Fundamental Questions in Aesthetics

P. C. CHATTERJI

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY, SIMLA
1968

Despite the novel aesthetic theories of such writers as Collingwood and Langer, the author believes that the discipline of aesthetics has advanced but little. This is because their theories do not provide answers to the problems which ordinary people and critics face in trying to understand and appreciate works of art. Specific problems are posed in each of the chapters of this study and works of art themselves are viewed in most cases as answers to problems. Chatterji deals exhaustively with current controversies in the theory of value and in stating his position explains the relationship of aesthetic value to value in general. While the focus of this work is on English poetry, its differences from the other arts is not neglected.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS IN AESTHETICS

Fundamental Questions in Aesthetics

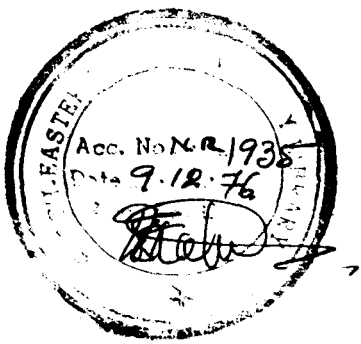
P. C. CHATTERJI

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY, SIMLA
1968

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY

FIRST EDITION
AUGUST 1968

Rs. 20 $ 8.00 45s



Published by the Registrar, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla-5,
and printed at the Delhi Press, Jhandewallan Estate, New Delhi-1.

TO

my wife

PREFACE

It has been contended that less has been said to the point in aesthetics than on any other subject. Mr. Clive Bell, who expressed this view in his delightful book *Art*, in the first decade of this century, gave two reasons for this state of affairs. To make any headway in aesthetics two qualities are required which rarely go together—artistic sensitivity and hard, patient logical thinking. Those who are artistically sensitive do not bother their heads to analyse their experience and discriminate the factors involved in appreciation. On the other hand, those who are capable of patient and logical thought generally lack taste. Their theories might explain the facts but they are the wrong facts. This analysis goes a long way to explain the lack of progress in the field of aesthetics. But it is not the whole story. In the last fifty years or so, when there has been a renewed interest in aesthetics, persons of taste and philosophical ability such as Clive Bell himself, Collingwood and Susanne Langer, to mention only the most distinguished, have concerned themselves with this subject. While they have produced some novel theories of aesthetics I doubt whether the discipline of aesthetics has advanced very much as a result of their endeavours. The reason for this, in my view, is that each one of them has been concerned to give us just another theory of aesthetics as a whole. These theories might be all very well but frequently they throw little light on the specific problems which confront the critic or any one else who wishes

to understand and appreciate works of art. In this respect aesthetics seems to have, till very recently, remained outside the main current of analysis in Anglo-American philosophy.

In other words, as I see it, the trouble is that we have not seriously set about the task of formulating the fundamental questions in aesthetics. And this business of asking the right questions is not an easy matter. Questions may be meaningless, confused, ambiguous or irrelevant to the task in hand. Unless philosophers turn their attention to the problem of clarifying and stating precisely what are the questions which have to be asked, nothing substantial can be achieved.

In recent years no doubt the linguistic analysts have been taking an interest in aesthetics. While I am in sympathy with their approach, in so far as it involves the raising of specific issues, I find that most often their answers to questions are based on conclusions which they have arrived at in other branches of philosophy. Their attempt frequently seems to be to dissolve questions to show that they do not arise. But if the old questions are meaningless or pseudo questions, then what are the questions which should replace them? To this, not much attention has been paid so far.

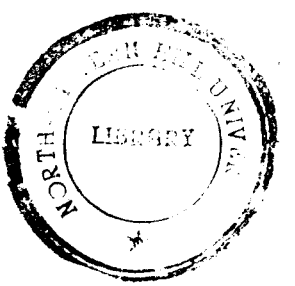
It is proposed in the following pages to formulate and to attempt to answer some of the fundamental questions which arise in artistic appreciation. I trust that the answers provided are not inconsistent with each other but they are not expected to add up to anything like a theory of aesthetics. The main point is to indicate the problems.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Niharranjan Ray, Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla for his interest in my work and for his encouragement. But for him and the assistance I have received from the Institute my project

would not have seen the light of day. The first fruits of my study were presented in a lecture in Calcutta many years ago, under his distinguished chairmanship and I am happy to think that the work has also been completed under his auspices.

P. C. CHATTERJI

Rashtrapati Nivas,
Simla.
22 July, 1968.



CONTENTS

common-sense theory. The alternatives (a) and (b) are examined and rejected. The common-sense view is defended according to which the work of art is an objective fact which has to be discovered. A basis is thus provided for the objectivity of aesthetic judgements. The process of getting to know works of art is examined and is compared and contrasted with knowing other objects.

Chapter III

Art and Imagination ... *Pages 54–80*

The Croce-Collingwood theory that the work of art is an imaginary object is examined and rejected. The illusion theory as presented by Alexander and Langer is analysed. It is shown that the word 'illusion' is being used in a technical sense and creates confusion. The view that works of art are instances of supposal is examined and defended.

Chapter IV

Art and Feeling ... *Pages 81–107*

Several senses of feeling are distinguished of which three are singled out as relevant to the question: What is the relation between feeling and art? These are (a) 'to feel when it means 'to sense' (b) 'to feel that X is the case' (c) 'to feel when it means to experience an emotion'. While (a) and (b) are dealt with briefly (c) is discussed in detail with reference to the question: in what way is a work of art an expression of emotion? and what is the relation between the emotional response to works of art and emotional response to every-day situations? The views of Langer and Bell are examined.

Chapter V

Towards a Theory of Value ... *Pages 108–149*

Evaluation does not necessitate the assignment of value in quantitative terms: all that is necessary is grading. Aesthetic evaluation implies a theory of value in general within which aesthetic value can be defined. Intuitionist and the neo-positivist theories of value are examined and it is contended that neither is satisfactory. This unsatisfactoriness is traced to two common premises–(a) the object theory of meaning and (b) a common model for the evaluative statement which is formulated as "This is good". It is contended that evaluative statements are propositional functions similar to mathematical propositions. This view is explained and defended.

Chapter VI

Aesthetic Criteria ... *Pages 150–176*

Evaluative statements in aesthetics are shown to be a sub-class of evaluative statements in general. The contention that evaluation necessitates the acceptance of a definition of art is criticised. Art objects can be evaluated in terms of two groups of characteristics–(a) generic qualities which are shared by all art objects (and some others) and (b) those which are peculiar to specific arts or groups of arts. The generic characteristics of art are *order, simplicity, coherence* and *compactness.* The principle of organic unity is considered and rejected as meaningless. The specific formal characteristics of poetry are also considered. It is claimed that the generic or specific characteristics discussed are

empirical and therefore open to verification or falsification as in other disciplines.

Chapter VII

The basic requirements which works of art must fulfil if the notion of truth is to be applicable to art are indicated. Thereafter the application of truth to poetry is discussed in detail. It is contended that poetic statements are both emotive and descriptive; the emotive function is dependent on the descriptive. Scientific and poetic statements are distinguished; poetic statements describe not only the relations between external events but the manner in which these events affect the poet. The respects in which a poem may be false or true are examined. The question as to how we can show that a particular poem is true or false is a different and difficult question but no more difficult than proving the truth or falsity of a proposition about history, a scientific theory or a metaphysic. The analogy between poetry and metaphysics is pursued and an attempt is made to show that in the evaluation of a poem the distinction between important and trivial is more relevant than the distinction between true and false.

Chapter I

IS AESTHETICS POSSIBLE ?

In philosophy, if not in other spheres, ours is an age of debunking. The debunking of metaphysics which commenced some forty years ago with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was followed by a summary disposal of moral philosophy. While the earlier Logical Positivists had not thought it worth their powder to devote more than a chapter or two to what they called emotive sentences, a thorough statement of their position was finally presented to the public in Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* in the forties.

More recently, these philosophers, the neo-positivists or linguistic analysts, have started attacking aesthetics. It has been contended that traditional aesthetics rests on a mistake and this and other grounds have been adduced which have challenged the existence of a subject such as aesthetics. To what extent is this attack on traditional aesthetics justified?

The first question which we have to ask ourselves is: what is traditional aesthetics? We are told aesthetics is that branch of philosophy which has tried to answer such questions as "What is Art?" "What is Beauty?" and so on. The answer to

Chapter II

THE ART OBJECT AND HOW YOU KNOW IT

Aesthetics has to perform two functions, which may be described as interpretative and evaluative. In the last chapter we have dealt with the main objections which have been raised against the possibility of evaluation in aesthetics. Before we can decide on the value of a work of art, whether we are going to describe it as a masterpiece or a mediocre work, we must know *what* the work is. We must in some sense be able to understand it and ascertain correctly what aesthetic qualities it possesses. Critics are in the habit of using strange words to describe the aesthetic qualities of works of art, almost as if they were motivated by a perverse desire to confuse and perplex those whom it is their business to enlighten. Thus the critics will speak of colour and texture in music and rhythm in painting, importing into one art the qualities apposite to the other. Suppose nevertheless that a critic were to remark of a Moghul miniature "the painting has great depth" or were to speak of the "spatial rhythm" of a landscape in the Bengal school. Whatever we mean by depth, I think we would all agree that he was assigning quali-

Chapter III

ART AND IMAGINATION

It is universally accepted that there is a special and close relationship between works of art on the one hand and imagination and feeling on the other. Without imagination and feeling works of art cannot be created and a little of both is required also for the proper appreciation of them. But when we come to stating the precise nature of their relationship we find ourselves involved in considerable confusion.

Let us start with imagination. Furlong in his recent book *Imagination*[1] refers to three distinct uses of the word imagination. He distinguishes between something being 'in imagination', of something being done 'with imagination' and 'supposal'. When we speak of something being 'in imagination' we contrast this form of existence with existence or being 'in reality'. Images, dreams, illusions and hallucinations are some of the things which exist in imagination. Art objects also, according to Collingwood, exist in imagination.

When we talk of 'in imagination', we are talking of a manner or form of existence. We are concerned with an

Chapter IV

ART AND FEELING

Every one seems to be agreed that somehow, in some peculiar, unique way, feelings find expression in art and feelings are aroused in the enjoyment of art. If feelings mislead us in science and philosophy, if they are hindrances to efficient action, at least in art they find their justification. Art could not exist without them; in art feelings come into their own. But agreement vanishes as soon as we come to details.

In this chapter I want to address myself to two main questions: (a) In what way are feelings expressed in art? and (b) What is the relationship between the feelings we experience in ordinary life and feelings which we experience in the enjoyment of art? For instance, if listening to Chopin's *Funeral March* I feel sad, is this sadness like the sadness I feel when I hear of the death of a friend? If it is different, then what are the respects in which the two feelings differ?

To begin with, there is this word *feeling*, which for ambiguity is unrivalled in psychology. And yet the high priests of aesthetics in modern times, Clive Bell, Colling-

Chapter V

TOWARDS A THEORY OF VALUE

In the second chapter we have contended that the first task of the critic is one of discovery. He has to give some indication as to the qualities of the work of art, some interpretation of what it is that he has found. In the third and fourth chapters we expanded on this theme and described the elements which go to the making of a work of art. We turn now to the second main task of the critic, namely, evaluation.

It has been argued by some that it is not the function of the critic to evaluate works of art. These people make a caricature of evaluation and then point out that to attempt any such thing would be foolish in the extreme. For instance, it is said that evaluation means drawing up a list of precedence. We have to decide who is the greatest English poet, who comes next and so on. If you are to evaluate a particular poet, say, Auden, you must fix his place in the hierarchy. Then you must dispose of his nearest rivals. You must draw a line between major and minor poets and so on. This, it is contended, is evaluation; and what could be more patently

Chapter VI

AESTHETIC CRITERIA

In the last chapter I have argued that value principles or assertions of intrinsic value are statements of implication. Such implications, I have contended, hold between the ideas of certain states of consciousness and states of affairs, on the one hand, and the a priori concept of value on the other. Among the states of consciousness which are intrinsically valuable are those which are roughly described as the enjoyment of beautiful objects. These states of consciousness I would classify as aesthetic states of consciousness. When we talk of aesthetic value we are talking about the intrinsic value of those states of consciousness which involve the appreciation and enjoyment of the beautiful. It is the state of consciousness which is aesthetic and to which intrinsic value applies. In this context, *aesthetic* qualifies the object denoted; it does not qualify value. There are no *kinds* of value or species of value which we designate as aesthetic value, moral value and so on.

An aesthetic state of consciousness is the enjoyment of works of art which are really beautiful. In this statement

Chapter VII

TRUTH AND POETIC EVALUATION

In the last chapter we examined the criteria which make for excellence in works of art. These we grouped under two heads. Firstly there are criteria which are applicable to works of art generally or at least to most works of art. These criteria are not, however, exclusive to works of art. Secondly we contended that within particular arts or groups, there are some additional criteria which apply. These we designated specific criteria and we discussed in detail those which are relevant to the evaluation of poetry. But we considered only formal evaluative criteria. We have contended that a major dividing line between literature and the other arts is provided by the fact that literature makes use of conventional language. At least on the surface it looks as if something is being asserted in literary works. The value of literary works will, therefore, be determined not only by the manner in which assertions are made but also by what it is that is asserted. Our evaluation of literary works will be affected by the truth or falsity, the importance or triviality of what they say. In this chapter I propose to discuss this

INDEX