

Autobiographical

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It is sometimes said, with a touch of deliberate paradox, that all fiction, even the most phantastic, is in reality autobiographical. Be that as it may, we all know persons who are their own favourite and most fertile topic of conversation, while there are others who will speak only reluctantly about themselves. I confess that I belong to the taciturn kind. It was therefore with some dismay that I received the request to write an autobiographical statement for this number of the so excellent *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*.

I started my academic career, then, as a classicist, taking a degree at Cambridge University in Classics with distinction in Ancient Philosophy. This was followed by a Stanton Fellowship and a second tripos in Philosophy of Religion. For this I read Philosophy under C. D. Broad and F. R. Tennant and attended the lectures of McTaggart. My first book, *Foundations of the Philosophy of Value*, was published by the Cambridge University press in 1933.

While still an undergraduate I was fortunate to enjoy the friendship of Arnold Haskell, who later became known for his connections with British Ballet. At this time he was building up his collection of contemporary paintings and drawings and owned a small gallery in Conduit Street.¹ His influence stimulated and broadened my incipient interest in modern art and aesthetic values in general and I have always remembered our friendship with gratitude.

In the 1930s I founded and organised the Cambridge University Arts Society, arranging weekly talks by practising artists in term time and small

exhibitions in the Gordon Fraser Gallery. I enjoyed an extensive acquaintance among artists, counting Frank Dobson, Maurice Lambert, Leon Underwood, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Mark Gertler, together with the critics Roger Fry, R. H. Wilenski and Herbert Read as special friends. These people among many others helped my powers of appreciation gradually to mature and this, combining with a continued interest in philosophy, laid the foundations for my later work in aesthetics. But before I was ready to write in this field there came the interruption of the war. One lesson I did learn, however, which has not been nullified by a fairly long and diversified experience, and that is the wisdom of Ruth Saw's statement that an aesthetician must always be prepared to face objections from "people who think they know it all without bothering to find out."²

During the war I was employed in the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office in close contact with the Underground Resistance Movements of Poland and Czechoslovakia. There was no opportunity for philosophy or aesthetics. After the war I spent a number of years in diplomatic service as First Secretary (Commercial) in the British Embassy, La Paz. Here I was able to acquire some familiarity with the very different appreciative demands of the Pre-Columbian arts of Peru. It was not until my return in the 1950s, however, that I was able to begin writing in aesthetics. *Theory of Beauty* was published in 1952, *Aesthetics and Criticism* in 1955, both by Routledge and Kegan Paul. In 1960, in conjunction with Herbert Read and Ruth Saw, I founded *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, and continued as sole editor until 1977, when the present editor, Terry Diffey of Sussex University, took over. As my own views in Philosophical Aesthetics continued to develop and mature they were often formulated or "tried out" in articles contributed to this journal, particularly the later issues. Throughout these years I was encouraged and assisted by Professors Alec Mace and Louis Arnaud Reid. My debt to both is greater than I can easily express.

The two books on aesthetics written in the 1950s were concerned with central problems arising from the attempt to establish the criteria by which works of art are assessed in relation to each other and differentiated from artifacts which are not considered as classical statements of a "formalistic" theory of aesthetics. There was indeed emphasis upon form as the objective correlate of the specifically aesthetic value as distinct from the many other values which works of art carry but which are carried also by non-aesthetic objects. For a value which is common to a number of things cannot serve as a principle of distinction between them. A similar insight inspired the work of Monroe C. Beardsley and those who followed in his steps. But in my writing there was no implication that aesthetic value is

necessarily or always more important than the other values which an artifact may carry. Indeed in these books I already advanced the suggestion that in our critical assessments of works of art two distinct criteria are involved, stature or greatness and aesthetic quality. This idea was further developed in my Presidential Address to The British Society of Aesthetics, published in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1984) under the title "Assessment and Stature." In connection with the literary and performing arts I also proposed the germ of a theory of "concretisation" which attracted the interest of Roman Ingarden as an analogue of his own theory of "concretisation," although I had not read his writings at that time.

These lines of thought led to the conclusion that aesthetic value is the property which some things possess of stimulating and supporting a kind of awareness peculiar to them and distinct from conceptualised knowledge. They exercise, expand and enlarge *percipience* in the sense of direct apprehension as distinct from knowledge or understanding *about* a thing, however complex the thing may be. This insight was developed in *The Art of Appreciation* (1970), in the series "Appreciation of the Arts" which I edited for the Oxford University Press. Here I argued that aesthetic appreciation is a skill which, like other skills, requires cultivation and that it consists centrally in the enhancement of sensibility. The implications of this for education were developed in two articles, "Creativity, Progress and Personality" and "The Cultivation of Sensibility in Education," contributed in 1984 to the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

The term "aesthetic value" has two conceptually distinct meanings which are not always kept apart. As already described, it may refer to the properties in virtue of which, aesthetic objects are discriminated from other things and assessed in relation to each other. These are the properties which render them capable of evoking and sustaining aesthetic experience. And the understanding of aesthetic experience, or "disinterested perception," arose gradually, as described by Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz³, along with the differentiation of the fine arts from the useful handicrafts, in the course of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. But "aesthetic value" also refers to the value we place upon aesthetic experience itself in comparison to the many other activities in which human beings may indulge. As George Dickie has emphasized, aesthetic value in the former sense is derivative from this latter value even in such otherwise drivers aesthetic theories as those of Beardsley and Goodman.⁴ Latterly I have been concerned with this latter value and the problems it raises. In several recent articles I have suggested an evolutionary context for the understanding of this, as follows.-

We are faced with the initial paradox that in advanced societies cultivation of the fine arts is regarded with pretty general agreement as an important cultural value although in fact only a relatively small minority of people is actively interested in them. In the course of evolution human beings developed faculties of intelligence, observation, curiosity, prediction, etc., which served the practical purposes of survival and more comfortable living and eventually enabled mankind to achieve its present position of dominance in the biosphere and to overpopulate the earth. When these faculties are exercised and cultivated for the sake of their own refinement and perfection instead of for practical and biological ends, we speak of "cultural values." So when intelligence is exercised for its own sake and not merely as an element in the survival mechanism of mankind there emerge the cultural value of philosophy, logic, mathematics and theoretical science. Curiosity is not merely a human drive but in one form or another is operative throughout sentient life, leading to that familiarity with the environment which favours successful adaptation or control. The cat carefully investigates before settling down in a new environment. Among human beings curiosity when combined with intelligence and freed from utilitarian functions is the motive force of the search for truth, the sciences of cosmology, particle physics and molecular biology on the one hand and on the other hand of such disciplines as history and archaeology. Aesthetic experience is the cultivation for its own sake of the faculty of percipience, or direct apprehension, which underlies all our mental functions. This is its nature and this it is that establishes its position as a cultural value. The paradox we noticed is common, if less conspicuously, to other recognised cultural values. It is on these lines, I believe, that an explanation and understanding of aesthetic value is to be found.

In addition to the persons already mentioned, I welcome this opportunity of acknowledging my inestimable debt to many contemporaries and colleagues, without whose help I could have achieved nothing. In particular I have learned much from R. K. Elliott and Ruby Meager.

Notes and References

1. Arnold Haskell: *Ballet* (1935); *Black on White* (1933).
2. Ruth L. Saw: *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (1971), P. 15.
3. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz: *History of Aesthetics* (Eng. Trans., 1970-1974).
4. George Dickie, "Evaluating Art" in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 25, No.1 (1985).