

## Chapter- IV

### The Nature of Aesthetic Experience as Contemplation :

One point of agreement concerning aesthetic experience is that it is an experience to be prized very highly. But no single account of a particular aesthetic experience seems able to yield a characteristic or groups of characteristics that can serve as the basis of a definition of the experience. It seems to have a variety and complexity that defy attempts to state its essential conditions. And this variety is increased and made more complex by the different media in which works of art come to us. Whatever it is we need to look at some accounts of aesthetic experience a little more closely since aesthetic judgement sometimes get coloured by and made by presupposing this or that account or view of aesthetic experience.

Although aesthetic experience varies widely, there have been many attempts to identify a characteristic or characteristic common to all its manifestations. Probably the most widely - affirmed of these attempts are those that maintain that aesthetic experience is essentially contemplative. One strand of contemplation theory can be traced back to Aristotle. In the *Poetics* he maintains that the spectator experiences, or should experience, pleasure in witnessing tragic drama and that there is a pleasure that is proper to it. Proper is that the well-made tragedy engenders in the spectator both the experience and the resolution of the emotions of pity and fear. In the *Eudemian Ethics* he points out that looking and listening are never regarded as intemperate in the way the appetites are or may be, even though looking and listening begin with the senses. If a man, says Aristotle, sees a beautiful statue or horse, or human being, or hears singing ..... only with the wish to see the beautiful and to hear the singers, he would not be thought profligate any more than those who were charmed by the sirens (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1230 b). What Aristotle is trying to bring out in the remark is the contemplative character of the proper perception of dramatic tragedy and of beauty in general. He points out that we do not condemn rapt contemplative attention as profligate in the way in which we condemn strong appetites and desire : The stillness, or *stasis*, of aesthetic pleasure is not the object of moral disapproval in the way that the movement to procure what one desires might be.

What is the exact nature of the contemplation that is characterised by stillness or *stasis*. In the *Poetics* (1449b) Aristotle maintains that a tragedy arouses pity and fear and accomplishes the catharsis of those emotions. The remark is quite enigmatic, and it has been the subject of extensive discussion and interpretation in classical, literary and philosophical writing. The word 'catharsis' has attracted many interpretations. There does seem to be a fairly straight forward understanding of what Aristotle says. Throughout his account his insistence is on the structure and plot of a tragedy being so organised that the whole representation evokes pity and fear in the beholder and in such a way that it imparts its proper pleasure. This proper pleasure is connected with, for Aristotle, with knowledge and also with the human propensity to enjoy representations and imitations. The pleasure from well -wrought tragedy is the pleasure of seeing and knowing what is represented in it. Pity and fear are engendered in us as spectators of the tragedy, but when those emotions are contained by the structure of the well -wrought tragedy, instead of provoking us to movement and action as they normally do in daily life, they are able to be experienced contemplatively; for the sake of knowing what they are like rather than as spurs to action. We are purged of them, it seems in being able to experience and know them fully. They yield their proper pleasure, the pleasure of an untrammelled knowledge of their natures.

The Aristotelian thread of contemplation theory became incorporated into Western Culture, when Thomas Aquinas came to write about the experience of art and beauty he developed the kind of distinction Aristotle had made between the *stasis* induced by beauty, perceived as beauty and the desiring movement towards the possession of something. Thus Aquinas maintained that beauty and goodness in a thing, although fundamentally identical, are logically different. Goodness properly relates to the appetite, while beauty relates to the cognitive faculty. Goodness has the aspect of an end, but beautiful things are those which please when seen. This account shows Aquinas, following Aristotle, not only characterizing aesthetic perception as contemplative but also in regarding it as cognitive. The kind of logical distinction he makes between responding to good or

desirable things by movements towards them and to beauty by an entranced contemplation has prevailed in much aesthetic theory. It is expressed in a most lively and interesting way in some of the work of James Joyce. To this we have already referred.

In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle wrote of people who were charmed by the 'Sirens', those sea creatures whose songs were of such beauty that sailors became transfixed and will-less so that their ships ran on to rocks. This same notion of loss of will as an important characteristic of aesthetic experience is found in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer's view on art and the experience of it are dependent on the structure of his philosophy as a whole and although the details of that structure are complex they derive from a single thought. It is the thought that the world as we understand it in everyday life, with its apparent orderliness, variety, its comprehensibility and manipulability, is fundamentally nothing but one immense blind driving force which Schopenhauer calls *will*. It is important to understand that for Schopenhauer, there are not two separate things, the world *and* will, but that the world *is* will and will *is* the world. However, we may think of the world under two aspects. Under one aspect it may be conceived of as blind, irrational will; under another the same force is experienced as the world of our everyday understanding, a world in space and time, operating under causal laws and explicable to the human mind. Schopenhauer writes of the world as a whole as the objectification of the will; it is will made manifest. And just as we are to think of the world as a whole as the objectification of will as a whole, so we are to think of any human individual body as the objectification of a particular, individual, human will. Everything one does or is all human lives and all the multifarious creatures and things comprised by the world, are particular, objectifications of the universal and perpetual struggle of the will as a whole. The world conceived of as under natural laws and as containing beings capable of autonomy and choice is the world as we represent it to ourselves in virtue of the capacities of mind possessed by human beings; but the world as will, as a blind force without lucidity or reason, is how it also is. If we understand this, Schopenhauer says, we understand the truth of the human situation.

His view of things has Sombre implications. It offers a picture of human life as an inescapable struggle in which all things and all beings are pitted against each other as each is driven to persist in its own willing. Schopenhauer offers the possibility of salvation from our subjection to will. He points out that even though we recognize that this is how things are there is often also a feeling that behind our existence lies something else, that becomes accessible to us only by shaking off the world. This something else is revealed when what he calls 'a denial of the will' takes place. One cannot deliberately rid oneself of will, so its denial can not be brought about by choice; but it occurs as the result either of great suffering or of aesthetic contemplation. It involves a perception of things that is entirely different from the everybody perception of them as in space and time, and as under causal laws, and it yields a knowledge that is quite different from the knowledge acquired by means of that everyday framework of understanding. He writes "let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation ..... [and] lose ourselves entirely in this object ..... we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as pure mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception (*The world as will and Representation*, Vol.1, pp '78.179).

The structure and ramification of Schopenhauer's thought are quite different from Aristotle's or Aquinas's. Yet their accounts of the will-less nature of aesthetic perception are strikingly similar in any ways. All three refer in some way to a profoundly attentive contemplation, to the exclusion of everything save the object of that attention, to the vivid presence of what is perceived, to loss of will or desire, to the compelling nature of the experience and to the delight and knowledge attendant upon it. Schopenhauer's claim that the knowledge acquired in aesthetic contemplation is of a special kind is intrinsic to the general structure of his philosophy.

Ordinarily it is as individual willing subjects that we perceive things but in aesthetic contemplation, when the individual will is denied, what is perceived is not a particular object but the Idea of the object.

Plato thinks of the Ideas as non-material, as more real than physical things, and as perfect and unchanging. In Schopenhauer's scheme of things Ideas occupy a place between the will as a whole which is unknowable. In his philosophy, as in Plato's, the Idea consists of all that is essential in the perceived object and nothing that is inessential. In knowing the idea of something what is known is the fundamental structure that makes it the *kind* of thing that it is rather than the particular variations that make it an individual instance of that kind. Schopenhauer maintains that it is possible to become the knower of an Idea only through a loss of one's individuality, by becoming a will-less 'pure subject of knowing'. Just as the particular, contingent variations of an object must fall away to reveal its Idea, so does the individual will of the perceiver give way to a pure knower. Schopenhauer writes of the perceiver as 'pure subject of knowledge', free from individuality and from servitude to the will. The individual, he says, can know only particular things; the person who, in perceiving, becomes the pure subject of knowing knows only Ideas. We have to think of ourselves as somehow outside space and time, as free from our ordinary ways of apprehending things and free as well from any kind of wanting or practical relationship to what we perceive. To see a tree aesthetically is to see it plucked from the stream of the world's course and becomes a representative of the whole, equivalent of the many in space and time. In knowing it as Idea one comes as close as it is possible to get to knowing the will as a whole.

How is the denial of the will necessary for aesthetic contemplation to be brought about? Philosophically speaking, what is required is that will, which is normally dormant, has to give way to knowledge. We need to be well rested and calm so that we can the more easily lose awareness of the self and entertain the consciousness of other things. The denial of will is a denial or loss of one's

individuality and an achievement of pure perceptual contemplation.

It follows from Schopenhauer's account that it is possible for anything to be regarded purely objectively since everything is to some extent or at some level a manifestation of an Idea. It is nevertheless, works of art most readily and most easily effect the nullification of will that is required to bring us to the purely objective viewpoint. Works of art can do this because they emphasize the essential and eliminate the inessential. When something is 'picturesque' or 'poetical' it becomes set apart and is less accessible to the will. The perceiver is then more easily able to contemplate without will. In a sense, the perceiver becomes identified with the thing perceived, and being without will, finds the experience pleasurable.

The person of genius possesses the ability to apprehend Ideas to lose one's individuality, and lets us peer into the world through his eyes. The ability to perceive so well is the inborn gift the genius, and the ability to embody this perception in an artefact that enables us to see what the genius saw is, Schopenhauer says, an acquired technique.

We may not need to accept the metaphysical frame work of Schopenhauer's thought in order to acknowledge what is of value in his account. We can separate much of his characterization of aesthetic experience from the metaphysics on which he grounds it. We can, for example, accept the existence of a sense of restless striving in human life without embracing the belief that the world is ultimately pure will. We can entertain the thought that in aesthetic perception we perceive things in a certain way and acquire knowledge without accepting that what we perceive and know are Platonic Ideas. In particular, we can explore, by means of Schopenhauer's accounts of the enriching and liberating nature of aesthetic experience, the full character of this kind of human experience. Even as we savour his insights, we also recognize that his metaphysical frame work places certain restraints and emphases on his account of aesthetic perception.

We intuitively understand a work of art as a created new object that is valued not because it points us to something beyond or other than itself but because it is meaningful in virtue of its own particularity. This is the kind of logical status Aquinas ascribes to a beautiful object when he speaks of Beauty as separate and distinct. When Sartre's character, Roquentin, in the novel, *Nausea*, recognizes in the song he hears in the cafe, he realizes that it has a being and meaning of its own that are inviolable. Tagore speaks of the figures in his paintings in similar terms. Yet Schopenhauer seems to take a different stand. For him, it is knowledge of Ideas that is of supreme importance and the particular work of art is simply a means to that more important vision. A question that therefore needs to be asked is whether his metaphysical scheme accords too little importance, or the wrong kind of importance to the particular aesthetic object or work of art.

But all that we may readily say in defence of Schopenhauer's account is as follows. In spite of his emphasis on Ideas he does regard the particular object or works as necessary for the perception of the Idea it instantiates. Without matter, Ideas could not become apparent to us, could not be aesthetically perceived. So the work of art or object, can not be seen as something that is dispensable once we get through it and beyond it, so to speak, to the Idea, for the object or work is the Idea made perceivable. It is not merely an instrument that clears the way towards the Idea. It is its inalienable embodiment.

The apparent fusion or union of Idea and object raises two further problems. The first is that how exactly an idea, which is abstract and general, can be exemplified in a particular material object. This has vexed and permeated, irrsolvably much of traditional philosophy. But this is certain that Schopenhauer is trying to give an account of an underlying coherent and systematic structure of reality that will be recognized as the ground and justification of our everyday

experience and beliefs. We do often describe aesthetic experience as furnishing us with insights into a deeper and more universal reality, and the notion of plurality of external Ideas, capable of some sort of instantiation in particular things. It should be a deficiency in any such account if it can not make clear the relationships between any of its categories or parts, and Schopenhauer's account is deficient in that he is not, in the end, able to say *how* Ideas be instantiated in particular things: His metaphysical structure, therefore, does not manage to provide the kind of grounds or justification that are needed to support his account of aesthetic experience and of reality in general.

The second, related, difficulty concerning Ideas about how the maker and the percipient of an object or work are able to recognize that they are apprehending an Idea. For if, as Schopenhauer insists, we can not know Ideas independently of their embodiments in particular things, then we have no means of checking a particular perception, putatively of an Idea, against a standard that would confirm or disconfirm the perception. Once again, the metaphysical structure Schopenhauer has created produces problems that cannot be satisfactorily resolved.

Yet the notion of Idea is a fruitful one in the context of aesthetic experience. Schopenhauer contrasts Idea with concept, describing the former as resembling a living organism that has generative force, which brings forth that which was not previously put into it. In contrast, concepts, although useful in daily affairs, are "eternally barren and unproductive in art" (Ibid.p.235). The artistic genius, Schopenhauer says, perceives and feels the Idea as something original and generative, apprehending it as something sensuous and richly productive. Here Schopenhauer is using his conception of the Idea to elucidate important characteristics of work of art and of the production and experience of them, and also to distinguish the domain of art as essentially involving perception, feeling and imagination from the domain of reason, reflection and conceptualization. He says that every work of art offers an incomplete and temporary answer to the question :

'What is life'? Each work is 'a fleeting image, not a permanent, universal knowledge and it is so because 'all the arts speak only language of *perception*' (Ibid Vol.II, p.406). Perception gives what is peculiar, it supplies fragmentary examples rather than rules. It is left to philosophy, he says, to provide the concept, a permanent and comprehensive answer to the question 'what is life ?' At the same time he regards philosophy and the arts as fundamentally related in that both seek to answer that question, albeit by different means : art by percepts, philosophy by concepts.

We may now look a little closely at the notion of contemplation. It is arguable that contemplation does not require stillness, it does not imply passivity. Contemplating is something one does rather than something that happens to one. 'Attending to', 'dwelling upon', 'regarding' and 'looking at' are activities often involving great contemplation and intensity. The inward feeling of contemplation can be one of abounding vitality and movement, one seems to be transported into the world of the work and then explore that world. And when this dynamic quality of contemplation is acknowledged, when it is recognized that its inward side is not equivalent of what may outwardly show itself as a fixed gaze or glassy stare, then it is possible to allow that it is not essentially static or passive. The Aristotelian *stasis* described by James Joyce's hero Stephen Dedalus, is a sustained focusing of attention rather than an inert reciepience. Contemplation in the context of painting consists of visual exploration, a recognition of shapes and representation and an understanding of their relationships and meanings. The case of listening to a piece of music is analogous. One does not simply led through, or follows through, a temporal sequence of sounds. That is by no means the full story. Knowledge and memory have to be employed actively in order to recognize and connect the heard themes, rhythms and harmonies, and to produce the expectations of their recurrences, developments and resolutions. In dwelling on a poem one generally investigates images and thoughts, moving imaginatively among the poem's pharases and meanings and searching them in ways that deepen and extend perceipience.

Contemplation has both passive and active aspects. It may be said with C.S.Lewis that the first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender. But contemplation maintains a dialogue with what perceived. It includes that will-less receiving in which a person is entranced, as if experiencing a revelation, as well as searching attentiveness. It includes thinking *about* something by imaging it as well as apprehending it directly. I may contemplate the vista that lies before me or the images evoked in the reading of a lyric poem, but recalling them and dwelling on them afterwards are also contemplations of them. The contemplation that is most typical of an aesthetic situation is marked not by empty passivity, but by a *willingness* to dwell on something, to be contained and more within the evocations of *this work*, its forms, qualities and moods. Schopenhauer's will-less perception is not that of a wax-like *tabula-rasa* receiving *impoessing*. The striving will is absent but knowledge is not. He writes, "everyone who reads the poem or contemplates the work of art must of course contribute from his own resources ..... (Everyone) has to stand before a picture as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him. What we grasp of the work depends on what capacity and culture will allow" (Ibid.Vol.II, p.407).

A feature of aesthetic contemplation is that it seems to require both an involvement with and detachment from the perceived object. We have noticed that the completeness and harmony of the well-wrought work of art sets it apart so distinctly that it resists one type of involvement, that in which one might intervene to act upon or within the work in some way, while at the same time creating the conditions for another type, an imaginative participation in the work's character and meaning. Schopenhauer's view is comparable in that it includes not only a detachment but also an involvement that is near-mystical union with what is known.

The kind of impersonal detachment characteristic of aesthetic contemplation is generally known as 'disinterestedness'. It has probably the single most important concept in the last three centuries of aesthetic theory. To be

disinterested concerning something is not the same as being uninterested in it. 'Disinterestedness' can describe the absence of the kind of interest that relates to one's own advantage or disadvantage, or it can describe an impartial and unbiased attitude in which one has no personal axe to grind in a matter. It requires us to consider something on its own merits and not in relation to what might accrue from it for ourselves. To be concerned with the object itself rather than with how it relates to ourselves. Or it can refer to a concern solely with the look or appearance of something and an absence of any interest in the actual existence of what appears. The notion of disinterest as an important characteristic was given explicit and detailed exposition by Kant. We have already considered Kant's investigation of the logical character, logical status and presuppositions of such judgement as 'This is beautiful'. We shall not repeat our account here. But it is worth our while to remember that the judgement of beauty is a judgement of *taste*. Taste is a person's capacity to judge things by means of a contemplative delight in their beauty. It is the capacity for disinterested aesthetic experience.

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