

AESTHETICS AND PSYCHO-ANALYSIS

In this paper I want to examine the analogy between aesthetics and psycho-analysis recently put forward by some philosophers. For convenience, I shall take as my main reference John Casey's Book entitled *The Language of Criticism* (Methuen, 1966).

Taking his cue from certain passages in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*¹ and the later works of John Wisdom, Casey argues that aesthetics may be described as reflective thought. Reflective thought is neither inductive nor deductive. Nevertheless "it seems to allow for discovery which consists neither in the finding of new facts, nor in the drawing of logical implications". What is added, however, "is a new application of a concept, a new way of seeing things". (*Ibid*, p. 17.).

Aesthetic reasoning, as we are told, is more like psycho-analysis than science. "A psycho-analytic interpretation cannot be imposed on a patient as though it were a causal hypothesis which has been 'proved' by or 'explains' the agreed facts of the case. Nor is it simply a logical inference from the agreed facts. The patient is induced to see his behaviour in a different way or to take up a new attitude. The argument might take the form of a comparison of the old description of picture, and the new one; and the criteria might be those of economy, explanatory richness, elegance and so on, what it would be by no means far fetched to call aesthetic criteria." (*Ibid*, p. 19.)

Casey notes that this new way of looking at things, the 'insight' which is the basis of aesthetic reasoning is somewhat like scientific 'conjecture' as Professor Karl Popper calls it. At the same time, he points out that it might be far fetched to suggest that we form hypotheses in aesthetics as we do in science.

Two other points in the analogy may be noted. First, by disagreeing with Popper's² view that psycho-analysis and philosophical theories generally cannot be falsified, Casey contends that there is no rigid distinction between hypotheses which are falsifiable and interpretations which can be shown to be far fetched or over-elaborate. Just as the criterion of the rightness of a psycho-analytic interpretation is that the patient accepts it,

so in the case of physical hypotheses we have to accept that they have been verified.

Secondly, the gap between fact and value is not bridged by a decision, as it is in ethics as many neo-positivist philosophers have contended. Casey believes that both in psycho-analytical practice and in aesthetics there is no such sharp distinction between fact and value.

Before explaining this analogy between aesthetics and psycho-analysis in some detail, I want briefly to touch upon the question as to whether, and to what extent, this theory is to be found in Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein refers to this issue, in two places in *Philosophical Investigations*. Firstly in Part I para 74, he speaks of seeing an object in two or more possible ways. You may see a leaf as a sample of a leaf shape. You may see the same object as a sample of a cube. And he points out that you would act differently depending on which sample you take the object to represent. This very brief statement could, however, only indirectly be taken to refer to the process of "seeing as". Secondly in Part II, section xi, Wittgenstein talks of two uses of the word 'see'. You may, for example, see an object; this pencil or that chair. Also, you see likenesses and differences. Wittgenstein calls this experience of seeing likenesses and differences, 'noticing an aspect' or 'seeing as'. But this is a point which I shall develop later in this paper.

The interesting point to note, however, is that Wittgenstein has nothing to say in his reported *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*³ on this subject.

On the subject of aesthetics Wittgenstein discusses mainly the following :

(i) The term 'beautiful' which philosophers take as fundamental is meaningless; and is, moreover, rarely used by critics in talking about works of art.

(ii) The terms and phrases they use are phrases like "there is something wrong", "something missing" or "it is not quite right" or "just right".

(iii) Appreciation of a work of art has to be within a culture and at a certain time.

In the lectures on psycho-analysis Wittgenstein concerns himself with :

(i) What is meant by acceptance or rejection.

(ii) What is meant by psychological explanation. It is not the same as causal explanation.

(iii) In what sense can a dream be called a symbol.

My intention in the foregoing paragraphs is mainly to show that Wittgenstein himself did not believe that there is any close analogy between aesthetics and psycho-analysis. Be that as it may, let us return to a detailed examination of this analogy.

Firstly, in both cases, for the aesthetic philosopher or critic (I dislike the term aesthetician) and for the psycho-analyst, it is contended that there is a problem which requires solution. For Casey and the linguistic analysts, philosophy is a form of therapy which cures them of state of anxiety which is commonly described as perplexity or puzzlement. A person reads a poem or looks at a painting and cannot make sense of it. The philosopher or art critic comes to his rescue and interprets the work for him and the problem is solved. Similarly, it is argued, the patient has a problem; he is suffering from amnesia, or whatever the case may be. And the psycho-analyst interprets his behaviour, shows him that it resulted from a suppressed wish. And thereupon the problem is solved.

The question arises as to whose problem it is which is solved. In the case of psycho-analysis the problem is that of the patient. Because of his amnesia or schizophrenia, his normal life is disturbed and he is unhappy. The psycho-analyst has to find an answer to the patient's problem. But whose problem are we solving in aesthetics? If the analogy is to apply, it should be the artist. But is it? In the psycho-analytical situation the patient is behaving in a strange way; this is the malady, the problem. Perhaps he has dreams or hallucinations. A lot of information comes out as a result of free association. The analyst's function is to look at all these facts, interpret them, convince the patient of his interpretation—and the cure follows. So, it is the patient's problem which has to be solved. Of course, the psycho-analyst may have a problem too, in finding interpretation which satisfies him and the patient. The patient may

go to a second analyst, who may give a different interpretation and this may or may not be acceptable or convincing to the patient. But what I wish to emphasise is that in each case we have to go back to the patient and the success or failure of the analyst's interpretation is judged by its capacity to solve the patient's problem.

But what happens in the aesthetic situation, if I may so describe it? Who is it that corresponds to the patient? It would be natural to suppose it is the artist. But is it? Many philosophers, who could be described as close to the later Wittgenstein if not as his disciples, have argued that works of art are gratuitous, that they are not answers to problems. On this assumption, the artist cannot be equated with the patient, since the artist does not have a problem. On the other hand, it may be contended that artists are faced with problems, and works of art which they create, are solutions to these problems. It seems to me that this is a plausible theory. In architecture the problems may be obvious. A building has to be constructed to serve a particular purpose. Space being expensive, and not easily available, the best utilisation of space becomes a problem. The nature of the soil, the availability and nature of materials to be used, all present problems for the architect. A Gerard Manley Hopkins sees misery and injustice in the world and this is his problem which he presents in his curial sonnet: 'Thou art indeed just Lord'. And so on.

However, to come back to the analogy with psycho-analysis: who, in the aesthetic situation, corresponds to the patient? As we have seen, it is not the artist. For either the work of art is not an answer to a problem and is gratuitous—in which case the artist has no problem; or it is an answer to a problem, and in this case the artist has solved his own problem. But on both alternatives, it is evident that the critic is not required to solve the artist's problem.

Then who else is there in the aesthetic situation, who could correspond to the patient? This question is not specifically posed or answered by the linguistic philosophers. It is simply assumed that the patient is anyone who attempts to understand the work of art. In this case there is not one patient but many patients and their problems in understanding a work of art may

be different, depending on their background, acquaintance with the culture in which the work of art exists, level of knowledge and so on.

It might be argued that psycho-analysis does not function in this manner. The psycho-analyst does not set out to solve the problems of several patients at one time in a generalised manner. He is concerned with a *particular* individual and his case history. But to this it might be replied that the theory of psycho-analysis has grouped a number of facts, or special cases, under its key concepts. And these key concepts give us insights into various types of psychoses and the principles along which particular cases can be understood. So, it is the function of aesthetics to frame key concepts which help to explain works of art. While this would apply at the philosophical level, the critic working at a clinical level would use these principles to interpret particular works of art.

This sounds plausible enough on the surface but the analogy appears to me to break down. The art critic is not addressing himself to the personality problems of potential or actual appreciators of works of art. He is basically concerned with the work of art. He is seeing, for example, as John Stallworthy⁴ does that in many of his poems, Yeats starts with a particular statement or image and then seeks to generalise it. Or Vivienne Koch⁵ in her study of the later poems points out that Yeats had undergone the Steinach glandular operation in 1934 when he was seventy years of age. As a result the respectable old man's exterior covered a cauldron of seething sexual passions. You will not understand these poems, she tells us, unless you appreciate this conflict in Yeats' personality. The critic's problem is the work of art, to comprehend it, to see the connection, or lack of connection between its various parts and so on. It is also his function to help the interested public to understand and appreciate the work of art. In psycho-analysis, the problem is to help the patient to understand himself. In the aesthetic situation, the problem is to understand the artist's work, to help others to do so. But emphatically the critic's job is not to help individual members of the public to understand themselves !

The advocates of this theory lay a good deal of emphasis on their contention that, like psycho-analysis, aesthetics or criti-

cism is a matter of persuasion. If you apply concepts of right or wrong in aesthetics, Wittgenstein has said, you will end up in confusion. What is required of the critic or the analyst is described in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, section xi, page 193, as follows.

“Two uses of the word ‘see’. The one : “What do you see there ?—“I see this ” (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other : “I see a likeness between those two faces”—let the man I tell this to, be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself. The importance of this is the categorical difference between the two objects of sight... I contemplate a face and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I see that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience “noticing an aspect”.

I suddenly see the solution of a puzzle—picture. Before there were branches there; now there is a human shape. ‘My visual impression has changed and now I recognize that it has not only colour and shape but also a quite particular organisation’.

So the contention is that the function of the critic is to help you to see the painting or the poem or whatever it is, as a quite particular organisation. And this business of “seeing as” is what the psycho-analyst also does with his patient.

This aspect of reflective thought, of “seeing as”, it is contended by Casey, does not involve the discovery of facts. And it is held that in this respect reflective thought differs from inductive thinking. But is it the case that in reflective thought, as illustrated in criticism and psycho-analysis, there is no discovery of facts ? In science, for instance, you discover a galaxy; it existed for billions of years but was unknown to man. Does not the same thing happen in psycho-analysis ? Several events, especially in early childhood, lie hidden in the unconscious. Does not the psycho-analyst discover them for his patient ? It is possible, no doubt, to quibble as to whether this process is one of discovery or of re-discovery. But whatever the philosophical niceties, psycho-analysts do claim that they bring to light facts unknown to the patient. These new facts are important in helping the patient to see his life history in a new way. And I would suggest that the same happens in aesthetics. True, the painting or the

poem is all there. But facts about the creative artist come to light and it is in the light of these hitherto unknown facts, that a new and different interpretation is possible. I would suggest that the process of discovery is as germane a part of psycho-analysis and aesthetics as it is of science. No doubt the procedures for discovery are different. In psycho-analysis and aesthetics it is rather like history, like discovering the past, whereas in some of the sciences discovery is tied up with prediction of the future.

At this point we come up with the problem as to what counts for success in psycho-analysis and aesthetics respectively. In the former, it is the analyst's explanation, his way of seeing the facts which has to be accepted as the right one. I emphasise the point that there is just one correct way of looking at the facts. Is this so in aesthetics? If this were so then what happens to a contention such as Empson's theory of seven types of ambiguity? In aesthetics often the purpose of interpretation is to show the several different ways in which the art object can be looked at, and it is the combination of many meanings at one and the same time that contributes to the significance of the work. I suggest that this is one important difference between a successful and unsuccessful explanation in psycho-analysis and aesthetics.

In psycho-analysis the acid test of an explanation is whether it is accepted by the patient and the malady is cured. Acceptance of the explanation and cure are inter-connected. If the patient appears to accept it and the cure does not follow, the analyst does not reject his explanation. It is the patient who is at fault, who is either consciously or sub-consciously resisting the explanation. This is why it is said that psycho-analysis cannot be falsified. But is this so in aesthetics? The answer to this question is not simple. Aesthetic theories have been described as irrefutable for various reasons. For example, Bell's theory of significant form is said to be irrefutable on the ground that the test of the presence of significant form in a work of art is dependent on the observer's experience of the aesthetic emotion. But how is aesthetic emotion described or defined? The answer is that it is the particular emotion one experiences when one is aware of significant form. So the two key concepts in Bell's theory are defined in terms of each other. Basically this theory is subjective and is, therefore, irrefutable. I have argued in my book *Fundamental Questions*

in Aesthetics (Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1968) that this is a weakness which applies also to the work of Collingwood, Susanne Langer and others whose theories are examples of speculative metaphysics. But if getting to know works of art is like getting to know other empirical objects, that it is a process of discovery, then interpretations of works of art are empirically falsifiable. It is the awkward unaccountable fact which falsifies an aesthetic interpretation, as it falsefies a scientific hypothesis. If, in particular cases, aesthetic theories have not been refuted, criteria of preference may still be available. For if the work of art is an answer to a problem, it is possible to enquire whether it is a satisfactory answer. And it is possible further to enquire whether the answer passes the tests of simplicity, of economy of assumptions, and of being fruitful or suggestive of new avenues of inquiry.

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