

Chapter- V

Form and 'Significant Form'

There have been views that aesthetic judgements are concerned with the 'form' of aesthetic object. An aesthetic object is identified in terms of its form, or by virtue of its possessing 'Significant form'. Several views have emphasized the importance of form in aesthetic experience too.

It should be admitted that the concept of form is not one. It has complexities of meaning and thinkers have used the term in different ways or with different emphases. For Aristotle form is the balanced structure that relates to the elements of a whole. For Aquinas, it is something similar, a due proportion, a harmony, wholeness and clarity the perception of which constitutes a revelation of essential meaning. For Schopenhauer, as for Plato, form is the metaphysical structure of reality that is perceivable and also knowable only under certain conditions. With Kant, only form, in the sense of design, can be beautiful. For him, colour is a non formal property and can not be an element of beauty because its appeal is only a sensory one. He allows that a colour may be agreeable and its agreeableness may attract us to the beautiful form, but any pleasure taken in it is distinct from the pleasure taken in the beautiful. Non-formal properties on Kant's account, are therefore not objects of the judgements of taste. He writes to argue that "the *design* is what is beautiful". The beautiful does not gratify in sensation but pleases by its form. That is, for Kant, the fundamental prerequisite for taste. The colour in a painting are part of the charm, they enliven the object for sensation, make it worth looking at, but "beautiful they can not". (Kant, P 67)

Clive Bell's theory concerns itself with the aesthetic enjoyment of form. People are accustomed to judging paintings more by reference to their content and subject matter rather than to their formal aspects. For Bell, the central problem of aesthetics is to discover some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke aesthetic emotion are called works of art. What is the quality shared by all objects that provoke aesthetic emotions? Clive Bell's reply is: Only one answer seems possible - significant form lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of form, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and

combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving form I call 'Significant Form'; and 'Significant Form' is the only quality common to all works of visual art" (Ibid, P.23).

When Bell speaks of 'all works of art' he is using the term 'work of art' in an evaluative sense to mean 'good works of art'. Significant form is the essential characteristic of a good work of art. Unlike Kant, Bell does not exclude colour as an element in significant form. He regards the distinction between form and colour as an unreal one, since one can not perceive or conceive line or a colourless space, nor a formless relation of colours. Nor does Bell place much importance on aesthetic experience of nature. 'Beautiful' natural objects do not exhibit significant form, and do not move as aesthetically. Bell's point is, what makes form significant is that it conveys an emotion felt by its creator, whereas beauty conveys no such emotion. Hence 'beautiful' is not the proper predicate of aesthetic judgement.

Aesthetic judgement or emotion, in Bell's view, is a response to form itself, not to the human circumstances or characters or events that form may be used to depict. Bell does not say that realistic representation must necessarily be bad. It may well be significant, but its aesthetic value, in his view, lies in its formal aspects. He cites Sumerian sculpture, Egyptian art, archaic Greek and early Chinese and Japanese works as sharing three characteristics : absence of representation, absence of technical swagger, sublimely impressive form.

Bell's conclusions have important bearing for the nature of aesthetic judgement. To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs. In making an aesthetic judgement we are shut off from human interests; we are, as it were, "lifted above the stream of life" (Ibid, p.36) This position is reminiscent of Schopenhauer's remark that "aesthetic experience plucks the object of its contemplation from the stream of world's course and holds it isolated before us" (Vol.I,P.185). Bell maintains that significant form, the one essential characteristic of art that induces true aesthetic emotion, is unaffected

by cultural and historical change. This point is concerned with the status of aesthetic judgement. Of course Bell does not believe that the same unchanging forms are universally and perpetually reappearing in art, for the forms of art inexhaustible, but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy.

What then we need bring from life in order to appreciate art ? According to Bell, we need bring nothing with us but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three - dimensional space. Does it ring true ? Can Bell be right in regarding the representational aspect of a painting as in no way relevant to an aesthetic perception of it ? It is the mutually enriching union of form and content in a work that seems to be the source of its aesthetic excellence. Is a purely aesthetic contemplation of a work of art psychologically possible ? For Bell, the aesthetic emotions experienced by the perceiver should be evoked by the work's formal elements and not by anything represented or embodied in or by those forms. He might say also that the view that the indissolubility of form and content is aesthetically potent is held by those who lack the capacity to respond to significant form in the required way.

Bell's separation of content from form and his near-exclusive linking of the aesthetic emotion to art bring about a bifurcation between on the one hand, art and aesthetic, and on the other, what he calls 'life'. For him, in experiencing the visual arts aesthetically we turn away from everybody living and enter another world, "a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own that is unrelated to the significance of life" (Ibid). In this other world, the emotions of life have no place. It is a world with emotions of its own, says Bell. This seems to run counter to the intuition that aesthetic perception and appreciation of painting, and of the arts in general, can be of profound significance in everyday life. Bell does not deny it. He remarks that though art owed to life, life might well owe something to art. Art does affect the lives of men, it moves to ecstasy.

He concedes, too, that art is affected by life. For practical purposes we find useful tables around us, chairs and tables and utensils. The tables tell

us facts that serve practical ends. But of the thing in itself that lurks behind the label nothing is said. Artists, says Bell, are not concerned with labels. They are concerned only with things perceived as themselves. Only when things are *perceived* as ends that they *become* means to aesthetic emotion. Bell's emphasis on the importance of form in aesthetic experience puts him in the mainstream of philosophic thinking. Like others before him, he holds that to perceive the forms of things is to experience the deeper reality of the world. When something is seen stripped of all its associations and all its significance as means, the formal significance is revealed. Bell calls it "the significance of Reality". The artist's emotion is an emotion felt for reality and the work of art is an expression of that *emotion*.

Few have denied the attractiveness, boldness and vitality of Bell's view but numerous charges have been laid against it. One charge often made is that of vicious circularity. Bell first states that art evokes aesthetic emotion. He then says that aesthetic emotion is evoked by significant form. But significant form, we are then told consists of such lines and colours as evoke aesthetic emotions, aesthetic emotion and significant form have been defined in terms of each other instead of independently of each other. What is needed to break this circle is a description of aesthetic emotion that distinguished it from other emotions without reference to significant form.

Another complaint is that Bell's theory is subjective. He says that the starting point of all systems of aesthetic must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotions, and he maintains that an aptitude or gift of aesthetic appreciation is rare and requires constant cultivation and practice : Only those, says Bell, for whom art is a constant source of passionate emotion can possess the data from which profitable theories may be deduced. All these means that it is difficult to disagree effectively with his theory, since any criticism of it can be dismissed or, at the very least, un derined by the response that it must be emanating from someone lacking in the sensitivity required to respond to significant form. At the same time Bell seems to believe, in a some what Kantian mode, that it is part of what it is to be a human being to possess some capacity to respond to significant form. But he makes no

sustained attempt to say how agreement in aesthetic judgement might be possible.

Another criticism levelled against the theory of significant form relates to its fundamental simplicity. Bell assumes that aesthetic experience can be characterised by reference to a single essential quality : significant form. Such a view, as we have already seen, can be challenged. To be fair to Bell, we have to remember that he does not put forward his theory as one that he would want to assert for all the arts. His concern is with the visual arts only. But even there the theory seems to be over - simple in its claim that to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. What Bell wants to exclude are those irrelevant, associative, extraneous connections that 'life-experience' can lead us to make and that can so disastrously obscure the intrinsic character of the object that is before us. What he did not seem to recognize was that his own superb appreciative capability did not so much exclude representational elements as deploy or assimilate them with complete appropriateness in the service of his aesthetic delight in formal properties. Nor does he fully consider the point that form and content are often fused together, when, for example, the depiction of a tempest is given by means of rough and forceful brush strokes.

Such criticisms of Bell's theory do not mean that the notion of significant form is without value. For anyone struggling to find a way to a certain kind of enjoyment of paintings the doctrine is a supremely illuminating one. The fact is that it stands in need of refinement and correction is as much a merit as a failing since it thereby evokes an immediate critical interest and debate.

Bell separates art and significant form from beauty. He does not define art in terms of the beautiful. Beautiful form is the same as significant form, and it is significant form that is, for him, the essential quality of works of art. It is aesthetic rather than the beautiful that Bell connects with art. He regards aesthetic experience as experience of art, except in the case of the artist who, he says, is capable of experiencing the aesthetic emotion in respect of many things.

References and Notes :

Bell, C.*Art*, Chatto and Windus, and Gray Arow, 1961 edn.

Roger Fry was a close friend and supporter of Bell. He held that the subject matter of a work of art is always irrelevant.