

NATURE OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE ACCORDING TO THE TRADITIONAL INDIAN APPROACH

The starting point of any theory of aesthetics is the recognition of a distinct aesthetic state which is of a different kind of mental and emotional activity present in what is called aesthetic experience. The exact nature of this distinction depends largely on the type of theory developed but generally among other distinguishing characteristics it is marked by most aestheticians by a non-practical and non-cognitive aim described in such terms as "away from life" "disinterested" "impersonal" "detached" and so on. These negative attitudes do succeed in drawing attention to the basic problem, namely the existence of a separate aesthetic mode, but they generally fail to take into account its distinctive nature.

The question is : is the aesthetic mode actually and fundamentally a kind of experience which is different from others, and if so, what is it that characterises this difference ? Evidently it will not do take refuge behind such blanket terms as Clive Bell's unique "aesthetic emotion"¹ and explain all aesthetic experiences in terms of it, nor to assign it as Kant does, to a special faculty of mind which is distinct from the practical sphere of the will, and from the intellectual sphere of understanding, and is concerned only with the sphere of feeling.²

If a case must be made out for the existence of a separate aesthetic state, as indeed it must be, if aesthetics is to claim a value of its own, the exact nature of this state must positively be specified, whereby the distinction becomes substantially real and does not remain one of terminology alone.

The whole problem dissolves into whether a different set of terms such as "aesthetic emotion" or "disinterested pleasure" is in fact being applied to an experience which is substantially similar to another experience, but which is different only in degree or in the connections between their constituents or whether the nature of the aesthetic as against the practical and the cognitive, demands a mode of thinking, willing and feeling, qualitatively and intrinsically different from the other states.

According to Indian theory, aesthetics is not only confined to that limited branch of study which deals with the appreciation and creation of art works and the problems arising therefrom, but is the delineation of an entire realm of enquiry within which all ordinary experiences, including those which arise from pure art activity, become aesthetic, the aesthetic state being not a specific mental faculty, emotion or attitude, but a composite state of consciousness wherein perception, feeling and understanding gain new dimensions. In Indian thought, the aesthetic mode is an experience of the whole man and not of a part of him. Taken in this very wide sense, a mathematician can in the course of his study gain the aesthetic perspective, as also the moralist or the craftsman. The peculiarity of the aesthetic state is not consequently in terms of that which isolates it from other experiences but that which elevates it to a different level. The experience of beauty does not concern the feeling of pleasure alone, no matter how impersonal, disinterested or detached this might be, but that which, with the realisation of truth and goodness, belongs to the intuitive consciousness, a state of being which unified homogeneous (*ekaghana*) marked by a total absence of discursive and relational elements and is thus not available to the rational mode of thinking or knowing.³

The aesthetic consciousness thus comes about through a complete identity of the knowing subject with the aesthetic object, giving rise thereby to a pure experience of this, here and now, filtered of all extraneous influences and ingredients. Works of art due to their emphasis on the creation of vital and essential form, are a direct means to this experience. They are, however, only one of the many ways by which it can be attained. The aesthetic state contains the experience provided by works of art, but art is not the only means of evoking it.

The above view forms the basis of medieval Indian aesthetic thought and is best understood in the background of its overall metaphysics, particularly that of the Śaiva Philosophy.⁴

In Western idealistic thought, reason is the sole instrument of truth, and experience as a form of knowledge is valid only for the empirical order. The shortcomings of reason, as a means of uniting the individual with reality, were felt by Kant who clearly showed its limitations to penetrate the essence of Being. Noumena,

unapproachable and remote, was according to him, forever inaccessible to the knowledge and experience of man.

Indian idealist thinkers however, have never disassociated abstract speculation from a concrete realization of its metaphysical structure which they translate into living reality. This position, at once metaphysical and psychological, leads them to conceive of reality as consciousness, and everything which is around us, as resting in the last analysis on the Self.⁵ The Self is known not only through the pure light of knowledge (*prakāśa*) but can be contacted directly in the essence of our innermost being (*vīmarśa*). In other words, reality is approached not by reflective reason alone, but also through pure experience, the two being identical in the ultimate awareness, which is in the manner of a realisation (*janana*) and which has, as its very essence the beatitude of ecstacy (*ānanda*).⁶

Aesthetic experience is a modality of this unbounded consciousness, characterised by the immersion of the subject in the aesthetic object to the exclusion of everything else.⁷ It momentarily interrupts every-day experience, presenting itself as a compact, autonomous area of consciousness, unaffected by elements of phenomenal existence.⁸

While the aesthetic experience is akin to the religious state, it being referred to in traditional texts as the twin brother of the experience of Brahman,⁹ there is yet a difference between the two. The subject in the aesthetic state while transmuting the occurrences and feelings of everyday life, remains ever conscious of them whereas the mystic state marks the complete disappearance of all polarity, and the contents of everyday life are transcended. The difference here is one of degree, not one of *kind*. Within the horizon of the aesthetic consciousness the empirical and rational order of things (*samsara*) is not eliminated as it would be in the religious state, but transfigured. This transfiguration effects the mysterious conversion of pain into pleasure, of sadness into delight, of mobility and inquietude into rest and the fulfilment of desires.¹⁰

To return to the question posed earlier, "Is the aesthetic mode actually a kind of experience different from other experiences?" It seems clear from what has just been said that there is a distinct aesthetic mode, distinct in its constitution and status, not merely in its function and method. In other words, the experience

provided by art works is not different from other experiences only as shaving in the morning might be said to be different from working out a mathematical equation, but in a substantial way. The aesthetic experience though composed of the same material as ordinary states, breaks away in the intuitive moment from its empirical base and becomes momentarily a new and different kind of experience.

This view as developed by the Indian theorists rests on a number of assumptions which the modern philosopher may be tempted to challenge.

The first assumption is that the aesthetic state is a thing *sui generis* different from the ordinary state of mind. It might be asked : what is implied by attributing uniqueness to the aesthetic mode ? Is it not a dogmatic assumption, postulated in order to give status and value to an experience different from others only in degree ?

Let us examine some of the views that are frequently put forward for the existence of a distinct aesthetic experience. Richards, for instance, advances the following arguments :¹¹

(a) It may be held that there is a kind of unique mental element which enters into aesthetic experience, an element which does not enter into other experiences and which is the "differentia" between them. As Clive Bell maintains, there is the existence of a unique "aesthetic emotion" as the differentia. But the presence of such an inexplicable entity as he points out has no place in modern psychology. If we take empathy as being such an entity, we find that it enters into innumerable other experiences as well as the aesthetic experience.

(b) Another view which is commonly held is that the aesthetic state is qualitatively of "the same stuff" as the others but is of a special form, the special form being described in terms of impersonality, disinterestedness, distance, subjective universality etc. This form, Richards shows however, is sometime no more than a consequence of the incidence of experience, a condition or an effect of communication. Moreover, disinterestedness and impersonality are attitudes which are shared by the scientist, and distance can also be used as a moral principle. Hence they are not unique to the aesthetic state.

The rejection of these and similar views in favour of a distinct aesthetic state, however, should not lead to the conclusion that no particular province can be assigned to the aesthetic experience, it being, as Richards concludes, closely similar to other experiences, at best a further development, a finer organisation of them and not in the least a new and different kind of thing. It only suggests that the approach to the problem is wrong and consequently these views go against the very case they hope to support.

When the Indian theorists hold that the aesthetic experience is different in kind from others they do not assume the existence of an ultimate aesthetic value or any other ingredient which, added to ordinary experiences, gives it the qualitative difference. Nor do they support their arguments by such general statements as : "Aesthetics is a unique activity since it is pursued without an end." These statements may be perfectly correct but are besides the point, since they do not further the case for a distinct aesthetic mode.

The aesthetic state as a thing "apart" must be shown to be opposed fundamentally to other experiences. The *alaukika* state of the Indian aestheticians is unique in as much as it is presented as a unitive, homogenous experience within which the subject merges his identity. It is characterized by a state of compactness which is felt as beatitude. Within this state of self-sufficiency the self does not feel the need for anything other than itself. This type of beatitude cannot be enjoyed in practical life where things external to the subject are always desired. These break the unity of the aesthetic experience with their presence. The point of difference between the aesthetic and other states, lies in the fact that the former is an end in itself, undisrupted by any objective factor whereas in the latter the subject always presupposes an object. The distinction of subject and object which is present in all ordinary experience is obliterated in the aesthetic experience. Such an identification is not only never achieved in everyday life but is within the cognitive framework impossible. Discursive knowledge which forms the basis of our practical and logical state, is always formulated by a subject as against an object. A unified experience consequently marks a definite break with the world, it appears in the horizon like a new entity totally unlike the states of consciousness with which we are familiar.

It might be asked : in what way is such an experience different from an emotive one ? Does not the diffusion of the subject and the object take place in every emotional articulation ? There is a fundamental distinction between the two apparently similar states. An emotional reaction is a sensuous organic experience within which the ego predominates while an aesthetic response is a mental and spiritual reaction, a supersensuous experience within which the ego is transcended. It is a manner of experiencing emotion without ego even as *a priori* knowledge is intuitive insight gained prior to rational categories. It is in the full realisation of the self, the self taken not as a limited narrow empirical ego but as the ultimate unbounded consciousness when there is a full participation of the subject within the aesthetic object, that the marginal conversion of pain into pleasure takes place.

This extraordinary power of transmuting sadness into pleasure may be called the unique element, the *differentia* which belongs to the aesthetic experience, which makes it a different *kind* of experience from others. The sudden transformation of pain into pleasure is not a miraculous phenomena but is the result of the individual consciousness finding its identity within the larger whole of the universal consciousness. This concept, which is fundamental to Śaiva metaphysics¹² forms also the basis of traditional Indian aesthetics.

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NOTES

1. Clive Bell, *Art* Chatto and Windus, 1914, p. 28.
2. *Critique of Judgement*, Transl. by Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964, p. 15.
3. *Ekaghana* literally means 'closely dense' 'compact' that which is uniform and without obstacles !
4. Śaivism is one of the important religious systems in India being proto-historic in origin. In its Kasmiri version it flourished around the tenth and eleventh century A.D. There are two systems of the Śaiva doctrine, the Śaiva Siddhānta and the Śaivism of

Kashmir. It is to the latter, of which Abhinavagupta was one of the well-known exponents, that we are referring. The central theme of this system as given in the *Pratyabhijnā*, one of its main texts, is that Śaiva, the only reality of the universe, is infinite consciousness. He is the subject as well as the object, the experiencer as well as the experienced (*spandakarikā*) "As the consciousness on which all this resultant world is established, whence it issues, is free in its nature, it cannot be restricted any where. As it moved in the differentiated states of waking, sleeping, etc. identifying itself with them, it never falls from its true nature as the knower" (S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 732).

The world is created through the power (Śakti) inherent in the Supreme Consciousness and all the forms manifested thereof are due to this energy. Śaivism is essentially a monistic doctrine, influenced greatly by the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.

5. Rainero Gnoli, *The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta*, Roma, 1956, p. XXIII.

6. K. C. Pandey, *Comparative Aesthetics*, Vol. I, The Chowkamba Sanskrit Series, Banaras, 1950, p. 82.

"Admission of *vimarsā* or self-consciousness in the absolute by the Śaiva is the point of distinction between the Śaiva and the Vedāntic conception of Ultimate Reality. The latter holds that the Brahman is *santa*, i.e. without any activity...it is self-shining and not self-conscious...The Śaiva maintains that the Absolute is not only self-shining but also self-conscious."

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid, P. XXII.

9. The following is Visvanatha's famous definition of aesthetic experience given in his *Sāhityadarpana*. It is similar to the conception of Abhinavagupta and his predecessor Bhatta Nayaka. "*Rasa* is tasted by the qualified persons. It is tasted by virtue of the emergence of *satya*. It is made up of full intelligence, beatitude and self-luminosity. It is void of contact with any other knowable thing, twin brother to the testing of Brahman. It is animated by a *chamatkāra* of non-ordinary nature. It is tested as if it were our very being in indivisibility." (Gnoli, op. cit., p. 54 note 3).

10. Gnoli, op. cit., p. XXIV.

11. I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963, P. 15.

12. The intimate essence of consciousness or the 'I' according to the Śaiva, is beatitude. The absence or beatitude and suffering are due to a need, privation or desire for something separated from the Self. Beatitude is the absence of this desire, the resting in oneself to the exclusion of everything else. The 'I' contains all things everything that exists, arises from its unconfined liberty. It cannot be the seat of any deprivation and can desire nothing but itself. Aesthetic experience is the tasting of one's own consciousness and therefore, of one's own essential beatitude." Gnoli, *op. cit.* p. 87, note 2.