

AN EVERYDAY AESTHETIC IMPULSE: DEWEY REVISITED

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MOST AESTHETIC theories and analyses tend to concentrate on the receptive rather than the productive aspect of the (aesthetic) context they seek to elucidate. Thus the focus commonly is on aesthetic experience (with an emphasis on perception), appreciation, the critic's role therein, and the like. Of course some work has been done on the other side, e.g., on the nature of artistic genius, starting perhaps with Plato's *Ion*. But on the whole it is the counterpart that has elicited most attention.

While I wish here to emphasize aesthetic production, for my purposes further preliminary clarification is necessary. Thus for example I will not be dwelling on another common theoretical concentration in these matters, namely, the world of Art usually understood as the literary, the musical and the fine arts, be it of the highbrow or even the lowbrow variety. John Dewey, in *Art As Experience*, rightly saw artistic activity as a continuum from the common, everyday world of aesthetic feeling and concern to that which results in products exhibited in museums and performed in concert halls, i.e., all those objects elevated to that 'separate realm' of art. Unfortunately his efforts do not seem to have been heeded very much by most aestheticians.

At the outset he tells us:

A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.¹

More needs to be said about such everyday events and doings, not necessarily in relation to experience in general, but to everyday creativity in particular. I have in mind what seems to be a universal urge to produce, from each individual's point of view, aesthetically pleasing surfaces, to use the (earlier) vocabulary of D. W. Prall.² This urge or desire is what I wish to elaborate as *the aesthetic impulse*.³ The notion of impulse is suitably non-committal as contrasted with drive or instinct, and as regards questions of genesis (is it innate?), and thus may escape issues tangential to the present discussion. The important thing is to become aware of the pervasiveness among apparently all human beings con-

tinually to create environments—in the broadest sense of the term—that can only be characterized as aesthetic. Examples and further elaboration presently follow.

It is interesting to note that even in the Marxist tradition, whether orthodox or not, e.g., in Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*,⁴ dialogue mostly takes place within and about the realm of art. The common man, the non-artist, i.e., presumably most of humankind, is forgotten as an aesthetic producer. As earlier suggested, this generalization doesn't hold with respect to reception or appreciation, to people-as-audience. Linguistic analyses of ordinary aesthetic concepts and reasoning, as well, address the ordinary person's aesthetic *response*. And one of Marxism's main concerns is with the art work's content, especially as this might be socially read or apprehended by an audience. To be sure, there is in Marx a vision of universal aesthetic *engagement* (in the Sartrean sense), but the emphasis is, again, on art-as-such. I am speaking here of the anticipation of a post-revolutionary era when everyone, freed from exploitative labour, would have the time, the opportunity and the desire to do commerce with (no irony intended) the kind of fine art that is now reserved for the few. The point is that whether such an outcome is likely or not, the impulse, the ground on which all artistic/aesthetic activity is based is *now* and has presumably 'always' been present. Attention needs to be paid once again to that end of the spectrum. Dewey, with his notion of continuity, in this respect is consistent with this suggestion. The impulse here adduced surely provides the ground or force that eventually manifests itself in the most sophisticated and aesthetically appealing exemplars. The idea is to rediscover and explore that ground

In the chapter 'The Act of Expression' Dewey does consider using 'impulse' to make a related point, but settles on *impulsion* instead. I do not follow his usage here for two reasons. First, that concept is a rather general one inasmuch as it refers to a force or conation that he claims underlies experience in general. Impulse, as here used, is more specific, however: it refers to a similar conation but one which is already of an aesthetic nature from the start. More on this later. Second, 'impulsion' is a technical term, one that is unnecessary for our purposes

The *relation* between aesthetic production and reception is another issue that must be addressed in these considerations. For although from the beginning I announced that my emphasis would be on production, there can be little doubt that the two are inextricably related. In this context it is perhaps better to say 'aesthetic' rather than 'artistic' production, since the latter connotes precisely that which is not the main concern of this paper: the realm of art. Traditionally of course *aesthetic* is usually paired with *appreciation*, while *artistic* is linked with *production*.

Again, Dewey with insight stresses the inseparability of these two concepts. He thought it 'unfortunate' that there exists in English no broader term which links, as their referents are linked in experience, 'artistic' and 'aesthetic', and that

'aesthetic' has to do double-duty: 'to cover the entire field' on the one hand, and 'to limit it to the receiving perceptual aspect of the whole operation on the other'.⁵ Although this dialectical point on the relation between creation and appreciation may now be a commonplace, it must be reiterated, particularly in connection with the notion of an aesthetic impulse. A few closing quotations from Dewey are therefore instructive in this regard:

To be truly artistic, a work must also be esthetic—that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception . . . In short, art, in its form, unites the very same relation of doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy, that makes an experience to be an experience . . . The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.⁶

He goes on:

The eye attends and reports the consequence of what is done. Because of this intimate connection, subsequent doing is cumulative and not a matter of caprice nor yet of routine. In an emphatic artistic-esthetic experience, the relation is so close that it-controls simultaneously both the doing and the perception . . . The urge to action becomes an urge to that kind of action which will result in an object satisfying in direct perception.⁷

As Mill suggested in his ill-fated argument about pleasure and desirability, some theoretical points (e.g., 'first principles', as he calls them in *Utilitarianism*) are only susceptible of empirical proof. Likewise, my claim that the aesthetic impulse is ever-present can only be 'validated ostensibly', so to speak, by pointing to the concrete everyday experiences which manifest it. In our case we shall rest content with such a descriptive adumbration yet not as did Mill shift to a claim of value.

In various ways, human beings seem to be endlessly and hopelessly caught up in an urge to render the world around them an aesthetically pleasing one. The 'around' starts immediately, so to speak, with our own bodies and radiates outwards to our abodes, our neighbourhoods, our cities, our countries and beyond.⁸

We hum a tune, we casually turn on the radio, we mimic in conversation, we hang pictures, we organize, we arrange and rearrange . . . It would seem that the arts are present in embryonic form in our most mundane everyday activities. The taking notice of all these sorts of doings at first may appear a novel and challenging endeavour. But soon one is impressed by their sheer number, their pervasiveness and their virtual inescapability: what begins as an interesting set of observations soon threatens to grow into another theory of human nature. One can begin almost anywhere.⁹

Let us, for example, begin at home: whether we live in our own house, an apartment or flat we rent, or a 'place' we're simply occupying, is it not the case that we've spent countless hours in its aesthetic enrichment, including thinking

about it, preparing for it and sometimes even redoing it? But what is the 'it'? I have already discussed the Deweyan notion of 'aesthetic' to indicate the sense presupposed here. The *it* is of course constituted by aesthetic activity. The amount of work and time involved may vary from owned to rented dwelling, but this is a contingent matter: there are some who work more on their flats than others do on their own houses. Perhaps one should speak of energy expenditure in aesthetic pursuits (aesthetic energy), in which case one would include money, if it be allowed that, in most cases, money acquired represents work done.

The middle classes paint (or pay to have painted) walls, work on their yards, hang pictures and place artefacts, install carpets, place rugs, choose furniture, tidy up, sweep and clean floors . . . They also *think* about changing the things they don't like: remodel a room, change or install a door, add a partition or make an addition, etc. Sometimes the thinking converts to doing. The rich may pay to have these things done on a grander scale, while the poorer do it themselves on a smaller scale. These differences in 'scale' between economic classes may also imply qualitative differences: some of the objects of their concern may be simply and completely different. The difference in aesthetic *choice*, for example, between deciding which Mediterranean port to dock in versus which park bench or doorway to use as sleeping quarters.

Perhaps at the very lowest levels of human deprivation and desolation the aesthetic impulse absents itself, say in the case of the starving. But is it not also perhaps sheer physical energy and even will that have left the victim of hunger rather than more particular drives and impulses that may have been swept away in the wake of the former?

The question of form versus function continues to arise. To return to the middle-class house for example, what may seem like purely functional jobs, such as plumbing or electrical work, will often have aesthetic considerations at a slightly deeper level. We want a lamp here, an outlet there, but we want *that* lamp, and that outlet for the fixture which we went to pains to select. As for plumbing, of course there's the matter of fixtures, appliances, and *their* aesthetic appeal. In emergencies, however, as when we call the plumber simply and urgently to unblock the drain, it may be that considerations of hygiene, the prevention of damage, discomfort, etc., bring aesthetic ones to an abrupt if momentary stop. It is conceptually more difficult in such cases to single out the aesthetic impulse at any rate.

Even closer than home, *what about* the body? Starting with diets, vitamins and exercises? What about haircuts, hair-dos and hair colours? Hats? Make-up and jewellery? Beards and moustaches? 'Eyewear'? Teeth? Clothes, Stockings, shoes, belts and neckties? Fads? Was aesthetic choice not involved in everyone (and more) of these? Isn't this precisely what the 'fashion industry' capitalizes on—this (outwardly expanding) aesthetic impulse? As a counter-example one may perhaps attempt to argue for the possibility of a 'thoroughly non-aesthetic person'. But *why* might such a person be in such a state? The sorts of answers to

this question would determine the relevance of what might otherwise only be an aberrant case.

The notion of aesthetic choice is also important in tying together some of the points that have evolved so far. Thus, it must be noted that, prior to and sometimes independently of, the doings in question, choosing is involved: we choose, for aesthetic reasons, the objects, sounds, looks, i.e., *surfaces* which we'll surround ourselves with. And that is aesthetic activity already. But this activity is also artistic-aesthetic in Dewey's sense. It constitutes creation (production) *and* reception from the start. Hanging a picture is an everyday sort of artistic act. Yet we also visualize how it will look once in place; we are artist and vicarious audience in the very act of choosing which picture will go on precisely which spot on which wall. Obviously a similar case can be made for the various sorts of activities thus far indicated, including 'literary' ones such as the choosing of the right word(s) for the brief note, letter or indeed speech act(s).

I think the above sampling should suffice at least to provide a context for my claim concerning the aesthetic impulse. As I suggested above, it might well be argued that 'the evidence' is virtually inexhaustible: the more one seeks, the more one finds. In any case, my concern has been to try to redirect attention to that seemingly generative substratum of aesthetic experience that Dewey rightly insisted upon.

If there's truth in any of the above, it is clear that by implication aesthetic theories addressing art-as-such will, *mutatis mutandis*, in some degree be applicable to the phenomenon I have adduced. The point here however is not to investigate in detail what such an application might call for. Rather, it is merely to indicate that the notion of an everyday aesthetic impulse is susceptible of (complementary to?) deeper theoretical elaboration. For example, as is well known, the aesthetic plays a crucial role in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Indeed, aesthetics occupies a major portion of his *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*. While he too focuses on the significance of aesthetic experience and the work of art, a similar claim might be made for his insights in the case of the everyday situations we've been considering. I have in mind such notions as contemporaneity, presence, sharing and the role of the self in the act of aesthetic contemplation. We're speaking here of those moments of aesthetic attention or absorption when one apparently, and only apparently, would seem to forget one's self:

Thus to the ecstatic self-forgetfulness of the spectator there corresponds his continuity with himself. Precisely that in which he loses himself as a spectator requires his own continuity. . . the absolute moment in which a spectator stands is at once self-forgetfulness and reconciliation with self. That which detaches him from everything also gives him back the whole of his being.¹⁰

Might not this dialectical experience, which is at once constituted by selflessness and self-renewal, be far more pervasive and recurrent than a traditional approach to aesthetics would lead us to believe? To a lesser degree of intensity

than the artist in the creative act, perhaps; but doesn't everyone, then, frequently partake of such experiences? And what are the implications of all this for the self, for its well-being, as it were? A subject that must be left for further exploration.

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REFERENCES

- ¹ John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York Putnam, 1958), p 3 Coincidentally, this very passage is used as (unreferenced) head quotation in Deborah Cook, 'Hans-Robert Jaus and the Exemplarity of Art', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 3 (1987), p 259 While the present essay shares some concerns with Cook's expository article, an important difference lies in our respective emphases on the relation between aesthetic experience in the world of art on the one hand, and aesthetic experience in the everyday world on the other we are travelling in opposite directions My route is emphatically from the latter to the former, while her discussion stresses the reverse
- ² D W Prall, *Aesthetic Judgment* (New York Thomas Crowell, 1967, first published 1929)
- ³ See Malcolm Ross, *The Aesthetic Impulse* (Oxford Pergamon, 1984) While bearing that title, this book on art education in Britain is only indirectly (yet favourably) related to our theme here It advocates, among other things, the use of the vernacular, as opposed to the 'High Arts', in the school arts curriculum Unfortunately, the notion of an aesthetic impulse is merely taken for granted and left unanalysed
- ⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, (Boston Beacon, 1978)
- ⁵ Dewey, *op cit*, p 46
- ⁶ *Ibid*, p 48
- ⁷ *Ibid*, pp 49–50
- ⁸ The *beyond* is not merely a rhetorical one it's likely related in one way or another to such vital social phenomena as environmental protection movements around the world Here, as in architecture, form (aesthetic) and function (health, well-being) meet in a subtle and delicate balance
- ⁹ In what follows I shall refer to activities typically found in Western culture It would be easy enough to recognize the impulse in question were one to take a 'National Geographic' sort of approach As has often been stressed (e.g. by Heidegger) one's own everyday world is harder really to 'see' Ethnology has always included aesthetic description in any case
- ¹⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans G Barden and J Cumming (New York Crossroad, 1986), pp 113–14

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