

Aesthetics Without the Aesthetic?

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I

In the following paper I wish to consider the current state of aesthetics as an academic discipline in the English-speaking world. More particularly, I wish to draw out what I take to be a problematic aspect of that discipline. Let me begin, however, with something quaint: with Clive Bell, a purveyor of just the kind of philosophically untenable rhapsody in opposition to which contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics arose.

The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion. The objects that provoke this emotion we call works of art. (Bell 1913: 6)

Thus Bell in his *Art* of 1913: a text unlikely to be cited in contemporary aesthetic discussion, unless it is to exemplify some untenable formalism or to demonstrate just how confused aesthetics can become if ‘art’ is used as an evaluative term. Let us look, however, at just what makes this particular quotation quaint.

The first thing that will strike the contemporary reader is the characterization of aesthetic experience as a ‘peculiar emotion’, suggesting, as it does, that the study of aesthetics should most properly belong to psychology. In fact, of course, for the first two hundred years of its history aesthetics did belong to psychology. The foundations of the modern study of aesthetics were laid in its eighteenth-century equivalent: moral philosophy. Indeed, it was the problem of accounting for the peculiar psychological mechanism of the ‘judgement of taste’ that first brought aesthetic experience into philosophy. The word ‘judgement’ here should not mislead us: for the eighteenth century this judgement manifested itself as, and was identified with, the ‘sentiment’ the object aroused. Such writers as Shaftesbury, Addison, Leibniz, Du Bos, Hutcheson, Hume, Burke, Smith, Montesquieu, Alison, and Kant, held taste to be an involuntary response: a ‘judgement’ that the eye makes at first glance and without the intervention of the will; one that, even in retrospect, the reason cannot account for. The pleasures of taste, in contrast to the delight arising from ‘prospects of advantage’ or attending on the action of reason, made their way ‘directly to the soul’ in the manner of a sensation, following on perception, as Burke put it, as ‘necessarily’ and ‘immediately’ as the experience of heat follows on the presence of fire (Burke 1958: 92). Moreover, the sources of this pleasure could vary widely from person to person, and over time for the same individual. This is

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the area of experience, the curious psychological phenomenon, that these eighteenth-century philosophers, who we now think of as the founders of aesthetics, wished to analyse.

Unsurprisingly, then, throughout the nineteenth century, British, French, German, and American textbooks on ‘moral philosophy’, ‘mental philosophy’, or the ‘philosophy of mind’, and, later, basic textbooks in psychology, would invariably include chapters either on individual ‘emotions’ such as beauty or sublimity, or whole sections on ‘the emotion of taste’, ‘the aesthetic sense’, ‘aesthetic emotions’, or *le sentiment esthétique*. It is worth remembering in this connection that Bullough’s often reprinted “‘Psychical Distance” as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle’ of 1912 first appeared in the *British Journal of Psychology*.

At the same time, however, within philosophy another aesthetics was taking shape. It was inspired at first by the ‘common sense’ philosophy of Reid and by the work of Cousin, and later by the belated reception of Hegel and that Romantic theorizing (for example, Shelley 1965) that ultimately owed its existence to German Idealism. This other aesthetics, the aesthetics of philosophy departments, was both anxious to disown any deference to psychology, and almost exclusively devoted to the study of art. Thus, by 1901, Croce, arguably the leading aesthetician of his day, could plausibly argue that, since the aesthetic is a matter of the expressive, that is, ‘the spiritual activity of representation’, such ‘pseudo-aesthetic’ categories as sublime, pathetic, moving, humorous, idyllic, and so on, ought to be excluded from aesthetics and turned over to psychology, where they belonged (Croce 1922: 98–99). For their part, the psychologists could be equally dismissive of this new aesthetics. Two decades earlier, Hall, surveying the teaching of philosophy in the United States, had written that aesthetics in universities had become nothing more than the summary treatment of an immense range of art forms coupled with ‘more or less arbitrary psychological principles ... laid down as fundamental canons of taste’, without any attempt to ‘explain the ulterior causes or the nature of feelings of pleasure or pain’ (Hall 1879: 94).

Despite Bell’s use of the word ‘emotion’, it is, of course, to the philosophical strand of aesthetics that he belongs. (In fact, phrases such as ‘aesthetic emotion’ or ‘aesthetic mood’ were, for a time, common to both philosophy and psychology.) Indeed, he explicitly states that the question ‘Why are we so profoundly moved by forms related in a particular way?’, that is, the question of Hall’s ‘ulterior causes’, is ‘irrelevant to aesthetics’ (Bell 1913: 11). Bell’s belonging to the philosophy rather than the psychology of aesthetics is also plainly signalled by the second claim in the quotation with which we began: ‘The objects that provoke this [aesthetic] emotion we call works of art.’ The aplomb with which he presents this resounding non sequitur is another aspect of the quaintness of the quotation.

What can one say to such a claim? What can one say to a claim that ejects from aesthetics not only everything written on the topic in the eighteenth century, including the work of Kant, but also most of what had been subsequently written up to Bell’s period? Who is this ‘we’, when no one, or at least no one outside of the exalting influence of Hegel, had ever claimed that aesthetic experience was to be *identified* with the experience of art?

Let me make quite clear exactly what renders Bell’s statement so apparently eccentric. The topic of aesthetics, and the discipline of aesthetics, has hitherto derived its identity from a psychological phenomenon: the aesthetic experience, that ‘part of ethics’, as Hume had characterized it, ‘left by nature to baffle all the pride of philosophy, and make her sensible of her narrow boundaries and slender acquisitions’ (Hume 1975: 267). Bell himself, as we have seen, declares that the unity of his subject lies in the experience of a ‘peculiar emotion’. Now this emotion is to be identified with a single kind of object (visual art), and no inquiry into its psychological foundations is to be made. An analogy may best bring out the strangeness of these restrictions. Let us say that we were investigating another peculiar emotion: for example, fear. Following Bell’s procedure we would first fix

on a single potential source of fear, say tigers (irrespective of the fact that they are not always encountered as objects of fear), and then, since the 'why' of the emotion is ruled out of court, proceed to examine the fearfulness of tigers without any reference to the idea of danger. It would be an extraordinary way to prosecute an investigation of fear.

And so the quotation from Bell now strikes us as quaint. What is interesting, however, is the way in which *both* of his claims – that aesthetic experience is a 'peculiar emotion' *and* that objects of aesthetic experience are called 'works of art' – contribute to this quaintness. With regard to the first claim we may allow that perhaps 'emotion' is a useful shorthand for the mental state that is aesthetic experience, and that it is merely the unfamiliarity of Bell's vocabulary that produces the effect, but, with regard to the second claim, it is surely self-evident now, as indeed it has been throughout the history of aesthetics, that having an experience of art is neither a necessary nor even a sufficient condition for having an aesthetic experience.

Why, then, begin with Bell at all, if what is going to concern us here is contemporary analytical aesthetics? Principally, because he is so very representative of the state of aesthetics in Europe and America between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. I single out Bell only because in the two sentences quoted he encapsulates a whole era of aesthetics. He is, very indirectly and casually, to be sure, heir to a Hegelian/Romantic tradition in which the subject of aesthetics is art, in which artistic value is taken to be 'timeless' (in effect, objective), and in which the experience of art is taken to be ethically significant. In this aesthetics, the object of enquiry is not what mental mechanism might produce a phenomenon like apparently disinterested (or 'impractical' as nineteenth-century psychologists would say) pleasure, but rather, much more grandly, if vaguely, the 'truth' that art contains.

Another reason for beginning with Bell's work is that it is just this moment – the opening decades of the twentieth century – that sees the rise of the 'analytical' method within Anglo-American philosophy. Within the space of a generation everything in Bell's work will become quaint. Long before the closing decades of the same century he will serve, if he serves at all, within Anglo-American aesthetics, only as a striking instance of how, once upon a time, sound appeared more important than sense in the discussion of aesthetic topics. And yet ...

II

Let us consider what the average university student is learning when they learn about aesthetics within the analytical tradition today. Take the following sample of widely used aesthetics textbooks, in the form of anthologies, published in the last 20 years. Hanfling's *Philosophical Aesthetics* (1992) begins with a section addressing the question 'What is art?', the remaining sections of the book being devoted to 'art and feeling', 'art and society', and 'art and value'. Feagin and Maynard's *Aesthetics* (1997), after a brief nod to the aesthetic in general, devotes five of its six sections to the identity of art, the artist, the understanding of artworks, emotional response to art, and how art can be evaluated. The first big question in Korsmeyer's *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* (1998) is 'What is Art?'. The rest of the book is divided into questions relating to the experience and appreciation of art, the evaluation of art, what we can learn from art, why we enjoy painful experience in art, and the role of the artist in art. Levinson's *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2003) is similarly overwhelmingly concerned with the definition, ontology, interpretation, and evaluation of art; one of its four sections being given over to separate chapters on specific art forms. Gaut and Lopes' *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2005) likewise devotes its final nine chapters to individual arts, having previously dealt with such topics as the definition, ontology, and evaluation of art, fiction and pictorial representation, and the various relations between art

and criticism, knowledge, ethics, and creativity. Kivy's *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (2004) is divided into two parts; the first begins by addressing the definition of 'art' and goes on to deal with the ontology of art, the evaluation of art, the interpretation of art, art and morality, and emotion in art. In contrast, the second half of the book is devoted to 'The Arts and Other Matters'. Lamarque and Olsen's title – *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (2004) – might raise an expectation that perhaps some kind of distinction is going to be made, but this is quickly dashed: we begin, as usual, with the question of identifying art, followed by the ontology of art, aesthetic properties, intention and interpretation, the evaluation of art, fictionality, pictorial art, literature, music, popular art, and, an increasingly familiar hanger-on, the aesthetics of nature. I am labouring the point, I know. It is worth noting, however, that this brief survey actually excludes any of those textbooks that overtly announce their topic to be the philosophy of art, even though such works are equally likely to serve as textbooks for courses in aesthetics. Bell's claim that the aesthetic is to be identified with the experience of art certainly may strike us as quaint in the bald formulation he gives it, yet the idea itself seems to be axiomatic in the contemporary practice of Anglo-American aesthetics.

Discussions of the aesthetics of nature and even of 'everyday aesthetics' have begun to appear (see, for example, Light and Smith 2005), but they are, as yet, self-consciously marginal. No one today would perhaps agree that the aesthetic is coterminous with the experience of art, but, as our textbooks show, almost everyone within Anglo-American aesthetics behaves as if it is. Moreover, Bell's other restriction of the aesthetic – to only a certain class of artworks – has also been mirrored in the history of twentieth-century analytical aesthetics. In practice great swathes of what we might have presumed to be the aesthetic experience of art – in the form of popular art and design – have been ignored, theoretically disqualified, or admitted only under sufferance; that is, admitted only after first being transformed through analysis into something possessing whatever the theorist believes to be the defining characteristics of fine art. One result of this is that twentieth-century aesthetics signally fails to correspond to the average subject's experience of the aesthetic. There is an air of artificiality about its study; one feels less that one is going deeper into the world one knows than that one is being initiated into a separate one.

I am not of course suggesting a conspiracy, nor am I insinuating an unconscious desire to hold on to a particular moment – Bell's moment – in the history of aesthetics. A much simpler explanation can be found in the familiar phenomenon of academic momentum: we write about what the others write about. Even so, there was nothing inevitable about the shape of contemporary analytical aesthetics. Beardsley, in *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958), dealt quite extensively with the nature of aesthetic experience itself, and returned to the topic throughout his career. Yet, while the work may be considered a classic of the analytical approach, Beardsley's inclusion of the topic is far from representative of that approach. (Likewise his argument that 'art' may be defined in terms of the intention to create an aesthetic experience, see Beardsley 1983.) One looks in vain, for example, for an overview of the nature of aesthetic experience in Kelly's four volume *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (1998), and it is a topic conspicuously absent from the textbooks surveyed earlier. Only around 20 of the 350 or so pages of Korsmeyer's *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, mentioned above, are devoted to the nature of aesthetic experience itself – rather dramatically illustrating that the nature of aesthetic experience is not one of the big questions of current aesthetics.

The non-aesthetician would probably interpret this neglect of the concept of aesthetic experience as evidence that a consensus on the concept had made discussion redundant: that the nature of that experience was so well understood that it could simply be taken as a given. This would be an error. There is sufficient consensus for certain notions, such as 'disinterestedness' to be invoked ad

hoc, but even the meaning of ‘disinterestedness’ is not uncontroversial – except in the sense that there is currently no very lively controversy about it.

Danto reflecting back on his well-regarded *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), wrote that, in writing the work, he had been led to put the aesthetic ‘on ice’ in dealing with the defining character of works of art by the reflection that aesthetic qualities are not exclusive to works (Danto 1993: 275). That would stand as a good description of the place of the aesthetic per se (as it cuts across distinctions between art, nature, and anything else) in contemporary analytical aesthetics: on ice. In practice this is functionally equivalent to Bell’s dismissal of the question ‘why’, that is, the psychological, from the domain of aesthetics.

At the same time, while analytical aesthetics has placed art at the centre of aesthetics the approach is too, well, analytical to be content with Bell’s cavalier use of ‘art’ as an evaluative term, or his identification of art with the object of aesthetic experience. It is unsurprising, then, that we should find the question ‘What is art?’ given pride of place in aesthetics textbooks over the last two decades.

There is so much that can be said about art without invoking the aesthetic at all. Moreover, art is in some ways a more ‘serious’ subject than aesthetic experience. Art has intention and meaning; works have, as Hegel said, received the baptism of the spiritual (Hegel 1975: I, 29). There appears to be a stability to the art object that is absent from any object actually constituted by aesthetic experience. (I cannot be sure that any object qua aesthetic object will endure even from one moment to the next.) The work endures; it is out there, in the world. Aesthetic experience, by contrast, simply happens to us: our responses are, as Hume says ‘blind but sure’; they ‘baffle all the pride of philosophy’.

There is, then, perhaps a procrustean motive to be discovered in analytical aesthetics’ focus on the topic of art. A question such as ‘What is art?’ lends itself very well to the analytic approach, as also to its philosophically therapeutic aspirations (the word ‘art’ still being widely used in an evaluative sense outside aesthetics). Moreover, given that art can be a source of aesthetic experience (and may even exist, as Beardsley suggested, for just this purpose), the question ‘What is art?’ is certainly not irrelevant to aesthetics.

However, given that the experience of art is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for aesthetic experience it is debatable whether any answer to the question ‘What is art?’ will, in itself, have any bearing on the understanding of aesthetic experience. If we recall the parallel drawn with investigating fear exclusively in terms of tigers, then we might extend the parallel by characterizing this concentration on the definition of ‘art’ as equivalent to pursuing our investigation of fear by a detailed examination of what makes a tiger a tiger (as opposed, say, to a lion or a wolf).

It is not surprising then that, despite the emphasis on art within analytical aesthetics, aesthetics continues to kick against the institutional theory of art, that is, against the discovery that the identity of art is most plausibly established without any recourse to the idea of aesthetic experience (see, for example, Davies 1991; Margolis 1998; Hanfling 1999, and the textbooks listed above). Art may be art because the art world says so, but one cannot have aesthetic experience by fiat. If the proper subject of aesthetics is art, and the proper definition of ‘art’ pays no heed to how I feel about the thing before me (as indeed it should not), then, by identifying aesthetics with the experience of art, we cause the notion of the aesthetic as a matter of feeling to evaporate. The eighteenth-century concept, the popular concept, and even Bell’s concept of the study of aesthetics as the study of a peculiar experience disappear – and with this disappearance the very possibility of meaningfully distinguishing a discipline of aesthetics from the history and criticism of art also vanishes.

III

I hope it will have become clear by now that my dissatisfaction with analytical aesthetics does not arise simply from its neglect of a topic I myself happen to find interesting. The problem is far more fundamental, and lies in the way in which analytical aesthetics, in concentrating on art, and thereby making the topic of aesthetics more manageable, may end by making the pursuit of that topic impossible. It is not the marginality of the project of understanding aesthetic experience that is the problem with contemporary aesthetics, rather it is the discipline's mistaken assumption that any kind of aesthetic inquiry (outside of the question 'What is art?') can be prosecuted in the absence of such understanding.

For, if we look again at the 'big questions' in contemporary aesthetics – the evaluation of art, art and morality, what we 'learn' from art, and so on – it is obvious that none of these questions can be meaningfully pursued without a theory of what aesthetic experience is. It is, for example, only by understanding the nature of the experience we have in connection with art (among other things) that we can begin to talk about what it even means to evaluate art. For the value of an artwork is the value of my experience of it. The alternatives are either a return to such objective standards as conformity to the Classical unities in drama or verisimilitude in representation in painting as criteria for artistic evaluation, or leaving value to art historians to determine in terms of popularity, innovation, or influence. Moreover, until we have a better understanding of the nature of aesthetic experience, it is far from certain that even the expression 'evaluation of art' is not itself begging a question.

The debilitating effect of this lack of a centre to contemporary analytical aesthetics is perhaps most evident when that aesthetics turns its attention, as increasingly it has done in the United States, to the question of the ethical dimensions of art. Interest in such a dimension is not, of course, new: many theorists from the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth were also keen on the idea of taste as an index of moral character, and the idea persists as an assumption in much contemporary aesthetics. (In contrast, the eighteenth century tended to see the relationship between the ethical and aesthetic as analogous.) This is not especially surprising; nineteenth-century writing on all kinds of topics seems naturally to tend towards a sermon-like quality. One of the most striking things about the twentieth and twenty-first-century textbooks surveyed above, however, is how often questions containing 'should' are raised: asking explicitly or implicitly how one *should* respond to something from an ethical standpoint. (There is also the question of how we *should* define the object of our 'contemplation' in order for our 'judgements' to be authentically aesthetic, which begs the question in a different form.) Such ethical questions are unarguably important, and this no doubt accounts for their prevalence. But, given that, to all appearances, aesthetic experience is something that *happens* to us, so that the field of aesthetic may be, as the eighteenth century had it, precisely the field of those mental reactions we do not will or control, it is surely begging the question to assume that a question with 'should' in it can be a question in aesthetics at all.

This is not, of course, to rule out the possibility of exploring the ethical dimension of aesthetics. It might be that if we actually knew what having a taste for any particular thing really signified, that is, if we understood what is happening in aesthetic experience, we might be in a position to argue about how we should respond. The question, however, is meaningless until we do have such an understanding.

The same inbuilt impasse can be found in almost every topic, except, significantly, the question 'What is art?', that currently preoccupies analytical aesthetics. In short, then, as long as analytical aesthetics keeps the nature of aesthetic experience 'on ice', even those questions about art that it

does concern itself with must remain unanswerable. I wrote above of a procrustean motive in the choice of topics within analytical aesthetics, that is, its tendency to pick up questions that can be predominantly discussed in the discourses of already sure-footed separate disciplines, such as ethics or ontology, in preference to those questions that must take us back to what is, in effect, the still-nascent philosophy of aesthetic experience. ('Still-nascent' because of its abandonment in the nineteenth century.) Academic momentum aside, this displacement is also partly the result of the analytic tradition's praiseworthy preference for the rigorous treatment of local problems over system building. Unfortunately, in the case of aesthetics, this preference runs up against the problem that, until we do have a better grasp of what aesthetic experience is in itself, we cannot even be sure what the local problems are, let alone how they might be solved.

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