

NOTES AND REVIEWS

STANDARDS IN LITERARY CRITICISM

K. VISWANATHAM

We have a tongue in our mouths. It tells us if a thing is sweet or sour, bitter or salty. It is unfortunate we do not have a tongue in our minds which can tell us precisely and accurately if a book is sweet or sour, shabby or superb. Every Tom waxes eloquent about Keats or Kalidasa but if a new poem is to be assessed he fumbles, as F. L. Lucas, whose book on Aristotle is a classic, fumbled about *The Waste Land*. A great critic of the old school wondered if Eliot ever wrote two consecutive lines of indisputable poetry. And today we wonder at the imbecility of this critic just as Francis Jeffrey's 'This will never do' against Wordsworth's poetry has become a byword for imperceptiveness. If Milton dismissed the light fantastic toys of the Metaphysicals, Donne became the very God of modern sensibility.

The judgement of anything literary is biased and coloured by subjectivism. One man's meat is another's poison. Many men, many minds. Tastes differ depending on the background and equipment of the indi-

vidual. Even about Shakespeare there is this astonishing and puzzling variation in opinion. One critic regards one of his sonnets as a pearl; another of equal competence wonders if Shakespeare could ever compose such a poor sonnet. Even about *Hamlet*, one of the finest in Shakespeare's canon, there is the condemnation by Eliot that it is lacking in objective correlative and the condemnation of Eliot by the admirers of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare we have the problem of disintegration. What one textual critic considers the acme of the play-wright's power is considered the very nadir by another. Shakespeare appreciation is the happy hunting ground of maniacs.

If even about Shakespeare opinions could be so varied and varying, opinions about lesser artists could be a legion. As the Latin saying goes, *Degustibus non est disputandum*.

Not many know the fuller implications of the title of Eliot's collection of critical essays *The Sacred Wood*. The title says a great deal about the role and function of a

critic. The sacred wood is a slaughter house and the priest there is a murderer. This wood is the grove of Nemi described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, his monumental work. The priest of the grove prowls about a tree in the grove with a drawn sword. Eliot writes 'He was a priest and a murderer and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to the office by slaying the priest and having slain him he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or craftier'. In this sense Dryden is slain by Coleridge, Coleridge by Arnold and Arnold by Eliot; thus goes on the succession by sword: a new priest liquidates his predecessor and is in turn liquidated by his successor. This is to say that each age gets its legislator of taste. We look at writings from his point of view. We think his thoughts, speak his speech, write within the curve of his idiom.

No one is a priest for all time. We have to note the dicta of all the priests, past and present. Literary criticism lives by a wise eclecticism; many roads lead to Xanadu. In the words of Daiches, there is no 'single' right method of handling literary problems, no single approach to works of literary art that will yield all the significant truths about them (p. 391) That is why perhaps some poets are on the rails in every age; they have 'multi-valence' as Shakespeare has. Some poets get derailed in some ages and become favourites again. The saying that familiarity breeds contempt is applicable to poets too.

Some poets lose their strangeness for some time and come into their own again after the familiarity is dis-familiarised. There is need for the 're-barbarisation' of the Word. No poetic style stays strange. The Cambridge critics needled Milton and shook him off the pedestal. Did not Keats say: Milton is death to me? Croce refuses to consider *The Divine Comedy* a poem; to him it is lyrical extracts sandwiched between pseudo-science. If Croce could say this about Dante who in Eliot's view is greater than Shakespeare, as his *Paradise* passes beyond the Pillars of Hercules in the uncharted waters of poetry, we have to admit that practical criticism is bound to be fragmentary, indirect, approximate. All criticism is tentative, oblique, partial. Literary criticism is an art, not science. Appreciation may be independent of theory though theory may strengthen appreciation. A work of art is greater than its interpreters. *Oedipus Rex* is greater than the *Poetics*. It is said wisdom is in a collection of men. Likewise we may say that appreciation is in a collection of readers and *Hamlet* the play greater than what Shakespeare intended it to be; the New Critics mention Intentional Fallacy as a hurdle. In the field of literary criticism no one is Sir Oracle or Madame Infallibility. Opinions vary and vary irreconcilably. One is amused by reviewers off books or examiners of theses. One says that the contents show admirable research; another says that they need revision on the lines suggested by him as if his suggestions are the ne plus ultra of scholarship. Even when two agree,

they agree with each other for different reasons. One feels sometimes sceptical about examiners or reviewers; they acclaim as original what is borrowed and ignore what is original. The only thing we can say with some certainty is that the opinion of a Bradley on Shakespeare is more valuable than ours. What C.S. Lewis has to say on Spenser or Milton in *The Allegory of Love* or *A Preface to Paradise Lost* demands our attention as he is more competent and better equipped than several others and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* is a deeper examination than, say, Addison's tourist guide appreciation of Milton. Critics devote a whole lifetime to the study of a subject and hence acquire a competence to talk about. Of course, there is the possibility of some one understanding it better if one has greater intuition. One may handle a subject for several years and still remain a dud; it is not a question of mere time. Shakespeare may be a second rate scholar but is a first rate reader. Ben Jonson is a first rate scholar but a second rate reader and hence a lesser poet. There are some who pose as Wordsworth scholars though their acquaintance is only with the *Fintern Abbey* poem.

In the words of Watson poetry resists interpretation by any single criterion. We make approaches to a work of art; some are more valuable than others depending on the equipment or intuition of the critic. There cannot be finality, definitiveness, inevitability about anything in literary criticism. No two men think alike as no two men pronounce alike. Think of Dr. John-

son's remark that the genius of Shakespeare flowed into his comedies; critics laugh at it today; by that single remark, Dr. Leavis says, Dr. Johnson disqualifies himself as a critic of Shakespeare. Linguists say that the Quinine may be pronounced *kwineen*, *Kwinain*, *kwainain*. Many men, many minds. Let us cultivate the charity or nobility of great critics. The great Anandavardhana points out that finding faults in great poets is *micning mallecho*, a pettifogging attitude. And Quintilian the great Roman rhetorician after listing errors in usage writes breezily and disarmingly in his classic *The Institution of Oratory* that a reader may find examples of those errors in his own book. As the Hermit says in *Sankuntalam*, *anuddhatāh satpuruṣāh samṛddhibhih* :

Wellek and Warren point out : "The total meaning of a work of art is the result of a process of accretion; that is, the history of its criticism by its many readers in many ages. "The work of art should be looked at from the point of view of a third time contemporaneous neither with the author nor with the reader." Perspectivism is a safe guide avoiding the pitfalls of Absolutism and Relativism. So, "Many men, many minds" is not anarchy of taste but the monarchy of appreciation dehiscing from the Reading Publics; many men, many minds become one Man, One Mind. Let us bear in mind that Criticism is not auto-telic.

A critic is a midwife, not the mother, No statue has ever been put up, says Sibelius, for a critic. The great art of criticism is to get oneself out of the way, wrote Arnold,

and let humanity decide. Quot hominess tot sententiae, as Terence says.

Tennessee Williams writes in his *Memoirs* : "All true work of an artist must be personal, whether directly or obliquely, it must and does reflect the emotional climates of its creator". The interpretation of that work of art is bound to be like-wise personal as it is a commerce between one individual and another who are not just two cakes of soap of the same make. To see the object as in itself it really is the Arnoldian ideal. But no man walks abroad save on his own shadow. The Personal Heresy may be Orthodoxy. The impersonality that Eliot talks about so much is contradicted by his own statement that Dante and Shakespeare created their Epic and Dramatic wealth out of their gigantic personal convulsions, of

course universalized. *The Waste Land* itself is said to be a personal whimper or bang Valmiki's grief flowed into verse : Slokatva-māpadtyata yasya sokah. No song is seraphically free from taint of personality. Personality is not a taint but a rich tint that individualizes a poet and marks him off from others. De-personalization is dehydration and is not a useful term in criticism. If all art is personal, the appreciation of that art cannot altogether escape from being personal—personal in terms of equipment and intuition, not in the sense of a wounded psyche. As C S. Lewis puts it, we can never get out of our own skins. A character in Shakespeare says :

Simply the thing I am
Shall make me live

Emeritus Professor
of English
Andhra University (India)

RICHARD WOLLHEIM, *ART AND ITS OBJECTS*, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, SECOND EDITION, 1980, 8V O DEMY, PAGES 270 WITH SIX SUPPLEMENTARY ESSAYS AND REVISED AND ENLARGED BIBLIOGRAPHY.

The publication of Second Edition of Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects* in 1980 is significant not simply because of the addition of six supplementary essays. Even without these essays the relevance of the reissue of the original essay *Art and Its Objects* in the second edition seems to resuscitate with renewed vigour in the context of a far greater multiplicity of approaches and ideas in the field of aesthetics. The second edition is also remarkable in its "changes and additions" in the bibliography. This new bibliography shows Wollheim's acquaintance with a host of recent major contributions. In spite of a considerable comprehensiveness Wollheim's attempt to make good the omissions in the six supplementary essays is indeed commendable!—there remains some uneasy yearnings disturbing a perceptive reader. The most obviously disturbing of such longings is the absence of any reference to that influential school of aestheticians headed by Susanne K. Langer. Though much of the pragmatic observations contained in *Art and Its Objects* and the six supplementary essays appended to its second edition meanders closely round assumptions similar to Langer school, one feels the presence of a chasm in the arguments that could perhaps have been satisfactorily bridged by allowances made for Langer

school of thought. For example, Wollheim's extremely analytical treatment of the 'physical-object hypothesis,' which occupies a sizable portion of the principal essay and the third supplementary essay, could have gained considerable support and depth placed against Susanne Langer's notion of 'virtual life' of a work of art propounded in her *Feeling and Form and Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*. Moreover, though Wollheim incorporates a reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Psychology of Imagination* in his bibliography his essays exhibit hardly any cognizance of Sartre's existentialist position of the 'unreal' status of a work of art.

The chief merit of Richard Wollheim's work lies in the completely unbiased analytical approach to certain crucial controversial issues in aesthetics. Wollheim approaches these issues from a strictly common-sense point of view and presents his arguments in perfectly commonplace language of everyday purlance. His treatment of what he calls the *bricoleur* problem following Levi-Strauss is a typical example. Levy-Strauss draws an analogy between human culture and the work of a *bricoleur* or a craftsman who improvises useful objects from the old junk. Wollheim seems to suggest that the work of any artist is created out of materials and medium available among the works of earlier artists. This also accounts for the variety and diversity available in the world of art. Wollheim has taken cognizance of Andre Malraux's *The voices of Silence* in his bibliography, but the body of his main argument has not benefitted from Malraux's

contentions Every artist, no doubt, learns the nature and use of his medium from the use made of the medium by his predecessors in the field. Thus the work of an artist seems to be reduced to collage or montage composed by a skilled craftsman. Should these works be described as creative works of art, is a question that obviously remains unanswered. Malraux has suggested a way out in claiming that the artist learns to look at reality distributed in patterns imposed upon it by his predecessors. Consciousness of these patterns enables him also to visualise the possibility of newer patterns. Harold Bloom's two remarkable books *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading* are brilliant studies of how an artist struggles to wrench from the overpowering influence of some models he takes as his ideal guide. But as Wollheim rightly indicates, this *bricoleur* problem remains a real problem with the primitive artists who presumably might not have got the opportunity of looking into any prior example.

Wollheim's fifth supplementary essay introduces another enigmatic problem in aesthetics: that of the nature of aesthetic perception. Wollheim's real insight lies in considering the issue from the point of view of the recipient, who seems to observe the symbolic representation of something through a particular medium as the thing in itself. His use of the two expressions 'seeing-as' and 'seeing-in' are extremely suggestive. They focus our attention on the vital part

played by the capacity to decode the symbolic message in successful aesthetic communication and links the whole issue up with his discussions on the relationships between art and language and code. The vital problem of language and the iconic requirement of an artistic medium has attracted the attention of critics and aestheticians long since; and it has acquired special significance in the hands of the Imagists in the early years of the present century. Ever growing attention paid to the study of imagery is a clear indication of modern preoccupation with these issues. Remarkable insights are contained in the works of I. A. Richards, Sigurd Burckhardt, and a host of other critics. Some remarkable observations are contained in E. Daitz's essay on 'The Picture Theory of Meaning' incorporated as Chapter III of *Essays in Conceptual Analysis* edited by Antony Flew in 1956. Daitz distinguished between iconic signs and conventional signs and includes language under conventional signs that are incapable of capturing pictorial effects. Richard Wollheim's work is indeed a timely rejoinder to this large body of significant contributions.

Two other essays appended to the second edition need special mention: 'Criticism as Retrieval' and 'Art and Evaluation'. In the former Wollheim considers the part played by criticism in retrieving the creative process from the finished product. Wollheim seems to suggest that the discovery of the artist's intention from an inquiry into the creative process is an essential part of the proper understanding and appreciation of a

work of art. Yet at the same time he remains fully conscious of the difficulties facing a faithful retrieval of the creative process. Only in rare cases this may be possible; and even in such rare cases whether retrieval is a real help in understanding the finished product, is a question not always easy to answer. In case of a large body of works from pre-historic times down to Renaissance it is impossible to retrieve the creative process for lack of evidence; and this sets a serious limit to criticism as retrieval. Wollheim admits this limitation and cautions us against imposing our own modes of thought on these works of art belonging to ages we know so little of. In 'Art and Evaluation' Wollheim takes up the question of evaluation which he has deliberately avoided discussing in the main body of his *Art and Its Objects*. In his typical analytical way he considers the question of aesthetic value and its application to works of art. The four different approaches to aesthetic value designated as Realism, Objectivism, Relativism, and Subjectivism show Wollheim's capacity for analysis at its best. All these approaches to aesthetic value ultimately lead to the wide variety of criteria that often baffles us.

MANISH CHAKRAVARTY

JOHN FISHER (ED.), *PERCEIVING ARTWORKS*, TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS, PHILADELPHIA, 1980, 8VO DEMY, HARDBOUND, PP. IX + 242.

If aesthetic perception is, what Bernhard Berenson, Harold Osborne and many other aestheticians have said, expansion of vital awareness — a form of cognition characterised as direct apprehension or insight rather than a mere sense activity, an emotional response or an analytical or discursive understanding, though sometimes it may follow from discursive analysis and may be accompanied by or even excited by emotion, *Perceiving Artworks* is a misnomer. Without any extension or sophistication of meaning *Perceiving* refers to the activity of visual sense organs only; the art works, therefore, taken for consideration are only visual in character that too limited to painting, especially representational. The root problem is whether our eyes move in the same way, say, when we perceive a flower and a picture of a flower. By empirical and experimental investigations the contributors to this volume have demonstrated with great skill that visual perception is a complicated psycho-philosophical human behaviour and *perceiving* pictorial arts is still more so as it requires the perceptual qualities of art works as well as perceptual process in observers, the special qualities of the objects and the special qualities of our experience which determine our relationship with the artworks. Professor Fisher writes in his introduction to the volume, "The problem of perception in artworks is a problem about (actual, derivative,

imaginary etc.) processes and qualities, about persons and objects, about discourse and objects of discourse, about sense and semiotics. No contemporary aesthetic theory can avoid the problem.” (PP. 5-6)

It is in the light of this conviction that he has collected ten essays by some of the most distinguished contemporary philosophers and psychologists who fit together not by agreement in conclusion but by agreement that the perception of visual arts is a complex and significant human activity. The contributors are Peter Machamer, M. W. Wartofsky, Godfrey Vessey, Alan Tormey, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Margaret Hagen, John Kennedy, Rudolf Arnheim, Monroe Beardsley and Joseph Margolis. The first seven authors deal with the issue, more or less, in the light of the most influential contemporary writers such as Gombrich, Goodman, Gibson and Gregory. Machamer believes that a theory of art presupposes a theory of perception and fitting the existing three theories of perception — behaviourist, cognitivists etc. and gestalt — finds them dissatisfactory as the psychological theories themselves are dissatisfactory. Nevertheless, he is hopeful that in future a satisfactory theory of art may emerge out of a satisfactory psychological theory by a harmonious blending of the three theories available. Wartofsky repeats Gombrich in arguing : we see what we paint instead of merely painting what we see treating there by all pictorial representations as optically correct. Hagen very wisely warns the perceptionists for their over emphasis upon the *perception* of painting ignoring its cognitive

and affective aspects. Wolterstorff's highly technical paper attempts at an explication of the pictorial concept of looking-like by giving an illocutionary account of pictorial representation. Arnheim discusses the part played by invariants and dynamics in Gestalt Psychology bringing it to bear on the perception of art.

Beardsley and Margolis contribute two different kinds of essay dealing with the conceptual problems of art perception. In his speculation on the interlink of psychology and aesthetics Beardsley shows that the relevance of philosophy of art to the psychology of art justifies the role of psychological explanation in aesthetics. In aesthetic perception, he demonstrates, psychological factors including 'aesthetic propensities' and 'aesthetic competence' play significant roles. Margolis relates the possibility of a science of aesthetic perception to the possibility of a science of human culture itself and as such it requires a fundamental revision of the very paradigm of science. Although somewhat inconclusive, these two papers are strikingly refreshing in their diversion from the exhaustive and technical elaborations on the visual representations that precede them.

Professor Fisher's collection convinces us that the perception of pictorial arts is a multidisciplinary problem the reflections on which cannot exhaust with either a Gombrich or a Goodman. The book, a representative cluster of contemporary thoughts on perception of artworks, inaugurates new avenues for fresh ideas rather than closed them for ever.

THOMAS R. MARTLAND, *RELIGION AS ART: AN INTERPRETATION*, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, ALBANY, 1981, OCTAVO DEMY, PAPER BOUND, PP. 221.

This comprehensive study of the common characteristics of art and religion argues its thesis cogently well. In describing art and religion as a happy blend of realistic and idealistic elements he indeed shows the right direction to an otherwise complex subject the meaning of which is difficult to unravel. That is the reason why even in jazz and folk music he finds some kind of a compromise and says "even here, when the music is at its hottest, the performer still considers his creativity as only a 'break' or a "riff", that is, an ornamentation to a score. (p. 37) Hence his assertion: 'Jazz and folk music are not mere exuberance any more than classical opera is mere repetition.' (p. 38) The religious example of what he calls *tremendum* and *fascinosum* existing together side by side is the classical one of Dionysus and Apollo functioning together in Greek society. The ultimate example of this process of coalescence occurs when Martland says, 'Art and religion not only impose a world; the world also imposes upon art and religion, and this coalescing process of imposing and being imposed upon is the necessary means to that new world.' (p. 100) But this coalescence, argues the author, breaks down when the genuine artistic and religious sentiment abates and, consequently, the dualism of act and

purpose reasserts itself. It becomes evident to the public that man acts religiously to attain salvation and the artist creates to understand himself more clearly. But there is absolutely no reason as to why the writer should be so apologetic and defensive about the matter. However unique may be the blend of idealistic and realistic elements in art and religion, after a certain analysis it is likely to get separated. At best its unity is that of a chemical compound and nothing more.

As a corollary of this defensive style of reasoning, there arises a bias. This is a bias against the realistic variety of art which the author conveniently dismisses as decadent. This results in the statement: '... art and religion do not so much express fundamental feelings common to mankind as determine these feelings'. Another similar claim which can not be sustained is that art and religion should not be verified by any preconceived structure of understanding. The evaluator must immerse himself in art or religion to do justice to his job. On verification this sounds like the tenets of 'art for art's sake' movement and in spite of its glamour and persuasiveness leaves one uncomfortable. One need not necessarily immerse himself in the river to fathom the depth of its water.

But the title is misleading. *Religion as Art* does not aim at interpreting religion as a form of art. It shows the ways in which art and religion "present collectively created forms of perception and meaning by which men interpret their experience" (P. 1); "art

and religion are similar and therefore must be doing such and such, rather than that since art and religion do such and such they must be similar" (P. 3). This functional approach to art and religion is intended not for the professional philosophers only, but also for the people who wish to incorporate an understanding of the activities of art and religion 'into a comprehensive world view' (P. 11) and in fulfilling this aim lies the

chief merit of the book where the author draws his examples from six world religions— Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism Confucianism and Islam and from the five fine arts and the performing arts.

The scale of the work is heroic; and with its masterly interpretations and correlations of the cross-cultural issues in aesthetics and religion the work opens new avenues for those who interlink arts and religion.

B. S. BARAL