

## Chapter-IX

### Criticism, Interpretation and Aesthetic Judgement

What do the critics do ? They may be said to engage in two major activities: : first, they pass judgements on the merits and demerits of works of art and, in the case of music, dance and drama, on performances. Second, they offer interpretations of works of art. The task of judgement involves the critic in identifying the value features of works of art and thereby he draws them to the attention of others. But works of art may be valued for many different reasons, and it is not always obvious that all of these reasons are equally relevant when treating an object as a work of art. Until we know something about what is relevant to the interpretation and judgement of a work of art we are in no position properly to characterize the critic's activities.

The most contentious issue in this context is the relevance to criticism of references to the creator of a work of art, and in particular, the relevance of references to the intention of the artist.

Let us consider the following argument. The job of the critic is to talk about an entity called 'the work itself'. It is about the value features of these works that we wish to know. What ought to be the axiom of relevant criticism is to talk about the work of art. If the critic deviates from this to make some other thing the focus of attention, then what is said is irrelevant to criticism. The first premise of the argument is designed to rid criticism of the need to refer to, or know anything about creators of works of art. The second premise is the claim that the work of art is one thing and its creator is another, separate thing. Work and artist are discrete entities. What can be truly said of a work of art is different from what can be truly said of its creator. What is true of *Mona Lisa* is not true of Leonardo. Hence anything the critic says about the artist is irrelevant to the task of a critic. Neither biography nor history is relevant to criticism. This is a corollary of the conclusion of the argument.

The argument for the exclusion from the activity of criticism of references to and knowledge of artists may now be evaluated. Is the argument valid ? Does the conclusion follow from the premises ? Are the premises true ? The argument,

of course, is valid . But there is something wrong with the second premise, namely, that the artist is distinct from the work she or he produces. The critic may at times use such terms as might create difficulty in eliminating from criticism of knowledge of and references to artists. Suppose a critic says that a work of art is perceptive, what does the word 'perceptive' refer to ? To the work of art or the artist ? There is no ready clear answer to this question. It may seem that the critic is talking about both at once. Or one may suggest that he is referring to a quality displayed by the artist in the work. This will undermine the claim of the second premise. Wimsatt and Beardsley suggested the elimination of reference to artists and came to a position close to the view that we should talk about the work and not the artist and yet conceded that sometimes to talk about the properties of a work is to talk about the features of the artist's mind that are displayed in it.

For the second premise of our argument to be true it *must* be true that for any and every term the critic uses we can ask the question : Is that term being used to refer to the artist or to the work ? There are terms like "perceptive" or "intelligent" etc. that seem to refer to an artist detectably present in the work. In using these terms the critic, though referring to the work, must also be referring to the creator of the work. If these terms are legitimate in criticism, it follows that some kinds of critical comments about a work necessarily involve reference to the creator of the work, and the argument we have considered rests on a false premise and so fails.

There has been the idea of the dramatic *speaker*. Beardsley and Wimsatt have suggested that when a creator produces a work of literature a fictional character is created who speaks the work. This speaker is not to be identified with the author of the work. The claim is that when we are talking about a work of art, the personal quality terms that we use of it refer not to the artist in the work but to a fictional person created by that artist to speak the work. This argument appears to be dubious. For if invoke the notion of a dramatic speaker is a right move, as the use of the term "perceptive" by the critic, are we to say that some fictional dramatic speaker of that work is perceptive? This is often not so. A story or narrative may be

perceptive or intelligent or sensitive, and in so saying do we not talk about the controlling intelligence who, through the works, presents the dramatic speaker? Who is that controlling intelligence if not the author? It is possible to distinguish a speaker *in* the work, say Hamlet, from the speaker *of* the work i.e. Shakespeare. It is true that we cannot always identify the speaker in the work with the author of the work. But that is not to show that we can not identify the speaker of the work with the creator of the work. Can a creator write a work in which he or she pretends to be perceptive or sensitive when he or she is not? If these are qualities of the work they have to be qualities of its *creator* as displayed *there*. Therefore the introduction of the notion of the dramatic speaker does not always allow us to avoid reference to artists by critics. An art work may be an expression of its creator's attitudes, emotions and qualities of mind.

## II

We have argued above that there can be talks about a mind or controlling intelligence that can be detected *in* the work characterised by the use of a certain vocabulary. In the European Continental tradition we find a radical approach which raises fundamental questions about coherence of our belief in the authorial voice. Levi-Strauss remarked that the goal of human sciences is not to constitute man but to dissolve him. This has bearing on our argument that in talking about works of art we can talk about the persons who produced them. If, as Levi-Strauss and Foucault have called our traditional beliefs about persons into doubt, then what do we do when we refer to the persons we call 'artists'?

The history of much recent theory of criticism begins as a reaction 'to Descartes. Central of his philosophy is the distinction between two kinds of substances: : the mental and the physical. The body is physical but linked to it is another entity, a mind, the seat of thought, feeling and personality, which is a different sort of thing from the physical body. A part of this view is that physical things get their meaning from the activity of minds. A word is a physical entity, and as such it is dead and devoid of meaning. A word gets its meaning when an individual mind,

a person speaking, attaches a meaning to it, or imposes a meaning to it, by an act of intending that meaning for it . But do we mean by appealing to private acts of intending, or to public structure of language ? For Descartes, it is a consciousness that gives meaning to our world. On the other hand, it is argued that it is the public, meaning - giving structures of the language, the public rules of a language are the source of meaning, including the meaning of the term 'person'. This is a striking line of thought, and has bearing on the issue of judgements on art-works.

It is held that a word gets its meaning from a public structure which is not the possession of any individual speaker. But if all this is so, why do we need reference to individual artists and their intentions in order to discover the meaning of a literary or any other work of art ? All we need to do is bring to a text our knowledge of the structure of rules that gives words their meaning and then read that meaning off from the text. Beardslay says that it is in language that the poem happens, there is no need to draw our attention off to the psychological states of the author. And Sartre has written that words become things themselves, and when a poet joins several of these together the case like that of painters when they assemble their colours on the canvas. Here we have the view that the meaning of a word is what it is regardless of what the author might say about what he or she would have liked to have said, just as the colour of a coloured patch is what it is regardless of what its painter would have liked to have painted. So the argument is : since the public rules of the public language and not individual and private acts of intention, determine the meaning of words, it follows that if we want to know what a text means, we should see what the rules of the language allow it to mean. We do not need reference to the intentions of the artist when our critical task is the interpretation of literary texts. Meaning is a property conferred on words, actions and institutions by the structure of the public language and not by individual acts of willing meaning to words, acts, etc. It follows that the task of determining meaning falls to the reader. Hence the emergence of what are called "reader - response" theories. The reader brings an accumulated body of public understanding to the text and, using that understanding, assigns a meaning to it. On this account reference to intention in the determination of meaning is unnecessary .

## III

The structuralist account which allows us to assign a determinate meaning to a text by the use of a structure of meaning - giving rules is somewhat over-optimistic. It holds that the rules can help us when our task is the discovery of the meaning of a text. The use of language is creative and always extends beyond the rules we have mastered for its understanding. A structuralist account seems to take no account of the way in which we can *creatively project* the structures that we have learned. One may have learned the meaning of the term "deep" with respect to ocean, and extends its creativity of feelings. This is something that *persons* do, and so the structuralists attempt to reduce persons to passive reflections of the structures of language overlooks the fact that language requires individual human beings *creatively to operate the structures* of a language. Structuralism can say little about the content or psychological effect of a text.

Even if we accept the view that meaning is assigned to texts by readers, this entails nothing about the eliminability of authorial reference. It is possible to argue that the words of a text are put together by an authorial act which can show us the author's characters and intelligence at work. Even Sartre pointed out that every stage of the production of a work of art the artist is confronted by choices. A work is the result of a set of choices, and from that set of choices there can emerge a strong sense of the mental, emotional and other qualities of character of the artist who made those choices. If we understand that at a certain point in a piece of music a composer could have gone into a minor key for cheap emotional effect, we may praise her or his intelligence and discrimination in resisting that obvious temptation. Sartre saw this clearly. He clearly saw that evidence of authorial choice *could* be read from the work, for the work is a repository that bears the evidence of successive acts of choice. A work of art, he said, "implies the intervention of the author and a transcendent choice". The author can to some extent choose his disguises, as in the case of such great a dramatist as Shakespeare, and in spite of his "negative capability" that Keats had ascribed to him, he can never choose to disappear. So even if the meaning of a text is determined by the reader deploying

the rules of the public language, that meaning, once assigned, may and will reveal the presence of the author in the text, and that in turn will reveal the personal qualities of the author.

#### IV

The argument against the presence of the author has been that the meaning of a text can not be there as the result of a prior act of willing by the artist in which a personal meaning is willed into the words that we need. But that is compatible with the view that when we assign a determinate meaning to an utterance we can do so because we can detect *in* that text an intention to this rather than that. Ambiguity is present when we can not detect such an intention in an utterance. But we can make our meaning clear because we can make our intentions clear in speaking. Intention can be made manifest in action, including our speech actions. When it is made manifest in our speech actions, then our meaning is made clear. The rules of a public language do not replace our meaning - intentions with other ways of assigning meaning to our utterances. They are, rather, the apparatus which allow us to make our intentions, and so our meanings, clear.

What is striking is that Beardsle, too, is forced to link meaning to intention in the context of interpreting a poem. The structuralists and Beardsle both believe that a work must be able to have a determinate meaning if criticism is to be possible. Determinate meaning is linked to a recognition of intention. The very *possibility* of criticism is linked to the possibility of assigning determinate meaning to text, only so can we test the rightness and wrongness of critical interpretations, the right interpretation being one that accords with the determinate meaning of the work. One of the significant differences between structuralism and post-modernism comes to this : the former appears to accept and the latter to quarry the notion of determinate meaning. And from this follows some of the problems that some have had with the writings of a post-structuralist such as Derrida. One question will be how the determinate thesis that meaning is indeterminate can be expressed, granted that thesis is true. Again, there will be questions, given that texts have no determinate meaning, about what criticism is to be. What might make one piece of criticism more significant than another ?

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