting-related examples, Freeland relies on E. H. Gombrich, who “described the history of Western art (mainly painting) as a search for progressively more vivid renderings of reality [where] [i]nnovations aimed at more perfect semblances. New theories of perspective in the Renaissance and oil painting with its greater tactility and richness enabled artists to achieve an increasingly convincing ‘copy’ of Nature” (23). The invention of the camera in the middle of the 19th century further contributed to the popularity of mimesis in visual arts: “the camera served as a new tool to present objective reality. Experimentations with photographic vision were discernible in contemporary landscape painting” (Nagy 134), manifesting in art movements such as Luminism.

As Featherall is working on his painting, however, his vision of his subject begins to change, which is first indicated through the description of the slightly altered colour scheme: “[Gordon] continued to lay paint on the canvas, thick swabs of corn-yellow, with deep orange stripes, a tiger of a hayfield” (Bowering 193), and then he “squeeze[d] horizon blue onto the palette – an old dry painting” (194). This is an attempt on his part to capture the colour scheme rather than every detail of the landscape.

The next step away from a photograph-like representation of the subject is to introduce letters in the composition: “Gordon wrote MOLTO⁶ in orange paint on top of the canvas, and painted slowly, letting his shoulders dip to the rhythm of the lines. The hayfield didn’t change, no stroke on the canvas took anything away from the yellow miles in front” (194). This implies that the essence of the subject does not lie either in its copy-like rendering or in capturing its colour scheme. Thus what we have so far approximates a neo-expressionist work with its vivid and harmonizing colours and rough, bold brushstrokes.⁷

The black-and-white Japanese footage Featherall suddenly remembers while at work on his painting induces another change in his art: it triggers an impulse to reflect the delicate nature of Asian ink paintings. This impulse does not manifest either in the artist’s altering of his subject or the colour scheme of his painting, but in his manner of handling brushwork: “[h]e had been swabbing paint onto the canvas. Now he touched it lightly, with a fine brush” (195). This influence is also symbolic of the role of the subconscious in the creation of artwork.⁸ This example, similarly to that of the artist’s observing the sun, indicates that the subconscious can serve as a receptacle and provider of others’ ideas and modes of seeing a subject, thus it can function as a source of artistic conformism.

Upon encountering a flute player at the hayfield, Featherall includes tones and hues in his painting that harmonize with his music: “Gordon painted. The

⁶ Art terminology abounds in Italian words and expressions, especially in music – hence the choice of words. ‘Molto’ means ‘a lot of,’ ‘much,’ ‘many.’

⁷ Neo-expressionism is a version of the post-modern in art (“Painting”).

⁸ Here, the subconscious works in the same manner in the artistic process as when the artist is observing the sun, and his vision is mixed with that of Van Gogh and D. H. Lawrence.

newcomer blew gently on the flute, making low hollow tones, and as he did this, Gordon lined in the darker brown surface brown shadows under the brilliant crest of the hay" (197). Featherall's reaction to the flute player's music can be considered another example of artistic conformism. Yet, paradoxically, the element triggered by the music in his composition will contribute to making the work itself unique.

Thus a gradual abstraction from the original subject can be observed in Gordon Featherall's art, his work becomes more reflective than naïve. Emblematic of this, to the flute player's comment that the hayfield "ain't that colour" (196) he responds, "No, I am not trying to make it the right colour" (196), which confirms that this is a conscious choice for him.

However, the abstraction in Featherall's artistic development is not the result of conscious planning, it seems rather random. He is certainly not in control of what emerges from the back of his mind while he is observing the landscape, just as the flute player's appearance is an unforeseen and unanticipated event. Yet, all these influences are discernible in the painting resulting from the experience. At the same time, in spite of the gradual abstraction, his work remains representational in essence.⁹

Non-conformism of the self-made artist

Gordon Featherall also contends that earnest endeavour is more important than schooling to produce genuine art: "a man doesn't have to be a painter when you get right down to it" (Bowering 139), he states. In the given context, this is to suggest that if the honest determination is there, the resulting artwork will be genuine.¹⁰ Therefore an artist does not need to be either well-trained or heroic, his insight will come from his earnest endeavour.¹¹ If schooling in art is considered as a form of conformism to a set of rules and styles, then Featherall's attitude comes across as non-conformism.

Conformism of the audience and the critic: labeling

Soon after Featherall starts painting his work, Carmen Ethiopia "pop[s] up from behind the long grass," the man "wearing the wrong kind of clothes" and "look[ing] piercingly at the canvas, expert fashion seen in movie shorts and colour advertisements" (Bowering 194). Again, clothes here may be symbolic of the audience's inappropriate attitude to art and art appreciation. What Ethiopia does first

⁹ In painting, representational art may also comprise images which depart from being true-to-life, as long as they are recognisable. ("Representational Art")

¹⁰ In Dutton, sincerity of expression is a defining feature of expressive authenticity.

¹¹ In Carlyle and Emerson, insight and the ability to penetrate into the "divine idea of the world" is the unique capacity of the hero/ poet, who personifies the unity of the ideal and the real, discovering the ideal in the real.

is to ensure Featherall of his amateur expertise, and he does so in a rather boastful manner: "I have looked at my share of paintings. Pissarro, Tintoretto, Hogarth, eh, eh?" (194). The superficial nature of his pretentious art *connaissance* is revealed in his answer to Featherall's question whether he likes Hogarth: "Well you know – Hogarth. But don't let me disturb you" (194). In all probability, Ethiopia has no in-depth knowledge of Hogarth's art, hence his inability to converse meaningfully about it. Putting on an air of an art expert bored of the subject, he tries to cover up his ignorance.

After a short time, Ethiopia re-enters into conversation with Featherall on his work by saying that "Van Gogh would have loved that hayfield," also adding that "he went insane at the end" (194). This statement reveals a response from the type of audience and critic who wish to contextualize the given work of art by placing it in a neatly labeled box through comparison to other, well-known artists' work. The phenomenon can be considered another embodiment of conformism in art. Such criticism is not based on the work's own merits but on those of the ones similar to it.

The additional remark ending Ethiopia's comment may be a demonstration of what constitutes "Van Goghness" in art for his kind of people who "[know] a lot about art [only] in a way" (197), just as it may represent another attempt of Ethiopia's at showing off with his supposed knowledge of popularized art history.

To further illustrate the conformist practice of labeling mentioned above, Ethiopia cites famous artists' names in response to Featherall's introducing himself: "the name of a painter, something to conjure with. Monet, Tiepolo, Brueghel—" (194).

Similarly, upon the flute player's remark on the differing colour scheme of the hayfield and the painting of it, Ethiopia furnishes the following explanation: "Impressionism... Renoir, Degas" (196) in the manner of "a man who was obliged to know something" (197). Again, he places the work in a category instead of making an attempt at learning about the artist's impulses behind it. Ethiopia represents the kind of art historian who wants to label and catalogue everything rather than considering the work as it is. He is "an ambassador [...] whose job entails codifying the lives and habits of other people" (197), an agent to enforce conformism in art. Hence he appears in the 'wrong clothes' on the scene.

Furthermore, Featherall realizes that locals who are regular observers of the subject at various times, who "live with it," may possess a better knowledge of it than either the critic or an artist upon a one-off visit: "[t]his man [i.e. the flute player] has the previous and preemptive knowledge of the hayfield. [...] His knowledge required many moments in how many years, of looking out over miles of hayfield" (196).

Featherall admires the flute player's depth of experience of the hayfield just as the flute player expresses his appreciation of Featherall's painting in his own simple manner: "It's pretty good" (197), which is worth more than any praise from Carmen Ethiopia because it comes from an expert of the experience, the only person in a position to verify the genuineness of Featherall's art. Their realization of a shared understanding of art is concluded with a 'business deal' – Featherall 'sells' the painting to the flute player, who turns out to be the landowner's son, for a stack of hay.

Non-conformism as the artist's resistance to his environment (time)

Along the course of painting, Featherall reveals some of his thoughts on art. An intriguing utterance is his "Do your painting in one sitting, he had decided. Don't come back to it" (Bowering 194) at the beginning of the story. In fact, painting in one sitting can be a reference to the *alla prima* painting technique, or 'direct painting,' which is confirmed by his applying dark to light colour (orange and brown on yellow), thin to thick (first thick swabs then light, fine brushstrokes), massing in the shapes (no pencil) and focus on contrasts (yellow and blue) (Currier "Alla Prima Painting – The Process"). Yet, the added "he had decided" creates the impression of the impermanence of this technique in Featherall's art, while the "Don't come back to it" that follows gives the utterance a temporal dimension, similar in manner to the 'to be read in one sitting' criterion of a short story. This dimension is further reinforced by the narrator's response, "The hayfield was the hay of today" (Bowering 194), which stresses the importance of the instantaneous in art.¹²

Conformism/ non-conformism of the artist's environment (place)

For Featherall, the greatest impediment in the artist's 'capturing the moment' appears to be the environment: "A test to do the one painting despite roar of automobile and chomp of eating neighbours, even here in the dry slope of railroad ridge between track and wire fence, to paint despite intrusion or weather" (Bowering 194).

He goes on to suggest that there has to be a match between the subject and the stimuli provided by the environment in which the artist works on his subject. For example, a busy, noisy environment does not match the subject of the Hayfield: "A man could paint a revolution that way, a violent act every day, thirty illustrations a month. [But] "the hayfield *offered another kind of instant*, one that stretched out radically, from the eye to the whole in eternity" (Bowering 194). Thus the environment has to conform to the subject for the artist's creation of genuine artwork.

Another illustration of the same principle at work is Featherall's perception of the flute player's music: "With the flute noise nearing, the painting stopped. For a while, he tried to groove the brush strokes to the music but it was wrong, because the music was wrong for that place. It was Hindustan music, Old Testament music, like the bright, wooden-looking colour prints of his old forgotten Bible" (Bowering 195). As an explanation, he adds, "in the Old Testament there are two possibilities for music, the long loud blare choruses of chornets as the walls of Jericho crashed in the sand, and the lonely soldier flute of shepherd David"¹³ (Bowering 195). As has

¹² It is not unlike the modernist interpretation of experience as put forward by Walter Pater in his "Conclusion to the Renaissance" or Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being.'

¹³ This is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's Hellenic versus Hebraic categorization.

been illustrated before, the lonely soldier flute is the music which befits the mood of Featherall's painting. It does not feel out of place, it blends in with the landscape thus it is conducive to the artistic process. However, it is also the very embodiment of Heisenberg's principle: its presence will affect the artwork – hence the appearance of the brown shadows on the canvas.

Conclusion

In the Lyotardian sense, Gordon featherall's art displays some post-modern features. He proceeds on an ad hoc basis, the impermanence of his choices is a discernible feature of his art, his work is seemingly unstructured in this sense. His resistance to the pre-established rules reflects in his attitude to art and life, yet he cannot fully escape from these, thus he cannot become non-conformist in this sense. His subconscious, the context of the artwork including the artist's working environment, his schooling, the expectations and misinterpretations of critic and audience may all work against him. His chance to achieve genuineness in depicting the hayfield is in capturing the instantaneous and in the combination of ideas arising from his experience of the subject into a coherent whole.

WORKS CITED

- Bowering, George. "The Hayfield." *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories*, edited by Margaret Atwood and Robert Weaver. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 193-198.
- Currier, Alfred. "Alla Prima Painting – The Process" <http://www.finearttips.com/2009/12/alla-prima-painting-the-process/> last accessed: 27/01/17.
- Dalal, D. S. D. *H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers: A Critique*. London: Sarup & Sons, 2007.
- Dutton, Denis. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Eyman, Scott. "Genius, But Not Always Talent, Marked D.H. Lawrence Works." *Sun Sentinel* Oct 6th 1985. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1985-10-06/features/8502130059_1_writers-genius-burgess-book last accessed: 27/01/17.
- Freeland, Cynthia. *Art Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Nagy, Judit. "Cultural Encounters on the Canvas: European Influences on Canadian Landscape Painting 1867-1890." *Eger Journal of American Studies* vol. X, 2007, pp. 133-144.
- Pache, Walter. "Modern Canadian Poetry and the Classical Tradition." *Probing Canadian Culture*, edited by Peter Easingwood, Konrad Gross, and Wolfgang Klooss. Augsburg: AV Verlag, 1991, pp. 141-156.
- "Painting" <https://www.boundless.com/art-history/textbooks/boundless-art-history-textbook/global-art-since-1950-37/postmodernism-237/painting-841-3573> Last accessed: 26/01/17.
- "Representational Art" <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/representational-art.htm> Last accessed: 19/02/17.
- Urquhart, Nicole L. "Moments of Being in Virginia Woolf's Fiction" <http://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/matrix/urquhart.htm> Last accessed: 26/01/17.