

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

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EVERY BRANCH of philosophy cherishes its classic fallacies, partly as a dire warning to the neophyte, partly out of a repressed but lingering fear that the celebrated inference may be valid after all—as has sometimes turned out to be the case. One of the famous scandals of aesthetics concerns ‘significant form’—the circular route by which Clive Bell first introduced this term into aesthetic discourse. As is well known, Bell began by saying that there is a unique ‘aesthetic emotion’, and set as the main task of aesthetics the isolation of ‘some quality common and peculiar to all the objects that provoke it’.¹ This quality he then named ‘significant form’, which he defined thus: ‘These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call Significant Form.’² It is easy enough to fit this pair of remarks into a logical circle, since he gives no other description of aesthetic emotion. What is it that we get from art? Aesthetic emotion. What is aesthetic emotion? It is what is produced by significant form. What is significant form? It consists of those combinations of lines and colours that produce aesthetic emotion. Bell has often been scolded for this logical lapse.³ If we wish the statement, ‘Aesthetic emotion is produced by significant form’, to be synthetic, we must of course define each term independently of the other. If (like Bell) we wish to make the statement definitive of one of its terms, then the other must be defined independently of it. And if we start with aesthetic emotion, on the naturalistic premise that the value of aesthetic objects is a function of the psychological responses they evoke, then it seems we must (unlike Bell) explain how aesthetic emotion is to be discriminated from other emotion, without referring to significant form.

Bell’s dilemma is helpful because he was too enthusiastic and philo-

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

sophically naïve to try to disguise it. But it is one that is confronted, in some form or other, by any naturalistic account of aesthetic value. For the distinction between aesthetic and other values seems to require the discrimination of a peculiarly aesthetic manner of affecting people acceptably. There is some difference of opinion about the proper choice of a genus. We can speak of 'aesthetic pleasure', but 'pleasure' strikes some people as too restricted, at least in its connotations. We can speak (like J. O. Urmson)⁴ of 'aesthetic satisfaction', but 'satisfaction' perhaps suggests too strongly an antecedent interest or desire. I shall choose 'enjoyment', and hope that it makes reasonable sense to speak of 'aesthetic enjoyment', or of 'enjoying something aesthetically'. Some will reject this locution: after we have been deeply moved, have passed through the emotionally shattering experience of a great tragic drama, would we say that we had 'enjoyed' it? I agree that the term is inadequate, if that is all we have to say; but I do not think it is incorrect, for anyone who stays through the whole play without any ulterior aim such as winning a bet—who is kept in his seat by the play itself—is enjoying what he is experiencing (he is taking a kind of pleasure in it), however profound and stirring his enjoyment may be, compared to other sorts.

I

Let us begin with a brief look at some illuminating passages from Samuel Johnson, Aristotle, and Edmund Burke, in whose writings we can discern three distinct responses to the dilemma, which, like any such animal, may be seized by either horn or avoided by evasive action.

Johnson supposes that it is the function of poetry to produce pleasure, and relies upon this supposition at crucial points in his criticism. For example, there is his defence of the digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh, and ninth books of *Paradise Lost*:

Perhaps no passages are more frequently or more attentively read than those extrinsic paragraphs; and, since the end of poetry is pleasure, that cannot be unpoetical with which all are pleased.⁵

What this says is that all pleasure is poetical pleasure; what is meant, no doubt, is that all pleasure derivable from poetry is poetical pleasure. A similar notion is implicit in Johnson's remark about *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, that 'Perhaps no author has ever in two plays afforded so much delight',⁶ and in his General Observations on *King Lear*, where he dissents from the *Spectator*, which had censured Nahum Tate's revision of the play, giving it a happy ending:

Since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the

observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.⁷

In these remarks Johnson refuses to make any distinction between a specifically aesthetic pleasure and the kind of (moral?) pleasure we take in seeing justice done. Pleasure can readily be identified without any reference to poetry, and poetry (though not *good* poetry) without any reference to pleasure, so there is no dilemma for him. But these arguments strike us queerly, precisely because no distinction is admitted. When we ask whether Nahum Tate's *King Lear* is better or worse than Shakespeare's, it seems quite irrelevant to be told that his version gives us the added pleasure of seeing Lear back on the throne and all the good people suitably married. Tate's *King Lear* might, of course, be disparaged on Johnson's general hedonistic grounds by the argument that in providing this pleasure the play loses other and greater ones, so that it comes out short in the account ('other excellencies' are not equal). But that seems insufficient—we want to say that to be a better play Tate's *King Lear* would have to provide a greater quantity of specifically *aesthetic* pleasure, and that the satisfaction of our moral sensibilities cannot be weighed in the same scale.

I think we must reject Johnson's methodological procedure, because unless we can discriminate aesthetic enjoyment from other sorts, we cannot have a category of specifically critical evaluation at all.

The logic of Aristotle's method is less easy to discern, but some clues to a possible approach can be found in the *Poetics*. 'We should not require from tragedy every kind of pleasure,' he remarks forthrightly, 'but only its own peculiar kind.'⁸ He says the same in Chapter XXVI, and in Chapter XXIII, where he is discussing epic poetry, which shares the same end as tragic drama. What is this kind of pleasure—the *oikeia hedone* of tragedy? Aristotle's answer is quite brief: 'the tragic poet must aim to produce by his imitation the kind of pleasure which results from fear and pity.'⁹ Since it seems that fear and pity cannot be identified except as responses to certain kinds of situation, Aristotle has implicitly defined the 'proper pleasure' of tragedy—let us call it the tragic pleasure—as the sort of pleasure felt in seeing tragic events. If we take into account Aristotle's discussion (Chapter IV) of the origins of poetry (we enjoy, he says, imitation and also melody and rhythm), we can sharpen this definition: tragic pleasure is the sort of pleasure felt in seeing the harmonious imitation of tragic (pitiful and fearful) events.

Aristotle's procedure avoids circularity, so long as no concept of aesthetic value, or critical judgement, is introduced. But then it has awkward consequences. It seems a little odd to say that the function of

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

tragedy is to produce tragic pleasure. When we speak of the function of the spleen, or of a gear, we mean its unique or special ability to produce results that can be defined and detected independently of any knowledge of the spleen or gear itself. But apparently the function of tragedy is to produce, by being watched, a pleasure that can only be described as the pleasure of watching tragedy.

A highly instructive analytical method is employed by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Exactly like Bell, he is looking for those properties in sensible objects that are capable of producing certain desirable feelings, of which he distinguishes two main aesthetic ones, the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime. He realizes that the inquiry runs into trouble unless the feelings can be described independently of their sensory correlatives. But consider first beauty, defined as

that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it. . . . I likewise distinguish love, by which I mean that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful, of whatsoever nature it may be, from desire or lust; which is an energy of the mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects, that do not affect us as they are beautiful, but by means altogether different.¹⁰

At first glance, here is Bell's scandal almost exactly. Beauty is what produces love: love is what beauty produces. But this is not quite the situation. The first definition (of beauty) Burke means to keep—so that he can then go on to inquire what qualities of objects beauty consists of—but notice how he phrases it. Beauty is what causes 'love, or some passion similar to it'. The reference to beauty in the sentence distinguishing love from desire is supposed to be non-essential, merely clarificatory; and the logic of the matter is this. Begin with the feeling of being attracted to a woman, as an individual (not as a member of a species); abstract from this the ingredient of sexual desire, and what you have left is a certain feeling ('love'). The beauty of a woman (as distinct from her desirability) is what enables her to arouse this feeling; her visible qualities and any qualities, wherever found, that arouse the same, or a similar, feeling are then (by definition) constituents of beauty.

This analysis is at least not circular, for it does not need to refer to the beauty-qualities in order to define the relevant feeling of (aesthetic) love. The serious question here is whether Burke has succeeded in isolating, identifying, and sufficiently characterizing a feeling that is in fact the feeling evoked by those objects that are widely agreed to be beautiful. And it seems doubtful that he has.

His treatment of the sublime is parallel in structure, but teaches a

different lesson. The passion to be discriminated in this case (whose cause will then be defined to be the sublime) is

Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime. . . .¹¹ Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.¹²

As before, the method is first to characterize 'astonishment' as the emotion we feel when faced by something fearful to a high degree, but are at the same time protected from it, so that we know we are safe. The consequent mixed feeling of being freed from pain, together with the feeling of being absorbed and filled with the sense of the terrible, is the delight of astonishment, and whatever qualities produce this feeling, or some feeling close to it, are (by definition) constituents of the sublime.

Burke is more successful in telling us what the sublime feels like than he was in discussing beauty, and it might seem at first as though here, at least, he has been successful in avoiding the circularity. Yet this success depends, just as it did in Aristotle, upon defining the feeling in terms of the quality perceived: astonishment is what we feel when we see an object that is terrible, or looks terrible, or is associated with what is terrible. But Burke introduces another procedure that is interesting and instructive. We are of course not surprised, after this account, to discover that more terrible objects are more sublime, but he goes on to argue that vastness, and power, and obscurity in the terrible increase the intensity of astonishment because they increase the terribleness. Thus the properties of visible objects seem to be connected in two very different ways with the feeling of the sublime, some of them by definition, and some of them contingently. Burke does not make this distinction very explicit or emphatic, but it contains an important truth.

II

How do we go about discriminating aesthetic enjoyment from other kinds? Presumably we must first identify a certain *source* of enjoyment, and isolate those properties of it that are productive of that enjoyment. That these features are, as such, enjoyable has, of course, to be shown; and then there may be some debate about the propriety of labelling this enjoyment 'aesthetic'. The procedure recommended by J. O. Urmson, in the paper referred to above, is interesting. He argues that 'aesthetic satisfaction' is distinguished from moral, economic, personal, and in-

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

tellectual satisfactions, by 'the explanation or grounds of the satisfaction' (p. 79). He rejects the proposed differentia of 'a special emotion or a special emotional tinge' (p. 81)—including the physiological responses (gooseflesh and tears) of A. E. Housman.

To judge a thing aesthetically good or first-rate is not to call it good in a sense different from that in which we call a thing morally good, but to judge it in the light of a different sub-set of criteria. . . . We may recognize an aesthetic reaction by its being due to features of the thing contemplated that are relevant criteria of the aesthetic judgement, and the aesthetic judgement is one founded on a special sub-set of the criteria of value of a certain sort of thing (p. 83).

Thus Urmson discriminates the 'aesthetic reaction' (of which 'aesthetic satisfaction' must be the positive type) by appeal to 'aesthetic judgement'—it is a reaction to those properties that are relevant to judgement. And he distinguishes the properties relevant to judgement as those that are criteria of a certain kind of value (which may as well be called 'aesthetic value'). But these two proposals are in imminent peril of circularity, since there appears to be no way of characterizing the criteria of aesthetic value other than to say that they are the properties that supply aesthetic satisfaction. Surely the satisfaction is primary here; the value, and hence the judgement of value, depend upon it.

Actually, Urmson's procedure tacitly acknowledges this, for he looks about for the most general and elementary situations in which a satisfaction that can reasonably be called aesthetic is available. Here a certain arbitrariness appears. Urmson begins with enjoyable smells, and though this particular satisfaction is no doubt akin to that of art, the inclusion of smell-satisfaction among aesthetic satisfactions has been regarded with suspicion by some aestheticians. But there is no need to bog down in terminology; I recommend a narrower sense of 'aesthetic', but am willing to pick a narrower term instead, if need be. Suppose we characterize aesthetic enjoyment as 'the kind of enjoyment we obtain from the apprehension of a qualitatively diverse segment of the phenomenal field, in so far as the discriminable parts are unified into something of a whole that has a character (that is, regional qualities) of its own.' No doubt many questions can be raised about this proposal; at the moment, I am interested in exploring its logical consequences.

Suppose we set down the following definitory statements:

1. *Aesthetic enjoyment* is (by definition) the kind of enjoyment we obtain from the apprehension of a qualitatively diverse segment of the phenomenal field, in so far as the discriminable parts are unified into something of a whole that has a character (that is, regional qualities) of its own.

2. *Aesthetic value* is (by definition) the capacity to provide, under suitable conditions, aesthetic enjoyment.

3. *Positive critical criteria* are (by definition) properties that are grounds of aesthetic value.

From propositions 2 and 3 it follows that:

4. Positive critical criteria are (analytically) properties that help or enable an object to provide aesthetic enjoyment.

And from propositions 1 and 4 it follows that those features of an object that are mentioned in the very definition of aesthetic enjoyment—unity, complexity, and intensity—will necessarily be positive critical criteria. Thus when someone asserts that one work of art has greater aesthetic value than another, and gives as his reason that it is more unified, there is a certain lack of surprisingness in this little argument, since it amounts to saying that the work has a greater capacity to provide aesthetic enjoyment because it has more of a property the enjoyment of which is (by definition) aesthetic. Yet it is not utterly trivial, since the work might have been better in other ways—for example, because it unified a greater collection of elements or because it had a more intense regional quality.

There is no circularity, then, in defining aesthetic value in terms of aesthetic enjoyment, and defining aesthetic enjoyment in terms of the properties enjoyed. But this set of definitions does have an interesting consequence, for it divides positive critical criteria—those properties that can be cited as grounds of aesthetic value (or artistic goodness)—into two sets. When we cite those properties that are involved in the definition of ‘aesthetic enjoyment’, we are giving the sort of ‘safe’ answer that Socrates describes in the *Phaedo*: ‘the safe course is to tell myself or anybody else that beautiful things are beautiful because of the beautiful itself’.¹³ Naturally, if aesthetic enjoyment is (in part) the enjoyment of unity, unity is a ground of aesthetic value, and greater unity (other things being equal) of greater aesthetic value. But when the critic cites properties that are not involved in the definition of ‘aesthetic enjoyment’—such as that a modulation is too abrupt, or not abrupt enough—he is giving a more interesting answer, because a synthetic connection has to be established to make the reason relevant (it must be argued that the too abrupt modulation mars the unity of the music, or that the insufficiently abrupt modulation weakens its dramatic intensity, or some other quality).

This distinction between the safe and the risky critical criteria may offer an explanation of an intuitive difference that has been felt by some recent writers. For example, Dorothy Walsh¹⁴ has distinguished between ‘reasons’ and ‘norms’ in critical judgement. The norms she lists¹⁵ are

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

unity, complexity, and 'generative powers' (the parts 'interact with one another to generate emergent regional qualities'). The norms, in her view, are not themselves reasons but 'regulative principles guiding choice in the selection of reasons' (p. 392); that is, the statement 'X is more unified' does not, for her, constitute an answer to the question, 'Why is X better than Y?' but it (or one of the other norms) will be operative, even if not mentioned, whenever answers *are* given to the question. Norms

are, methodologically, ultimate. Accordingly, they must recommend themselves on their own merits; they must be and seem plausible simply as such. To have this plausibility, they must be general to *the point of obviousness* (p. 391).

Professor Walsh does not, so far as I can see, justify her claim that unity, complexity, and intensity of regional qualities are obviously the correct norms of the critic; evidently she thinks it is not seriously deniable. But in the light of my previous argument, a justification might be given. Since these three Primary Critical Criteria enter into the very definition of the enjoyment that is in view, we might say, they do have a sort of obviousness. So, one might say, to cite a Primary Criterion is not so much to give a reason as to indicate the area in which a reason can be given—to classify criteria as unifying, complexifying, intensifying. The distinction between the Primary and Secondary Criteria would then be somewhat like that between rules of inference and premises in critical argument.

Nevertheless, I don't think this analysis is quite correct. Critics quite often (and sensibly) cite unity as a reason—they may say: 'It hangs together better'; 'It is better-organized'; 'It seems to have more of a shape'. (Actual examples are not hard to find.) We can sometimes sense the unity, or the lack of it, in a work even before we discover by analysis which detailed features are responsible. Unity is itself a regional, or *gestalt*, quality, and it has its perceptual conditions. The question is: *why* does unity function as a guide to our selection of specific reasons for justifying a particular judgement? The answer, I think, is that it so functions because the specific criteria are properties which, in this particular work, tend to promote or inhibit unity. Professor Walsh says something close to this (p. 393). If there is anything strange about citing unity or lack of it as a critical reason, it is only that this remark would be quite general, and not very informative unless pursued further, and also perhaps not very surprising, since one work of art can be better than another only by surpassing it in at least one of the three primary respects.

More recently, Morris Weitz¹⁶ has asserted that not all the reasons

that critics give to validate their judgements require to be vindicated in turn. After a survey of discussions by four Shakespearian critics, he says:

It seems to me, as I read critical evaluations of Shakespeare's dramas, that at least some of the reasons offered in support of the praise of the drama are good reasons, hence validate the praise, not because further reasons for them can be given, but simply because they employ certain criteria—certain 'P's—about which the question, 'But what have these to do with dramatic greatness?', cannot be intelligibly asked since no answer to it can be given (p. 436).

There are two remarkable omissions in Weitz's argument. In the first place, he gives no general characterization of those 'logically unchallengeable' (p. 437) reasons, by which they are to be distinguished from the challengeable ones. He just asserts there are some reasons (his examples are Johnson's 'Because they represent general nature' and Coleridge's 'Because they are true to nature') for which it is 'appropriate and legitimate' (p. 436) to ask a vindication, though he does not think that these reasons have actually been vindicated. On the other hand Pope's reason ('Because the characters are individuals, various and consistent') and Coleridge's reason ('Because the puns in *Hamlet* intensify the passions and move the action of the drama') 'can stand alone', and need not be further justified (p. 436).

In the second place, Weitz gives no argument, so far as I can make out, to show that some reasons are unchallengeable. He says that when a critic (such as Coleridge) employs unity as a criterion of evaluation, it makes no sense to ask why unity is a good thing in a drama rather than disunity, 'for what could be a further reason for the reason, "Because they are unified," offered in support of the praise of Shakespeare's dramas?' (p. 437). This is a bit surprising, when we recall that Aristotle did not hesitate to answer precisely this question (*mutatis mutandis*), when he remarked of the epic that 'it must have a beginning, middles, and an end, in order that the whole narrative may attain the unity of a living organism and provide its own peculiar kind of pleasure'.¹⁷ That is, unity is a good thing because it enables the drama to produce its special enjoyment. I don't think Aristotle was giving an unintelligible or useless answer to the question, but, as I have said, it is in a way obvious. It always makes sense to ask of *any* critical reason why it is relevant—why that particular property counts for or against the aesthetic value of a work. Yet there is this much truth in Weitz's distinction, that some of the critic's criteria cannot sensibly be challenged by someone who knows the nature of the relevant kind of value. Anyone who understands that aesthetic enjoyment is (among other things) a relishing of highly organized wholes, does not need to ask why unity is a positive critical criterion,

THE DISCRIMINATION OF AESTHETIC ENJOYMENT

though he might need to ask whether, and why, the puns in *Hamlet* are merits or defects.

In short, it is philosophically interesting (if true) that some critical criteria (the Primary Criteria) are established by the initial discrimination of aesthetic enjoyment and, consequently, of aesthetic value; but what makes criticism an interesting and adventurous business is that the Secondary Criteria are connected with aesthetic enjoyment in a synthetic and contingent way.

REFERENCES

- ¹ *Art* (1915), p. 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ³ See C. J. Ducasse, *The Philosophy of Art* (1929); Lincoln MacVeagh (1929), Appendix.
- ⁴ See 'What Makes a Situation Aesthetic?' Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Vol. XXXI (1957), 75-92.
- ⁵ *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill (1905), Clarendon Press, I, 175.
- ⁶ See *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (1960), p. 88 (cf. Robert W. Daniel, 'Johnson on Literary Texture,' *Studies in Honor of John C. Hodges and Alwin Thaler*, University of Tennessee, 1961).
- ⁷ *Op. cit.*, 97-98. The *Spectator* had said (No. 40; April 16, 1711): 'King Lear is an admirable tragedy . . . as Shakespeare wrote it; but as it is reformed according to the chimerical notion of poetical justice, in my humble opinion it has lost half its beauty.' (I confess to some chagrin at finding the term 'beauty' applied to this work!)
- ⁸ *Poetics*, ch. XIV, trans. G. M. A. Grube (1958), p. 27.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ¹⁰ *Enquiry*, ed. J. T. Boulton (1958), p. 91. I want to thank Professor Jerome Stolnitz for some very helpful corrections of my interpretation of Burke.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ¹³ Trans. R. Hackforth, p. 134.
- ¹⁴ 'Critical Reasons,' *Philosophical Review*, LXIX (1960), 386-93.
- ¹⁵ Corresponding to what I have called General Canons (*Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958), pp. 465-69) and Primary Criteria ('On the Generality of Critical Reasons,' *Journal of Philosophy*, LIX (1962), 477-86.)
- ¹⁶ 'Reasons in Criticism,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XX (Summer 1962), 429-37.
- ¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, ch. XXIII, p. 49.