ART AND EXPERIENCE

One of the many perennial problems of aesthetics is the interaction of art and experience. The aesthetic aspect of the problem lies not so much in the artist's modes of experiencing as in his modes of dealing with his experience in terms of art.

All great artists, all creative geniuses, have only one aim and purpose, namely to express the actual sensation of life as they themselves experience it. They are beings who convey through their art the felt intricacy of their existence and who know that no part of life must need be barred as inartistic, that nothing in mature experience is too sublime or too sordid, too remote or too commonplace to serve as material for art. And so, their achievement lies in their ability to expose their sensibility to all experience, not only to emotions, and to convey their genuine whole of tangled feelings. The artist's sensibility is of a special sort; it is, as T. S. Eliot says in another context, a " finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations."[1] For poets possessing a unified sensibility, Eliot continues, a thought is an experience which modifies their capacity of feeling. Consequently they can " feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose " and devour and absorb any experience, " so that in their poetry passages of philosophical speculation stimulated by Montaigue or Seneca throb with as living a pulse as their own direct accounts of human passion. Indeed, one has only to turn to Montaigue and *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*, or to North's *Plutarch* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cariolanus*, for complete examples of how readings as well as thought could be absorbed as vital experience."[2] It is the poet's special sensibility as well as the unifying power of his imagination that enable him to amalgamate disparate experience and distinguish him from ordinary men. Whereas the ordinary man's experience, says Eliot, is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary, the poet's experience is not. When the former falls in love, or reads Spinoza, the two experiences do not combine with each other, nor with the noise of the typerwriter or the smell of cooking. In the mind of the poet, Eliot continues, these experiences are always forming new wholes.

This seems to me completely acccurate and full of perceptive insights into the creative process. Of special importance in this context is Eliot's belief that "impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality."[3] Though what Eliot says may not be true of all the arts, it is certainly applicable to painting and poetry. By the time the painter and the poet complete their work, the experience represented in it may be "so different from the original experience as to be hardly recognisable."[4] It may be a medley of numerous feelings fused together in a lucid artistic pattern, in a statue or a song or a painting. The artist sees to it that the undisciplined squads of emotion fall into a timeless order, the kaleidoscope of sensations into an eternal pattern. His floating impressions are all fixed in a divinely lucid pattern of letters and sounds.

What then is the relation between art and experience ? James Joyce gives a reasonably acceptable answer when he defines art as "the human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an aesthetic end."[5] What he calls disposition is, generally speaking, of three kinds corresponding to the three functions the arts fulfil in various degree. When disposing the sensible or intelligible matter—or experience—the artist interprets life. Poems like *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy* are commentaries upon the whole human scene, its nature, its destiny. But Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Rembrandt's pictures of old rabbis, or El Greco's of Spanish grandees are all interpretations of experience like the plays of Shakespeare or like the statues by Michelangelo or Rodin. "These works are the language of men who not only saw and heard with the external eye and ear, but put into sound a hearing, into canvas a vision of what life essentially meant to them."[6]

Interpretation of experience is not the only function of the artist. "The amazing capacity of his (the poet's) for ordering speech is only a part of a more amazing capacity for ordering his experience." The artist not only transmutes ideas into sensations and experience or "takes in more every minute than his duller companion," he also clarifies his sensations through some conscious and explicit pattern and gives them a sequence and a development.

Our phantasies and dreams, our love and hate, are all brought under the discipline of some deliberate, logical and practical pattern. The ordinary man's sensations of colour and form are inchoate, irregular, fragmentary. "Things are experienced," writes John Dewey, " but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plow and turn back; we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated but because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy."[7] We cannot, like Cezanne or Vermeer, for instance, organize our experience into something lucid and harmonious. Most of us have experienced the blindness of human ambition, or the fatal possessiveness of pride. But it required a Shakespeare to show us the tragic meaning of the first in *Macbeth*, a Milton to exhibit to us the second in *Paradise Lost*.[8] While Lucretius turned his vague intuitions into a monumental work of philosophy, Dante turned his floating impressions into a magnificent epic.

In the *Partial Portraits* Henry James observed :

> " Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spiderweb, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations....The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern; the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience..If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it ?) they are the very air we breathe."[9]

Experience is never limited, because, as John Dewey has put it, it "occurs continuously..the interaction of live creature and environing conditions are involved in the very process of living". Experience for James is also ability and power, such cluster of gifts as the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things to judge the whole piece by the pattern etc. Experience, in this sense, is just another word for imagination, but it is not with this 'never limited' experience that the artist is concerned. He has to unify this cluster of gifts into *an* experience, into vital, creative experience. In like manner, impressions *are* experience but not all impressions are a creative experience. Only a creative impression—a sight, a sound, a thought, or an emotion—can rouse the artist's subconscious into action. But once the subconscious is roused, other impressions mingle with the creative impression and give it complexity,[10] its individuality. Experiences are therefore harlots; an experience is a virgin, fecund, innocent. Experiences are diffuse, but an experience is concentrated, intense, creative. The ordinary man's senses are practical, often myopic; the artist's, if they are the artist's, are not. That is why he intensifies our experience by arresting our sensations.

Where then does this 'an experience' come from? From the myriad objects of the world, the falling leaves in virile autumn, the delicate bud of fragrant spring, etc. Indeed, a work of art is created "not in isolation but in relationship."[11] The artist, according to Archibald MacLeish, struggles with the meaninglessness and disorder of the universe until he can subdue it to order: until beauty is born of ugliness, form of shapelessness, and Being of Non-being. MacLeish gives the impression that the traditional conception of the artist as "a solipsist, a candle flame consuming its own fat", is wrong and that the act of art is *not* a passive waiting for the symbol to emerge from the depths of the unconscious. For MacLeish—and for Lu Chi whose view of art has influenced him—the artist is not the attentive watcher and waiter brooding above the silence of himself, but a man taking a position at the hub of things. What MacLeish forgets is that the mystery of the universe does not exclude the depths of the unconscious, the ocean of the artist's own self, and that the artist can—and he often does—derive the aesthetic experience from the depths of

his own being. If he feeds his emotions and his mind on the great works of the past or on the myriad objects at which he gazes, he has also been feeding them on his own passions and memories which he often objectifies in his art. "The poet's labour", says MacLeish, elucidating Lu Chi's view, "is to struggle with the meaninglessness and silence of the world until he can force it to mean. ."[12] The silence of the world does not, I think, exclude the silence of the inner world of the poet's self. Moreover, no work of art is created *ex nihilo*. "The 'Being' which the poem is to contain" does not derive from 'Non-being'. The creative act is essentially finite and grounded and the artist does not produce something out of nothing. If his art is to have meaning and relevance it must draw on the artist's impression of life. The world must be there before "the poet can set out to interpret it, discover it, or represent it symbolically."[13] The artist is also to a greater extent dependent on literary and linguistic traditions and conventions of genres. "Language is something which the poet can hope to modify or purify at a certain high level of literary—*Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*—but not even a Mallarmé or an Eliot has been able to construct a language *ex nihilo*."[14]

The expression, artistic or aesthetic experience, is often used ambiguously. While for some the aesthetic object *arouses* emotion, for others arts are, from the point of view of content, expressive of emotion. As regards the first proposition it can be said that specific emotion is only an accidental outcome of aesthetic apprehension, for the same aesthetic object can—and it really does—arouse different emotions in different persons or even in the same person in different circumstances. Nor is the second proposition readily acceptable. How exactly does the 'object' express emotion? Some art critics—like Prall, for instance—who have tried to answer this question, have only repeated that objects do in fact express emotion.[15]

Psychological investigations in the last seventy years have amply demonstrated that art need not always arouse emotion in every spectator. The emotional response to a work of art depend on the art, the spectator, and the quality of his attention. The aesthetic experience is often said to be "the satisfaction of the 'play' impulse in a peculiar sense of play as a happy harmony of the sensuous or appetitive impulses with the rational and moral."[16]

This is a deliberate rejection of the Kantian view that distinguishes and even opposes morality and inclination. According to Schiller, the greatest good is not the fulfilment of duty in the face of difficulty and temptation but the lucky coincidence of attraction with duty or what we take to be duty." It is, however, wrong to think that this coincidence was realized only, or even mainly, in aesthetic experience. Reading poetry or visiting Switzerland may in certain circumstances be my pleasant duty, but all pleasant and obligatory actions—such as lying late in bed or dining with the woman I loved—are not aesthetic.[17]

It seems that aesthetic experience is more than mere feeling. It is certainly not like the feeling of warmth or boredom, but " an experience of rapt attention which involves the intransitive apprehension of an object's immanent meanings and values in their full presentational immediacy."[18] It is significant of, or an experience of, an aesthetic object and makes that object of the greatest interest, so that it is " grasped in such a way as to give rise to an aesthetic experience."[19] The aesthetic object need not be a life-like statue or picture; nor is it imperative for it to give us any new information about man or nature. Though a beautiful sonnet, Keats's ' On First Looking into Chapman's Homer ' gives, on the contrary, a piece of wrong information in the following lines :

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez—when with eagle eyes
> He started at the Pacific....

It was Balboa, and *not stout Cortez*, who with eagle eyes started at the Pacific. Yet, as I have said, the sonnet is undoubtedly an excellent piece of poetry which also, by the way, sheds considerable light on the nature of aesthetic experience. Keats's experience on first looking into Chapman's Homer was an aesthetic experience, an experience of ' realisation '. When enjoying the ' pure serene ' of the original, Keats became a Greek himself and his mind " possessed the weird power of being in two places at once ".[20] Aesthetic experience is the experience of this power, the power of ' real-ising ' other places, people or objects. My experience becomes aesthetic when the object I am contemplating extends my sense of reality as far as the ripples. Then I find

myself in one of those moods of the 'glory and the freshness of a dream', of feeling far more awake than usual :

> ....that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,—
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul :[21]

What Wordsworth is describing in these lines may be called a mood of 'intransitive attention', a mood in which emotion is not at all present and there is no motion inside, an autonomous mood indeed. Aesthetic experience is nothing if not autonomous. When it is *fully* in the grip of the object all other experiences are debarred. But our perception does not give up its role of 'relationality'; it continues to be related to the object which, as Eliseo Vivas rightly points out, "remains in complete monopolistic possession of consciousness."

It is not necessary for all sensible objects to yield an aesthetic experience to every spectator. Individual differences of nature and temperament play a vital role in all art-valuations and our response to beauty. While our imagination is at once stimulated by such words as 'megha' (clouds) and 'Savitri' these words will arouse no images and associations in the mind of an Engishman. Owing to one's exclusively Indian culture the writings of Joyce may not evoke any objective response in one's heart. Similarly, owing to his nationality, an Englishman may not find anything worthy of appreciation in Indian erotic sculpture. It appears therefore, that nothing in itself is beautiful; what may be expressive to one man may not be expressive to another. There are, however, many traits—of nature, of behaviour, etc.—common to all of us alike and so there is much of mutual agreement too. Most of us would, for instance, admit that the imaginative mind is essentially different from the ordinary mind; the imaginative mind is childlike, converting 'the very pulses of the air into revelations.' In *Psychology and Effective Behaviour* James C. Coleman comes to an identical conclusion. He saw in the artist's openness to new experience "a childlike quality, for the young child is a natural explorer and experimenter who embraces every new experience

with open arms and an open mind and who constantly 'creates' with thoughts, with words, with pencils and paints."[22]

Coleman goes on to observe that as people grow older their sensibility hardens and their conservatism prevents them from reacting to new experiences. "By carefully conforming to all the customs and folkways of their society and placing secutiry before curiosity, many adults cut themselves off from new experiences and new concepts and thereby close the door on creativity."[23]

The artist, then is a man of exceptional sensibility to experience, a man who possesses to an infinite degree the power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implications of things, and to organise his experience more meaningfully, more coherently, more vividly, than ordinary life permits. "Art is experience in its most articulate and adequate form : the union of sense, mood, impulse, and action chatacteristic of the live creature. It is not differentiated by the predominance of any one mental faculty, such as emotion or imagination, but by a greater inclusiveness of psychological factors. It has no highly restricted subject matter : anything vividly and imaginaitvely realized, indeed, may be the source of 'an experience that is *an* experience' –the kind of experience that is art."[24] Aesthetics is concerned only with this, with *an* experience, with that which, after creating ripples in his consciousness, ultimately results in an experience akin to *samādhi* or to *satori*. Great art is born when the gates of heaven open and the shining billows madly rush at the artist from all sides as they did when the blessed Mother revealed Herself to Rāmakṛṣṇa.

Aesthetic experience, like artistic intuition, is a distinct species differing from experience in general by being something more. But we hardly ever indicate of what this something more consists. It is perhaps more imaginative and more 'universalized or liberated'. It is, to quote a popular phrase from E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*, 'full of the wine of life'. The ordinary man's experience in general is like a cup—let us call it the teacup—while the artist's is as deep as the ocean. "There comes a moment —God knows when—at which we can say, 'I will experience no longer. I will create. I will be an experience.' But to do this we must be both acute and heroic. For it is not easy, after accepting six cups of tea, to throw the seventh in the face of the hostess."[25]

What E. M. Forster is saying applies wholesale to the creative experience which is fundamentally a Zen experience : " I will be an experience." All great art stems from this identification, from nothing short of this identification. When the artist becomes his experience, what is born is nothing less than a *Mona Lisa*, a *Divine Comedy*. When the experience is valuable, complex, rich, and universally understandable the art born of it shares these qualities. Thus the quality of the experience embodied in it determines its overall character and significance. Now, the question is : how can the underlying worth (or worthlessness) of an experience be judged ? What can be the criterion ? One can answer this in the words of Professor DeWitt H. Parker, and say that the experience embodied in art gives satisfaction and its value depends on the proportion of satisfaction it gives. The value of art as satisfaction " arises through the appeasement of what in a general way may be called desire."[26] Generally speaking, desire, according to Professor Parker, is not only the motivation of all experience but also its inward drive, and the source of its value. Desires that urge us on in life, reappear in our art. There are, for Professor Parker, " no peculiar elementary aesthetic interests or emotions."[27] What is really interesting in this discussion is his psychologically valid distinction between ordinary experience and aesthetic experience, a distinction drawn *vis-a-vis* desire. Whereas desire in ordinary experience is directed upon real objects and is satisfied through action or actions leading to its achievement, in the case of art, desire is concerned with " immanent or fictitious objects, and is appeased, not through a course of action leading to a distant goal, but in present, given experience."[28]

Arts serve another important purpose in addition to appeasing our desires. They penetrate into new spheres and dimensions of experience and have on that account to create a new reality and develop new forms.[29] Artists like Masaccio, Giotto, Leonardo, Titian, Cezanne, van Gogh, Picasso, or Cervantes, Goethe, the romantics and the imagists, Flaubert, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, or Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, Stravinsky, Schönberg— to name only a few of those artists who have created unquestionably great works of art—did not just let their fancy produce their art *ex nihilo*, they were driven or " guided in a certain direction by the human condition, the stage of perception and experience. ."[30]

In the words of Kahler, these artists "liberated forms and experiences that were to become *the* reality of the next age."[31] Their stories, portraits, combinations of sounds, paintings, etc. are important not only because they embody the artists' individual vision of reality but also because they reflect "a human condition in transition." The plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe, the novels of Joyce and Kafka, the portraits of Titian and Durer are important as much for their "deep physiognomical grasp of an individual personality,"[32] as for the new phenomenal vistas they open up, uncovering the new reality of our age.[33]

Another aspect of the problem with which we are dealing relates to the nature of our delight in natural objects. Is this delight an indication of a developed aesthetic awareness of nature? Some of us go to the countryside every morning for exercise, others for physical exhilaration and sensations. The person whose aesthetic awareness is well developed expressly seeks out the forms of nature primarily for the purpose of responding to its sights and scenes as he would respond to a *kathakali* item or to the music of *shehnai*. He does not give himself upto mere sensations; what he does is to let his whole being respond "to the visual scene with a completeness and forgetfulness of all else, as when absorbed in the music.."[34] When he succeeds in reacting to form with complete self-absorption, his perception becomes aesthetic. Thus one views an object aesthetically when one "perceives an object which holds the vision in this undisputed possession." By the same token, therefore, the impression created by an object or idea so viewed is an aesthetic impression[35] and works of art are the recorded experiences of the person who responds to an object—of nature or of man's creation—with this all-absorbing aesthetic interest. "They are recordings", says Arthus R. Howell, "which have been born of 'artifice' for the purpose of meaningful expression. This artifice, as constructed form--hence, art form—is the fundamental distinction between works-of-art and natural form."[36]

When one looks at an art form, one does not take long to realize that man must have stumbled on the discovery of art and poetry in the course of his quest for Truth, for there is a mysterious relationship between beauty and truth, between art and life. While the human intellect, through its logical deductions, builds

up that edifice of knowledge properly called science, sensibility helps in the sensuous apprehension of human realities. If the natural intensity of all modes of perception and senstation is to be preserved and co-ordinated, the artist will have to lean equally heavily on both the faculties (i.e., intellect and sensibility). In the rough and tumble of everyday life the human psyche cannot be perfectly unified, in its individual or collective aspect, by any coercion of the intellect or by what William James calles the 'single barrel approach to sensibility'. This reconciliation of discordant impulses is only possible through the medium of art and poetry which are a product or an outcome of a 'treaty between the mind and the heart'. In their objective analysis of the meaning, mystery and function of art most of the Western writers have stressed this very aspect of their reconciliatory impact. "The reconciliation of intuition and intellect, of imagination and abstraction," says Herbet Read, "can only take place objectively, or, I would rather say creatively. It is only by projecting the two sides of our nature into a concrete construction that we can realize and contemplate the process of reconciliation. That is precisely the function of the work of art, and that has been its function all down the ages."[37] Thus it is as the symbol of reconciliation, the verbal form in which our impulses submit to the aesthetic discipline of rhythm and proportion, that poetry occupies a high place in the romantic value-system.

One of the Indian poets whose views on poetry and art square with my own is Mahadevi Verma. She believes that a work of art demands not so much the crutch of a materialist view of life as the positivistic support of deep feeling and intense experience which brings about a harmony between the smaller self of the artist and the larger self of the universe. Though this growth of a comprehensive identity between the smaller self of the artist and the bigger self of the universe may be guided by politics, controlled by social obligations, developed by the new science and enlivened by philosophy, art has nonetheless an autonomy of its own. The result is that in spite of all the barriers the devotee of art form has an independent existence, and poetry has the function of providing a healthful nourishment to his impulses clamouring for expression. Poetry conceived in terms of a means

of redemption and salvation reminds us of Arnold for whom it represented the last refuge of a world sapped dry by science and technology. " More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."

When in the diversity of nature and in its changeable variety, the artist began to search out the link that connected the one extreme of the infinite consciousness with the other end of the finite heart of man, he found every single particle of nature glowing with a preter-natural presence. Still the artist's thirst was not fully quenched. For, so long as the self does not make a total loving surrender, the mystery of this relationship remains an unsolved enigma. This notion of art as a connecting link between the infinite consciousness and the finite self found a powerful exponent in the German mystical philosophy of Schiller who believed that all art arises out of two impulses : the sensuous impulse (*Stofftrieb*) which presses for the ' reality of existence, for some content in our perceptions and for purpose in our actions, and the formal impulse (*Formtrieb*), the demand of man's free rational self ' to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestation '.

Poe once said that no writer would have the courage to express the whole continum of his inner thoughts and feelings, for the very paper would burn beneath them. What he meant was that even the boldest writers tend to suppress those unconscious urges in their nature which are related to violence, cruelty, morbidity, and obscenity. Though many of our primitive barbaric impulses have become quiescent they have not been exterminated by culture, and the artist, however bold a non-conformist he may be, would naturally feel hesitant to remind his readers or spectators of the remnant echoes and memories of our primitive stage. Many artists, therefore, give us evidence of having sharply reacted to Freudian interpretations of dreams, sexual symbolism and neurotic conception of art and artists.

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NOTES

1. *The Sacred Wood* (London : Methuen & Co., 1957), pp. 53, *et seq.*

2. Vide F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (New York, O.U.P., 1959), pp. 13, *et seq.*

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

4. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1953), p. 138.

5. See Thomas Connoly, *Joyce's Portrait* (London : Peter Owen, 1967), p. 240.

6. Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1939), p. 34.

7. *Art as Experience* (New York, Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 35.

8. *Vide* Irwin Edman, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

9. ' The Art of Fiction ', *Partial Portraits*, 1888.

10. Thus art results from the interplay between the conscious and unconscious in the artist, so that in the act of creating he to some extent organises material that has been ' incubating ' in his unconscious.

11. Archibald MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience* (Penguin Book, 1965), p. 15.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

13. William T. Noon, *Joyce and Aquinas* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1957), p. 127.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Elisco Vivas, *Creation and Discovery* (New York, The Noon-day Press, 1955), p. 94.

16. E. F. Carritt, *An Introduction to Aesthetics* (London : Hutchinson's University Library, N.D.), p. 35.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Elisco Vivas, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Colin Wilson, *Poetry and Mysticism* (London : Hutchinson, 1970), p. 57.

21. Wordsworth, Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, 11.41–46.

22. See p. 394.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Melvin Rader (ed.), *A Modern Book of Esthetics* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962) p. 170.

25. E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey* (London : Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 66 *et seq*.

26. DeWitt H. Parker, 'The Nature of Art' in Morris Weitz (ed.), *Problems in Aesthetics* (New York : The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. 65.

27. *Ibid*.

28. *Ibid*.

29. Erich Kahler, 'What is Art ?' in *Problems in Aesthetics*, p. 167.

30. *Ibid*.

31. *Ibid*.

32. *Ibid*.

33. *Ibid*.

34. Arthur R. Howell, *The Meaning and Purpose of Art* (Ditchling : The Ditchling Press Limited, 1957), p. 15.

35. *Ibid*., p. 26.

36. *Ibid*., pp. 17, *et seq*.