

Chapter- VI

Aesthetic Attitude, Experience and Judgement 'Psychical Distance'

A major question is whether aesthetic experience is to be thought of as depending on certain qualities or features of objects, or on a special attitude towards or way of perceiving things or on some sort of conjunction of the two. Bell's theory of significant form is an example of the view that it is certain qualities of an object that furnish logically necessary conditions of aesthetic experience. Schopenhauer's theory is an example of the view that a certain attitude of will-less ness is its logically necessary condition. These two theories of aesthetic experience, in common with others such as Aristotle's and Kant's, seem to require both a detachment and an involvement: a detachment from practical or utilitarian aspects of the object and, as a result, a contemplative involvement with its essential being.

Reflection on those two features of detachment and involvement suggests that a distinction may be drawn between an aesthetic attitude and an aesthetic experience, the aesthetic attitude being a certain kind of stance or approach required as a necessary condition of aesthetic experience. Form this we may be tempted to think of the experience as a whole as a temporal, psychological process in which one is first rid of one's individual will and then, in consequence and if all goes well, enjoys an aesthetic experience of some sort. But this can lead to misunderstanding and error. For to think of Schopenhauer's account only as a description of a psychological process is to obscure the philosophical point for which he argues, namely, that denial of the individual will is the logically necessary condition for the impersonal knowledge of Idea, that, for him, characterizes aesthetic experience. Will-less ness is a logically necessary condition of aesthetic experience because it would be logically absurd to attribute impersonal knowledge to a knowing subject who is personal and individual. Loss of will, or self, is therefore the logically necessary condition of Schopenhauerian aesthetic experience.

This does not mean that we have to think of the complete aesthetic experience as a process that conforms to a rigid pattern or rigid procedure.

A theory of the aesthetic attitude that attempts to encompass the variety of aesthetic experience and at the same time to define it exactly is propounded by Edward Bullough. Bullough's views exerted an influence on the philosophy of aesthetic experience. His account depends on what he calls 'psychical distance'. For him aesthetic apperception, appreciation and judgement properly so-called can only be explained by the phenomenon of 'Distance'.

The distance is between the self and its object, or between the self and the sources of those affections. In the case of the fog at sea (which can be strange and terrifying, and nevertheless can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment. The example is Bullough's own). Distance is produced by perceiving the phenomenon without being affected by the personal terror it can occasion. When 'distanced' even if we see the fog as something that causes terror we see the terror as in the fog rather than in ourselves. The distanced view of things is not our normal view of them. Distance works such that it cuts out the practical side of things, and allows elaboration of what is thereby revealed.

It seems to be implicit in Bullough's account that distancing is both a phenomenon one may consciously try to produce in order to achieve an aesthetic experience and also one that may just occur without conscious effort. He regards Distance as an aesthetic principle that enables us to distinguish agreeable pleasures which, he says, are non-distanced, from aesthetically valuable experiences that are impossible without the insertion of Distance. He rejects characterizations of art and our consciousness of it as objective, subjective, realistic, idealistic, sensual, spiritual, individualistic, typical and so on. The conflicts between such descriptions, he says, can only be reconciled by the more fundamental conception of Distance. The notion of Distance, he maintains, provides a criterion of beauty and a distinguishing feature of the artistic temperament as well as being one of the essential characteristics of aesthetic consciousness. It is what makes aesthetic contemplation and judgement possible.

Bullough wants to maintain that the relationship in which one stands to the aesthetically perceived object is a personal one, albeit of a peculiar character. Its peculiarity is that its personal character has been filtered, "cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, withoutlosing its original constitution (Bullough,p.97). He cites our attitude to drama as an example. Enactments in the theatre often appeal to us in the way that people and events in daily life appeal, except that in the theatre we do not respond as we might in daily life, by involving engage ourselves practically or physically in what is taking place before us. This non-participation is often explained by pointing out that we know the drama is 'unreal' and consequently do not intervene in it. But Bullough wants to turn this explanation on its head. It is, not, he says, that knowing the unreal nature of the drama creates the Distance that prevents our intervention in it, but that "Distance by changing our relation to the characters, readers them seemingly fictitious" (Ibid, p.98). His proof of this is that "the same filtration of our sentiments" and the same "unreality" of *actual* men and things occur, when at times, by a sudden change of inward perspective we are overcome by feeling that all the world is a stage.

Bullough also detects a paradox which he calls "the antinomy of Distance". He asks us to agree with him that a work of art makes its strongest appeal when we have sympathies and experience that let us apprehend it fully : when we have what he calls a concordance with the work. A man who is deeply jealous in his relationship with his wife might well experience a profound concordance in witnessing a performance of *Othello*. This ought to qualify him to appreciate the play fully. Bullough observes that the concordance required for aesthetic perception should be as complete as is compatible with maintaining Distance; there must be "the utmost decrease of Distance without disappearance" (Ibid.p 100).

Bullough maintains that Distance may be variable in that there may be degrees of it that vary according both to the nature of the object and with the individual's capacity. The individual's capacity may also vary from occasion to occasion. For example, I may be unable to appreciate the collection of Buddhist art

today. Tomorrow, if I see it again, it may be different. I may achieve a suitable distance. This variability of Distance, Bullough argues, allows for variability in aesthetic experience in a way in which concepts such as 'objectivity' and 'detachment', do not. More importantly, he points out, it permits the notion of a particular kind of personal involvement as the hallmark of experiences that are aesthetic experiences. It recognizes, too, that Distance can depend on both the perceiver and the perceived object. 'Under-distancing', when it occurs, is usually a failing in the subject, as in the example of the jealous husband attending a performance of *Othello*. But it can also be occasioned by a failing in the object, by, for example, the kind of repulsive naturalism characteristic nowadays of television serial. Excess of Distance, according to Bullough, is more often the result of some feature or features of the work of art, or can be brought about by the temporal gap that the passing of several centuries produces. Thus it may be that I find the icons difficult to approach or engage with because I can find no concordance of feeling with their solemnity. Time has made their style and mood an alien antiquity for me until I, or they, effect some change in my sensibilities.

A criticism of the theory of psychical distance and of aesthetic attitude theory in general is presented by George Dickie in papers and a book. Dickie's claim is that the notion of an aesthetic attitude is a myth, once useful but now harmful to aesthetic theory. He is critical of Bullough's terminology : of the use of the word 'distance' to name a phenomenon and of the word 'distancing' to describe an action. For everything that is thereby referred to can, he maintains, be accounted for by using the concept of 'attention'. He asks :"Do we in order to appreciate some object, commit a special act of distancing ? Or, if in a given case it is not a question of doing something, are we ever induced into a state of being distanced when faced with a work of art or a nature object ?" (Dickie, 1971, P.50) He says that if the distance - theorist asks : 'But are you not usually oblivious to noises and sights other than those of the play or to the marks on the wall around the painting ?', his answer is 'yes, of course that is how it is, but it simply means that one's attention is focussed" and not that any special action has been performed or that any special psychological state

has been induced, (Dickie, 1964, P.57). Dickie recognizes that aesthetic apprehension can not be characterized nearly by saying that one attended to a play, for the attention might be to the stagecraft manifested in it or to its likelihood of being a financial success; and so he suggests that the kind of attention required is attention to the action of the play and that this is a better description of what is going on than saying, as Bullough would say, that one puts the play (or any work of art) out of gear with one's practical interests.

What error does Dickie believe will result from Distance Theory ? He objects to the single notion of Distance to characterize aesthetic experience, to the proliferation of special terms and to the rigid demarcations and categorizations that tend to result from such theorizing. The resulting framework, he maintains, just does not repulsive naturalism of some television soap operas. However the upholders of Distance Theory see it as having far-reaching implications, not only in taking Distance to be a necessary condition of aesthetic experience but also its being a yard stick for evaluating works of art. This is brought out in an article by Sheila Dawson. (Dawson, 1961). Dawson, an advocate of Distance theory, refers to a part of Peter Pan in which peter turns to the members of the audience and asks them to clap their hands in order to save the life of the fairy, Tinkerbell.

She claims that this produces a horrible loss of distance for most children: The magic has gone because distance has been abolished (*ibid*,p 168). This suggests to Dickie that 'loss of Distance' might be used as a measure of failure of something to be a work of art, and to rebut the idea he points out that *King Lear* and *A Taste of Honey* are plays in which an actor addresses the audience but which are not thereby disvalued. His own view of what is going on is that the author of *Peter Pan* is giving children a momentary chance to become actor in the play and that the children do not suffer loss of distance because they never were in a state of being distanced. Contrary to Dawson, Dickie maintains that *Peter Pan*'s request for applause is a dramatic high point to which children respond enthusiastically. (Dickie, 1964, p.57).

We do not have to agree with Dickie's claims here. It may be that children have the imagination or sophistication to participate in that way (i.e. by clapping their hands) and maintain distance. This does not contradict Bullough's own exposition of his theory of psychical distance for he nowhere states that audience participation is incompatible with being distanced.

Dickie concedes that Bullough's theory has some plausibility when it has to do with threatening natural objects. What he is thinking of here is the way in which strange or startling phenomena such as fog at sea or the freakish variations in wind, cloud and light that sometimes precede a violent storm, can bring about a sudden dramatic shift in one's perception of a scene or landscape. But he doubts the efficacy of the theory as it relates to works of art. It is not, he insists, that the jealous husband at the performance of *Othello* has lost or failed to achieve distance but simply that, because it reminds of him own jealousy, he finds it difficult to attend to the action of the play. To a supposed defender of distance theory who wants to argue that a member of the audience who mounted the stage in order to save the heroine is someone suffering from loss of psychical distance, Dickie replies that "a better explanation would be that he has lost his mind and is no longer mindful of the rules and conventions which govern theatre situation" (Dickie, 1971, p 50). He points out that there are similar kinds of conventions for each established art-form and that being distanced certainly can not be characteristic of our approach to all the arts, because some arts, especially dancing and singing, will sometimes draw in the spectator to become a participant in the work. He observes that there are intermediate cases : hissing the villain and cheering the hero in the old-fashioned melodrama situation, applauding during an act because of an especially well - performed piece of acting, and so on, Dickie concludes that "It is not that we are distanced from a work of art, we are barred from the work of art by the rules of the art game" (Dickie, 1962, p 299).

Dickie's criticisms have considerable cogency. They are certainly efficacious in casting doubt on the idea of a special kind of psychological mechanism that comes into play in order to generate aesthetic experience. He also makes a

broader attack on what may be described as *psychologism* in aesthetics.

The psychologism is the tendency to think of the aesthetic attitude wholly in terms of a subjective process occurring in individuals instead of seeing it as a concept that is a part of a philosophical account of what is meant for an attitude or an experience to be aesthetic. Dickie wants to undermine the view that there is a special and somewhat mysterious mechanism in need of close, introspective examination, an examination which, if successful, would resolve problems about the nature of the aesthetic. He does not want subjective process such as 'distancing' to be seen as the necessary and sufficient condition of aesthetic experience. For if 'distancing' an object becomes the guarantee of aesthetic experience of it, the notion of a specifically aesthetic object falls into abeyance, and aesthetic qualities then depend on the psychological capacities of individuals. Against such subjectivism Dickie wishes to maintain that the close attention we pay to a work of art depends on objective features of the work - its wholeness, clarity and completeness - rather than on the performance of a special act by the perceiver. Here in we get the idea of Dickie's notion of the nature, scope and limit of aesthetic judgement.

Although his criticism reveal inadequancies in Bullough's account of the aesthetic attitude and in subjectivist accounts in general, Dickie does not succeed in convincing us that the notion of Distance is one that should be abandoned. This is partly because Bullough's description of the 'feel' of those experiences we tend to call 'aesthetic' is extremely apt. We easily recognize what he is talking about and are able to acknowledge the considerable metaphorical and explanatory force of the notion of Distance even if we reject it as a complete and definitive account of the nature of aesthetic perception. And it is in just this respect, that is, as an adequate description, that Dickie's own account is unconvincing. The notion of attending to something, although it admits of greater lesser degrees of attention, does not carry within it the rich phenomenological possibilities are that traditionally associated with aesthetic perception. Unlike the concept of

contemplation, it suggests little or nothing of the selfless absorption, the engagement of heart and mind, commonly regarded as characteristic of the aesthetic points of view. It is more redolent of blinkered concentration than of a complex and variable experience of perception. It fails also to exhibit the character of an approach, captured in Keat's notion of Negative Capability, in which one is "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason" (Keats, 1954 edn.p 179). In short, although Dickie succeeds in giving warning of a barren kind of psychologism that can result from Distance theory he does not thereby succeed in discrediting the whole account. Bullough's views are consonant with the main stream of intuitive understanding of the character of the aesthetic domain and they embody issues that are still importantly alive in the philosophy of the arts.

An interesting question arising from discussions of the aesthetic attitude concerns the nature of our emotional involvement with works of art. Bullough argues that Distance renders characters fictitious, so that we are not tempted to treat them as real beings, while Dickie maintains that observing theoretical conventions achieves the same result. But this awareness of the 'unreality' of works of art has evoked puzzlement. For how is it that we can be profoundly moved by depicting and representations which we know not to be real ?

A suggestion that is somewhat different from both Bullough's and Dickie's views is that we engage in a "willing suspensions of disbelief" concerning characters and events in books, plays, paintings and so on. We temporarily believe in their real existence and so are able to be moved by them as we would be in reality. But this is not a satisfactory analysis of what takes place. For one thing, if we did sometimes believe that fictional characters were real we would surely, on occasion, find ourselves intervening in the action of plays in the manner suggested by Bullough and we would not react to paintings, statues, novels and poems in what would turn out to be entirely inappropriate ways. For another thing, we would be in a false relationship with these works, since to see them as real rather than as representations would deprive them of their true status as created entities. A work of art is *art*. It employs as Kant pointed out, material that is formed from nature but that is "worked

up by us into something else, namely, what surpasses nature" (Kant, 1973 edn.p.176). If we suspend our belief that art is what it is then our engagement with art is not rational. It is therefore much more feasible to argue that we need to retain unimpaired the belief in the artifice of what we perceive, along with all our other beliefs concerning life, actions and emotions, if we are to respond to such creations in a rational and intelligible way, it is clear that we are able to understand and feel deeply for characters in a book without knowing whether they are real or fictional, but the capacity to feel for them does not depend on either truly or falsely believing in their actual existence but on understanding the word of the world of the book through its relation to the whole world of our beliefs. I do not have to believe in the actual existence of Romeo and Juliet in order to understand and feel the tragic nature of their deaths, because the meaning and import of what goes on *within* the drama is not affected by its being fictional or unreal.

One further observation is worth noting. If it is puzzling or remarkable that we are able to feel anguish or any other strong emotion in experiencing something we know is not real then it is surely equally puzzling and remarkable that we can feel anguish at, for example, the envisaged or imagined loss of a person we love at a time when that person is safely with us. Indeed, this latter anguish should be seen as somewhat more remarkable and puzzling than the former, since it can occur without the prompting of a depiction or representation. But in fact we do not find such imaginings problematic except, perhaps, when they are pathological; and then it is the pathology rather than the ability to imagine that requires explanation. We do usually accept that most human beings possess in varying degrees, the ability to imagine not only circumstances, events and situations which are not factual but also the responses and emotions they invite, just as we accept that they possess abilities to think, reason, remember, conjecture and dream.

From our examination of various accounts of aesthetic experience it is clear that the experience has no single defining features. No single theory seems able to do it justice, partly because the concept is a complex one, and partly because it is a concept with a history, linked to cultural history and to the history of philosophy. There is always a growing edge to the study of aesthetic concepts, yet it is also true that certain themes endure and continue to emerge in one form or another, demanding clarification or reappraisal in the light of new areas in the arts and of changing sensibilities.

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