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THE CONCEPT OF 'BEAUTY' AND SOME PROBLEMS OF AESTHETIC APPRAISAL

I propose to consider the view that beauty is a unique aesthetic quality. I take Harold Osborne (*The Theory of Beauty : Aesthetics and Criticism and Aesthetics History*) as a representative of those who hold this view. It derives its viability from G. E. Moore. I shall try to argue that a unique aesthetic quality cannot provide the basis of a general theory of aesthetic judgment.

There is a theory of value which points to some quality which is intrinsic, in varying degrees, in all excellent works. This concern with some unique aesthetic quality has had enormous influence in the plastic arts where 'significant form' is perhaps its most vivid incarnation. It has been less important in literature, where discursive content makes it more difficult to choose a suitable quality. It is also a fact that a clear example of such a theory is not easy to find. Such qualities may be natural ones, or they may be mataphysical and the subject of a special intuition. It was invented to explain something quite concrete about painting. The formal coherence of a painting is often quite independent of the character of its subject matter. In some paintings the lines and masses seem to have no intelligible order at all, while in others the scene depicted might be much the same, but the structure seems to cohere, to have some kind of inner logic of its own. But this 'structure' is only analogous to the architectural sense of structure in which something is actually supported, or the grammatical sense in which structure refers to the relations of parts of speech in a natural language. It refers to no natural set of struetures and yet it is not an arbitrary notion, for it can be recognized by anyone with any experience of art, and general agreement about the formal properties of a painting is often reached. Nor does this mean shape, for a painting may be full of shapes of all kinds or have a distinct pattern of some shape and still be completely chaotic from a formal point of view. It is a notion that after careful consideration is identified with the formal elements in a work of art—with the arrangement of its parts into a coherent whole. Beauty is, in fact, the property of

being an organic whole for perception, a whole that is normally of great complexity and intricate organization, and the greater this complexity of elements organized, the greater the betuty.

Two sets of issues are raised here : the first concerns the character of definition of beauty as an objective property, the second concerns the use of this concept in formulating general principles. But to say what form is brings on rather misty language.

The value theories that refer to qualities inherent in things can be called uniquely aesthetic theories, while naturalistic ones are usually conserned with the whole of our experience. A possible exception to this is the most famous of all the inherent aesthetic qualities, for 'beauty' applies not only to works of art, but to things existing in nature as well, and beauty has been traditionally regarded as the object of perception by the senses. St. Thomas says quite simply that beauty is what is pleasing to the senses, and Santayana connects pleasure with objects in defining beauty as 'Pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing'. Neither of these, of course, need be limited to works of art, and as statements about a uniquely aesthetic quality they need much expansion and qualification.

Osborne believes that the purpose of aesthetics is to provide the general principles for making correct critical judgements, and that coming to an understanding of the notion of beauty is to be carried on in two ways : first, by examining the states of mind involved in the appreciation of beauty in works of art, secondly, by examining the objective properties in works of art which are connected with this mental state. This latter is the search for the true nature of the ' objective beauty-property' -- which is identified with the formal elements in a work of art, the arrangement of its parts into a coherent whole. Beauty is, in fact, the property of being an organic whole for perception. Normally it is a whole of great complexity and intricate organization. The greater this complexity of elements organized, the greater the beauty.

Two issues are raised here : (a) the character of the definition of beauty as an objective property : and (b) the use of this concept in formulating the general principles of aesthetic judgement.

Beauty is said to be the function of ' configuration ' and of the kind of configuration which is called ' organic unity '. This organic unity is a ' configuration such that the configuration itself is prior in awareness to its component parts and their relations according to discursive and additive principles '. It is apprehended ' synoptically ' as a single complex whole of multifarious and intricately related parts. This synoptic apprehension is such that it demands a heightening of consciousness.

Two difficulties arise at once.

(a) This is a limiting of the word ' beauty ' which might exclude much that we normally call beautiful. We often speak of an autumn afternoon, of a landscape as beautiful. They are not objects of art with an organic unity. Osborne might say that the synoptic apprehension of them at any given moment gives them such a unity as to be classified as beauty. But if synoptic apprehension is the test, it is in this case no more than the cutting off of a certain bit of experience by the focus of attention. We do this with a great many things that are not beautiful.

(b) Secondly, there are many organic wholes, such as complex machines which are apprehended synoptically prior to their component parts, or such as organisms themselves. In fact, by this test, most objects and situations are apprehended synoptically. This difinition rests upon a specialised notion of perception which cannot in fact be limited to the cases for which a claim is made.

Another problem arises with the quantitative measure of the amount of beauty present in terms of the degree of complexity of the organic whole. This quantitative measure of beauty fails to account for the fact that we may find a work more beautiful than another, but still a lesser work. Or, we may find the less complex whole more beautiful than the more complex one. ' Beauty' is not the only appraisal word-we can call a work of art great without calling it beautiful. It is an error to think that beauty can be measured in terms of the number of elements organized in an organic whole. We might on occasions find a *bhajan* by Kabir more intensely beautiful than a far more complex work, say, a *khayal* recital. And in doing so one need not deny that the latter is the 'greater' work. Or in looking at a small Chinese jade bowl one may find its perfection of form far more

beautiful than the Ajanta mural, although the latter may have a more complex sort of unity. We do not measure beauty in terms of the complexity of elements organized, nor do we always call the greatest work the most beautiful.

For the concept of beauty to do what Osborne wishes it to do, it would have both to apply to everything that we might wish to call beautiful and to comprise every important quality we might wish to attribute to great works of art, that is, every formal quality that is concerned in making the work great. And this would make of beauty such a comprehensive term that it would not be much of a guide to those fine discriminations needed in aesthetic judgements. Unless, of course, a sort of quantitative measure of beauty could be applied, and this is exactly what Osbrone wishes to do. Like I. A. Richards he wishes to calculate, to measure works comparatively on a scale which detemines how much beauty work of art have by a quantitative measure of how many elements they co-ordinate in some organic whole. This would not only rule out many of the qualitative distinctions which criticism normally make, but criticism would then become something of the calculating scientific sort of activity from which it might be thought that Osborne was trying to rescue it by the development of pure and exclusive aestheticism.

Even if the concept of beauty itself could be shown to be the unique aesthetic quality, it is meant to be, it is hard to see how it would provide the body of principles by which a correct judgment might be secured. There are no ready-made formulae for turning the individual qualities of art into the appropriate measure of formal elements. There would have to be some general descriptive criteria which acted as such formulae and it is quite impossible to see how they could exist except by inventing them anew for each work of art to be judged and for each work to set its own conditions in this way would make nonsense of general principles. The connections between the individual characteristics of the work of art and the aesthetic quality would have to be worked out in each case, and the individuality of particular works would make general formulation impossible. As a unique aesthetic quality 'beauty' has provided neither an explanation of the essential nature of works of art nor the foundation of a science of judgement.

Theories that use unique aesthetic qualities in the plastic arts

must rely heavily on ostensive demonstration. It is hard to give much sense to the notion 'significant form', to define it clearly, to say why some forms are significant and not others. It is much easier to point to a canvas, point out specific characterististics of the way colours and lines are organized and say, 'This is what I mean, this painting has it, that one over there does not.' And the comparative merit of these two works may be shown by this diffierence. In literature formalism has no such recourse to direct demonstration. Most literary formalists have been concerned with the setting up and enforcing of rules for various literary compositions. Sometimes the connections between value and any given set of rules may be clear enough. For example, some sonnets may owe heir intensity and depth of emotional impact to the consciousness and elegance of their form. But an excessive concern for rules leads to the preference for a current work over an obviously great one. Many sonnets can be written exactly according to the rules and still be very bad ones.

Another effect of an excessive respect for form and for the rules which govern various forms is shown in the attempt to write in complex but unnatural forms which are derived from theories of prosody. While this has often been one of the pleasures of poets, they have seldom invoked it as a serious concern.

This has been a brief examination of the view that a unique aesthetic quality can provide the basis of a general theory of judgment. I have tried to show that this claim cannot be maintained. The reasons for its falure are those which weigh against the possibility of any general theory of judgment. It seeks to reduce the basis of critical judgement to a simple quality - a quality either in ourselves, in our experiences of works of art, or inherent in the work itself. This runs counter to both our common sense and to all critical practice. To be concerned either personally or professionally with works of art is to recognize their diversity and uniqueness and to recognize the conditions that make these inevitable. The common quality in the use of the word 'beautiful' will be almost as remote and elusive as those of the word 'good'. Although 'beautiful' may have a less general meaning, any common characteristic will be as hard to find. When philosophers or philosophical critics thought that they were naming the parts of good or the varieties of the beautiful, their error consisted not in the misuse of the predicate, but

only in thinking that something, some common quality was named by it. And, in so far as they thought that the discovery of that particular thing was the key to the making of correct judgements, they have ignored both the individual character of the works themselves, and the entire history of critical practice. Whatever the status of the chosen quality may be, (natural, formal or metaphysical,) the error that concerns critical practice the most, is simply that of insisting on any single criterion of judgement, or attempting to reduce a complex of activities to a single simple principle. This has long been one of the most awkward features of aesthetic theory and whatever the interest or claims of the particular principle chosen, this error of the simple criterion must be pointed out on its own account.

There are several motives which lead to this demand for the simple criterion. One is perhaps a psychological need to feel that such things as the 'good' or the 'beautiful' are all of one piece, a desire for conceptual neatness and economy. For example, Osborne needs to distil the essential common element in all beautiful things. Connected with this too is the desire to make a judgements certain: this has always required making them matters of calculations.

Behind these attitudes are two sets of assumptions : (a) that the simple criterion can fulfil a multiplicity of demands : and (b) that the act of judgement is a single unequivocal act, a clearly set apart logical movement. Simple criteria are never in use and could never perform the variety of tasks demanded of judgement. There is no one act which is itself a judgement. Judgements are not only made through a variety of linguistic means and with an assortment of diverse standards, purposes and presuppositions, are not made in any one grammatical point or in any one logical move ; they are made through a variety of linguistic means with assortment of standards, purposes and presuppostitions. Often they are made through the accumulation of certain tones, a series of decisions, different points of view, complex attitudes. It might be said, of course, that this complex and elusive process might be only the gardual orientation of the mind towards a central guiding principle, but I do not think that the gradual emergence of attitudes can be held to be evidence for the existence of simple criteria. Such an attitude might very well be the complex product of many considerations, all of which are evident in the final judgement.

Another reason which points out the fact that use of simple criteria impoverishes the language of criticism is its necessary limits. Simple critria limits our language in calling a thing good or bad. To desire to limit the classes of reasons that can be given is to misunderstand the nature of criticism and of aesthetic reasoning generally. Aesthetics is not deductive reasoning about general principles or an empirical search among beautiful objects for the quintessential nugget of aesthetic substance. Aesthetics is a reason giving activity, an explanation involving many kinds of language and explanatory models, feelings, preferences for the many characteristics of the various sorts of things that we accept as being worke of art. There should neither be limits to the sort of reasons we can give, nor rules to govern our choice of explanations. These choices are essential. They spring entirely from the content of our meeting with the work of art. These choices depend on what aspect of a piece of art we find exciting, what critical issues may call our attention to, or simply, what disagreement it may bring up with a friend. Wittgenstein said that reasons in aesthetics are of the nature of furthor descriptions. In a sense this is true in that we call attention to more and more features of works of art in giving reasons for our opinion of it. The more complex or disputed the issue the more features we will try to distinguish to support our point of view. My only qualification is that this cannot mean description in any narrow sense, (especially in the limited sense which describing has to have when philosophers speak of 'descriptive' as opposed to 'evaluative' language.) but description used in a non-exclusive sense such as vivid, balanced, profound etc.

The constant mixing of descriptive and evaluative force in terms used by critics is one of the most constant features of critical language as a whole. Even reason giving in aesthetics is carried on in such a way. Any intelligible picture of critical judgements must discard the notion of criteria finding for that of reason giving. The word ' criteria ' is useful enough and might be kept, but what must be discarded is the search for the quintessential element, whether you call it naturalistic or formal. The method of criticism involved in the use of such criteria if they existed, would be the holding of a work up to an invisible yardstick or geiger-counter it would be artificial and pointless.

Richards and Stevenson and many after them have made division of the uses of language which might refer to aesthetics and morals. They have shown that in certain circumstance we cannot support conclusions in one kind of language with arguments derived from another kind. But in the language of criticism, description and judgement are inextricably mixed. The very words the critic describes with are such that they effect a judgement. Such words as 'clear', 'coherent', 'dull' etc. all describe in a normal way and at the same time make a judgement. The connection between judging and describing is often so close that the two could hardly be stated separately. To consider in these circumstances how statements of value are or are not derived from those of fact would be absurd, to point to the inextricable mixing of the two is to show that this neat division of two types to language has only a limited usefulness.

It is not important either to describe how it is that aesthetic reasons and arguments support aesthetic judgements, for in any normal logical sense they do not support them at all. Rather, they explain them : they make it clear what it is that we mean by our judgements and are the answers to a repeated "why?" When we argue about aesthetic matters we are not moving from hypothesis to conclusion or in any other formally logical way, but we show, point, compare, draw attention to, and generally try to make others see what it is that we mean by offering alternative descriptions or suggesting different ways of looking at a particular work. Our judgements are not supported by arguments, but rather are elucidated by a variety of remarks of possibly many linguistic types. We do not appeal to anything except to the education and experience of other individuals, and we try to present complex objects of art to them in a certain light. The successful argument does not point to rules, does not follow any particular logical path, but it is often the one in which we characterize skilfully, show connections some one had not seen and make them aware in ways in which they had not been aware. How this works is best shown through presenting something of the variety of judgements that critics actually make.

Visva-Bharati
Santiniketan.

Ratnabali Bhattacharya