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The Ethos of an Amateur

We are living in a world where the word 'professionalism' is steadily gaining in importance. The necessity of professional work and professional attitude presses us almost palpably. On the other hand, the word 'amateurism' is always associated with all the worst - lack of competence, of seriousness, of quality, etc. But it seems that it is particularly important to promote the ethos of amateurism in our times. I understand that this may only concern a small circle of people, but I think that it is here, in Czarna Dąbrówka – this special place in Poland where practitioners of an alternative culture from different countries used to encounter - where I can be understood.

The amateur that I would like to support here is not one of the extremes of the opposition: 'professional - amateur', 'certified - uncertified', 'institutional - uninstitutional'. That would be too simple. If it is a must to call for such a differentiation, I would like to point to something more universal.

Among all thinkable walks of life there are two distinctly recognisable ones: that of a possessor, a man at work, equipped with skills lifting him up the social and financial ladder on one the hand, and that of a vagabond, pilgrim, poet, chanter, minstrel, holy man on the other. From time immemorial a man has had a choice between two paths in his search of the truth: the path of painstakingly punctilious studies, acquisition of artistry and expertise, and the path of intuition, disinterestedness, spontaneity, and effort. And although the paths are not mutually exclusive, and many good qualities that one attitude will appreciate, can be respected by the other, for example an open heart, it is the escalation of feelings that is decisive here, that can exceed a certain level.

Legend has it that while filling up human vessels with life, God filled some of them with several drops of love beyond capacity. I do not know whether he did it out of a momentary lack of caution, or it was his well-thought-out intention. All in all that has resulted in several people wandering around the world and being unable to find home. It is impossible to teach them rationality and effectiveness. They are unruly with respect to existing borders, norms and codes, and they stick to madness, deprived of a sense of belonging. They are troublesome.

Sometimes there is an open conflict on a large scale, as in the Middle Ages when that stiff shell of the institutionalised Church was upset by the Franciscan element. Or in the Jewish tradition in 18th century when the community of rabbis and teachers of the law, deeply absorbed in studying the Torah and observing all those obligations and restrictions, was invaded by a spinning disc of Chasidism.

The power of such a disc is spontaneous, irrational, as a flash of a spark. That is why in this world it lends so poor a foundation to erect anything on it. That is why it will surely yield to the those who rule here, who build houses and republics and who deem the very idea utopian.

And even if the power of this spinning disc finds here its way, reaches power and gets institutionalised, it will soon die out and transform into its own grotesque imitation.

Sometimes the community marginalises and persecutes those whose energy feeds the movement of the spinning disc; they are misunderstood and there is then no will to understand them. In such an event the power may destroy the community. A conviction will grow stronger that it is only danger that could be expected from it. Well, it was Plato himself who wanted to drive out poets from his Republic. For many times the rulers of the 20th century have proved to be afraid of the power of a poet and they resorted to ultimate measures: Gumilow, Mandelstam, Lorca were all murdered, Brodsky, as a parasitic individual in the community, was sent to a forced labour camp. Such examples could be multiplied.

But the wisdom of a community is measured against the extent of its ability to domesticate such people, to understand them and appreciate their message, to find a place for them in its own structure and abstain from changing them in the name of its own self-love, on the contrary, to protect their otherness in the name of common good. There were many cases, weren't there?, when the very existence of a poet, chanter, jester, or yurodivyi, not only presented no danger to a community, but also protected it.

Thus, maybe it is among those people you can find individuals who have the name 'amateur' inscribed somewhere deep inside. But it is too big a generalisation, and it is not enough. That would again be too simple. I have taken another track that, as I noted earlier - seems to be more actual than the opposition of 'professional - amateur' and that introduces us to more interesting a context, but we should again try to abandon it. Because I do not want to isolate a specific figure, who could be identified with the amateur; what I want is to follow a specific path of experience and research resulting in a significant presence in the world

and a significant fashion of evaluating. I would like to ask about it and refer to various examples.

Maybe the amateur is part of us, of each and every one of us, that breathes, fights for self-expression, existence, that drives us or is suppressed by us, that should be protected and remembered? That is why I would like to talk about the ethos of amateurism, but not about the amateur himself, who is historically dependent and mythologically confined, for example to the myth of a vagabond or minstrel. I intuitively feel we should free ourselves from that kind of images. I want to stress that point, for we are generally not free from the rule of various myths, but I would like to protect my amateur against it. On the other hand, it is worthwhile to talk about the ethos of amateurism as specifically as possible, even if words did not come easy - I feel that we still know little about this problem. And even those who act in the territory of the ethos, do not fully know its boundaries, do not know how to protect it, and when they happen to betray it.

Ethos in the Greek tradition defined life in accordance with the morals, it was certain existence in the world. And somewhere at the beginning of this tradition *ethos* was identified with *daimonion*. It was Heraclitus to say that the *ethos* of a man is his *daimonion*. The *daimonion* is supernatural existence within a man, his inner voice that resounds in him from birthday. The Greek happiness - *eudaimonia* - literally means 'to have a good daemon', to be more specific - to recognise one's *daimonion*, and to know how to call him. Thus, happiness means to be able to recognise one's *daimonion*. This is the very understanding of *ethos* I would like to refer to. I do not mean acquisition of skills to live in accordance with the morals, with a certain acquired ethics of a community, of a culture, but the inner voice existing in a man from birthday.

The amateur - the one guided by his heart - who would not want to endorse this meaning of the word? But does it mean anything today? And what is its relation to what is amateur, to our private life, to specific artistic work that is here of particular interest to us?

The truth is that in relation to quite a number of people such attitude is full of vigour and creative when they are young. It is then easier to be adopted, and to be defended. Those groups who emerge in the context of the ethos of amateurism, are doing far better at the beginning, when they are building, when their youth powers are with them. And then a very difficult period comes, when they are older,

experienced, and when the powers coming from practising the ethos are very scarce. They reach a line beyond which there is helplessness and incapacity.

That can be connected with the age of a group or a particular person, but not necessarily. And at this point culture - to use an official name - starts to seduce them and they cannot resist it. A man balancing at such a threshold is unable to refute the arguments of those whose foundation is the official culture, their profession, of those whose social and material situation is clear. Such a man feels endangered. Eventually he often accepts a compromise. Some say - maturity, not compromise; another confrontation of childhood dreams with day-to-day reality, maturity and social duties. He gradually accepts those arguments, he has got well-grounded justifications at hand, and he is imperceptibly leaving his place and cannot hear that sigh of relief that those who have seduced him produce; the relief that they feel whenever another one has joined them and in doing so he proves that it is the way it should be, and that there is no other way.

The question that continuously haunts me is how to resist to this doubtlessly stronger opponent. In other words: how to survive with the ethos of amateurism throughout the whole life, and not only until maturity? Where to take strength from in that sense of belonging to nowhere?

In his tale entitled "Knulp", Hermann Hesse relates a story of a vagabond from Schwarzwald, who as a very talented, intelligent and comely man spent his all life on roaming the country without achieving anything material and thwarted all hopes that anyone may have put in him. Towards the end of his life, Knulp runs into a stonemason, his former fellow-vagabond, who now owns material property, a family and every night goes to bed in his own room. And this is what the stonemason said: "Look, Knulp... You could have got more than wandering and poverty throughout your whole life. You have gone to waste. You know, I am not a scholar, but I believe the Bible (...). You will have to excuse yourself, you will not just get away with that. You had been entrusted with far more than others and you have squandered everything." And later the voice-Hesse and God himself answers in these words: "Despite his being ill and tired he was keeping his eyes open, his nostrils moving vigilantly. (...) Wandering aimlessly he could only now see every hollow on his path, every change of winds, every track of game (...). He was not scared at all; he knew that God could do us

nothing (...) Listen - said God - I needed you the way you are. You have been wandering in my name and giving the settlers longing for freedom."

Everyone who has even had little experience with the ethos of amateurism, gets the stigma of social duty, feels hard pressed to work for benefits, and material gains. Each and every amateur feels the stigma. Hesse's point is quite inconspicuous here, it seems improbable for this magnitude of social reason and logic to be balanced with something so petty and simple; for the point is not to excuse oneself before the people, the point is to hear the inner voice that gives us our place in the world. God needs us the way we are. But it is not easy to raise to the occasion, this task often runs counter to the image the people have about our behaviour. That is why the ethos of amateurism - like it or not - often becomes the ethos of fighting with the blackmail of social acceptance.

With no doubt in the heart of this conflict there is the question of work, various attitudes towards it, and various understandings of the word. It might seem that it is as simple as this: you either work or not, you either learn and do something or day-dream, in other words: you are either a professional or an amateur. For it is a universal opinion that an amateur is somebody who does not work as he should.

But let us look at what is going on around us, at artistic work, from the amateur point of view. I am sorry to simplify or... exaggerate a bit but this is to present a sharp picture. The amateur perceives a big race, he can see stressed-out people who impatiently gain consecutive levels of professional skill, who are technically more and more efficient, but tired of competitions and ambitions, hungry for prizes, looking for cunning advice on how to play the game. The more tired they are and the faster the machine is, the deeper aversion they have to those who do not participate in the race, and the greater superiority they demonstrate over them. And they can only find two explanations for that: they either do not feel like it or cannot do it.

But the amateur has his doubts. He feels there is something dear he would like to get, but it is not mastery. He does not trust that vector of work either, it will probably not lead him to the longed-for place. His travel has taught him that you cannot look straight at a tree if you want to see it. His presence in the world is that of a watcher who tries not to frighten game away. He is surprised at the hubbub people make because of artistic work. Work - he used to repeat to himself - is like rain, which quietly penetrates life, it is transparent and it does not like being

talked about too much, being universalised, because if it is, it will become impenetrable for the searcher.

Sometimes the amateur produces a superb thing, which, naturally, does not mean he is able to repeat it. He might have problems with that. "He is not the owner of any lock - wrote Marina Tsvetaeva. And that is why he opens all locks. And he opens every lock instantly, that is why he will never open the same lock again. He is not the owner of the mystery, he is a passer-by."

I do not know if Boryska, one of the main characters of Andrei Tarkovsky's film "Rublow", would once again be able to find proper clay to make a bell, and to faultlessly mix necessary components of the alloy. Boryska's story is one of the most beautiful stories about the ethos of amateurism I know. The prince made him the builder of the bell only because they believed that Boryska's father handed down to him the mystery of bell-making before he died, which he did not. He was not the owner of the mystery. Knowing nothing, guided by his heart, he led the elders, each of whom was a master of his trade, but none of them could excavate a bell from under the earth, rough matter, and make it sound clearly. The crazy boy has got nothing in common with his co-workers: he digs the pit himself which a professional bell-founder would never do, he has not got their peace and surety but he is unusually open, and he provides the world with this openness, he risks his life, he yields to different time that forces him to wait and abstain from acting when work should be being done, he is also different from them in that he does not get the earthly benefits from his work, he does not go for his prize to the prince. What they understand as happiness, he perceives as unhappiness. He struggles through the mob in the opposite direction to get where Andrei Rublow is waiting for him, a silent master who has lost his faith, and his creativity. Rublow needs Boryska, he needs his heart to pick up the brush again. His hand, be it technically proficient, is nothing without a spark. Tarkowski lights on this black and grey film to shine all colours of Rublow's icons.

The virtue of waiting, in defiance of all logic, transports the amateur to another time, it transports him to other hands. It is true he is then unbearable, and makes you furious; as masters were because of Boryska. No one knows why he is waiting, and what he wants, as one caddik from Przysucha used to do, when he never started the prayer on time and continuously waited for something, although the faithful always waited for him in the synagogue. And Stalker, the protagonist of a film by Tarkovsky - whom did he listened to, or what made him choose the path

he chose, through the zone, in that particular moment and in the way he did it?

That can make people furious, and that does so, they often shrug their shoulders. But it is not what the amateur is afraid of most. Let me quote Tsvetaeva once again: "Do not be afraid of the notebook with crossed out parts, not of a blank page, but be afraid of your own and wilful page."

There are many more situations in which the amateur with his way of acting and evaluating is unpleasant to people, when he is unfair, intolerant, when he causes annoyance and disgust.

For example, it is difficult to make him get to like well-made things, products of perfect skill. Sometimes when he looks at them he - what a shame - surrenders to boredom and stubbornly looks for a flaw in something that does its best to eliminate errors and weaknesses. What is more, among those things he - bastard! - sometimes finds the worst, clumsiest, poorest one. And even an expert will not do - he will not understand its poor quality, its clumsiness, its relative badness... With his all heart he will be defending something that an expert would not even take a look at.

The same applies to history, for whose appreciation and gratefulness so many people look. The amateur can hardly see it, disregards it and evaluates it in a completely different way. In that he resembles a mother - whenever the world presents happiness to her son, she sees unhappiness. But can the world love her son? Has the world got a heart?

However critically you could evaluate those disadvantages of the amateur, you must admit it is those disadvantages that make it difficult for him to participate in the great race in the field of artistic activity, although he may want to take part in it. But his departure has its own consequences.

Do try not to work and see if inactivity is as simple as that. For some time the very inactivity may be an essential problem in itself: do nothing. Just now, when the pressures of ambition, of competition and of material gain are so strong, just now try and to the question what do you do?, answer this: nothing; what are you working on?, nothing; what can you do? nothing. The point is you should ask yourself a right question. Whom will I be when I give everything out, when I have got nothing? when I am not able to do anything? and I gain nothing? Am I still existent? Have I got my own name?

At such moment the amateur charges his batteries. You can punctiliously work for many years, you can learn a lot and gain a lot, but the moment in life will come when you will have to give it all up, when you will have to give it away for free. And then, if you are still on your feet, if they still remember your name, that may mean that for all those years you have been working on something completely different, on something incomparably more powerful than any earthly skill or possession.

The title of our meeting in Czarna Dabówka contains the word 'theatre', but actually I cannot see a single actor, set designer or director among us, in the sense of a name in life. I think that even if he wanted to adopt that kind of point of view, in other words to identify with any of those terms, the amateur would always suffer a defeat. Because even if he intensely practised for all his life, attained thorough mastery and were able to compete with best professionals, and even if history confirmed his achievements, his life would remain unfulfilled for him and for his inner voice.

I do not know why this is so. Maybe his longing is too strong? Maybe the tale about the human vessels overflowed with love by God is not completely fictitious? All in all it is somewhere else that the amateur must look for his name, for his mystery. There are many trails around. I would like to draw your attention to that which inseparably connects the amateur's creative work with his life ethos and its continuous presence in his life.

You cannot conceal or isolate anything here. The amateur would never be able to identify with his skill, no matter how perfect it is. Any cover of forms or skills immediately gets transparent. If there is something wrong with his life ethos, you will always see that through the most perfect act or technical skill. That's his actual curse.

We have all come across fare dodgers in our lives. There are people who can be fare dodgers and who almost always manage to steal a ride. There are also other people who will never manage to do so, because at their first attempt a ticket inspector will turn up and fine them. Those are amateurs. They will never manage to steal a ride.

Maybe some of the listeners of my story have come to a conclusion that they should stop working, disregard skill, throw away books, do not pay attention to accusations of the community, and all arguments of those who attack us for our amateurism, but that would be... a disaster. Believe me, there are numbers and numbers of examples of degradation among amateur circles, which are full of cheap spontaneity, warm self-

satisfaction, glad layabouts, intellectual infantilism, where you can buy all this alternative trend for nothing.

But following this trail I could also defend the ethos of amateurism. Let me elect a different set of arguments - I am aware of the point in time we are meeting in. I can imagine a different moment in time, when I would talk about intensive technical work, about gaining professional skills, about the pursuit of excellence. But today these words are deprived of their former magnitude, they have surrendered to the unifying and conquering powers of the world, which as an addiction provide pleasure, suck out arduous work of people, and then throw away empty vessels. Work is done in stress and with great intensity, at the end of our tether, but the work's energy consumes itself. Something has been forgotten like a buried well in our yard. This something steals peacefulness from them, Vagabonds of the East. At sunrise they will get up to work again. For the dead point must be reached by two arrows to revive: the first arrow is the one of belonging to nowhere, refusal; the other arrow must authenticate the first one. This is as Alexander Wat wrote in his poem entitled "Hölderlin": 'to authenticate one's belonging to nowhere'.

Only now has the other side of my story uncovered, the side of undivided attention, of that effort to certify, of ultimate consistency of one's actions. And this is the most arduous work. "Victorious refusal" - Tsvetaeva again. I cannot say much more about the other side, but I think there is no need, though. Hesse told us a lot about it in his story about Knulp. This is the simplest thing, the simplest ritual - hearing one's inner voice, freed of all ideologies, open to the space of mystery.

Let me finish with a certain disturbing anecdote from "Parallel Lives" by Plutarch, which is still another attempt to get to the heart of the ethos of amateurism: "When they told Antisthenes that Ismenias is a master flutist, he rightly responded: 'So, he is no good for anything else, for if he were, he would not play that good.'"