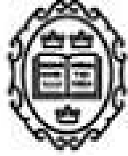

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IV.—THE FUNCTION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ÆSTHETICS

By W. B. Gallie

Introductory.—In this paper I attempt three things: first, a fairly close examination of the underlying assumptions and characteristic results of Idealist æsthetics; second, on the basis of my criticism of these, a re-statement of the function and method of æsthetics; and thirdly, one fairly detailed illustration of what I take that function and method to be.

I adopt this procedure for two reasons. In the first place the Idealist doctrine that Art is, essentially, Imagination has dominated philosophical æsthetics for the last hundred and fifty years, and during this period the vocabulary and presuppositions of artistic and literary criticism—from which any philosophical æsthetics must draw its raw-material—has been profoundly affected by this Idealist doctrine. Consequently, in order to deal completely to-day with philosophical problems arising from criticism, one must be equipped to distinguish the critic's relatively direct judgments and appreciations from their Idealist's accretions. This is my main reason for approaching my subject historically—from nineteenth century Idealist theories. But secondly, I believe that these theories are well worth investigating because they illustrate, in their own way so strikingly, certain very pervasive philosophical fallacies and confusions. For instance, I believe that they are vitiated through and through by the "essentialist fallacy": they presuppose, that is, that whenever we are in a position to define a substance or activity we must know its essence or ultimate nature—and know this by methods that are entirely different from those used in the experimental and mathematical sciences or in our commonsense judgments about minds and material things. Now, is their subjection to this fallacy a reason for consigning Idealist æsthetics to oblivion? Anyone urging this would, I suggest, do well to remember how tenacious and seductive a doctrine essentialism has proved to be. He would do well to recall how many of the greatest philosophers since Descartes have devoted perhaps their best energies to exposing essentialist fallacies, only to slip back—as soon as their philosophic interest flags or their acquaintance with relevant scientific procedures is defective—into unmistakably essentialist habits of thought. For essentialism is not only deep-rooted in men's thought habits—or linguistic habits; as it

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penetrates different departments of human thought it works on these, at first stimulating them but eventually blunting or distorting them, in markedly different ways. This is why the abandonment of essentialist habits of thought in mechanics did not lead automatically to the abandonment of them in other parts of physics, or in biology, psychology, and the political and social sciences. On the contrary, in each of these disciplines a fresh diagnosis of essentialist errors has been (or still is) needed, and a fresh act of excision. To attempt such a diagnosis in the field of æsthetics is, then, neither otiose nor trivial; and the act of excision which it demands can help us to see how at least some problems of æsthetics, confused in the Idealist treatment, can be posed in manageable—answerable—form.

Idealist Æsthetics.—Consider the following statements :

(A) There is *one* way of reading a particular poem, and this gives us that poem's individual meaning and value. (For poem one could substitute painting, musical composition, or what not.)

(B) There is (or was) *one* act of Imagination which also makes (or made) that poem's individual meaning and value.

(C) The ' reading ' referred to in (A) and the ' act ' referred to in (B) are, despite historical and psychological differences (accidents), ' ideally identical ' : they are equivalent conditions of the existence, meaning, and value of the poem.

(D) The material embodiment of any poem, painting, or what not is *æsthetically* irrelevant : the poem exists, as a poem, in the imaginative ' act ' or ' reading '.

(E) There is one way of explaining the ' reading ' referred to in (A), the ' act ' referred to in (B), and the ' identity ' referred to in (C) : and this understanding gives us the essence of what poetry in general—or, for that matter, of what Art in general—is.

(F) This explanation or concept of the essence of Art inevitably leads us to see the need of other equally general concepts of the essences of, *e.g.*, history, science, morality, religion, philosophy, and so on. In other words, to understand Art means to see it as one ' mode ' or ' category ' or ' grade ' of ' Spirit '.

These statements are intended simply as reminders of some of the main tenets of Idealist theories. If I have slightly oversimplified any of them this hardly matters, so long as the reader recalls the kind of tenet that is in question. For what I want chiefly to consider is the *logical order* in which these tenets stand in Idealist theories.

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To anyone whose thoughts are guided by empiricist principles it would seem obvious that the later statements in this list, especially (E) and (F) must owe whatever plausibility they have to the truth or probability of the earlier statements, and that these, especially (A) and (B) must be based on a very careful investigation of the objects, activities, and enjoyments which ordinary language brackets together as 'Art'. Idealist philosophers, on the other hand, seem to me without exception to argue for these earlier statements, (A) to (D), on the assumption that statements (E) and (F) *must* be true, indeed, to philosophic reflexion, are *obviously* true. Their arguments in favour of statements (A) to (D) are, very broadly, eliminative: suggested alternatives to statements (A) to (D) are shown—on the assumption that (E) and (F) are true—to be confused and self-contradictory or such that they "collapse into identity"—*i.e.*, into statement (D) or (C) or (B) or (A).[1] I would not, of course, deny that Idealist æstheticians have tried hard to square the consequences of their initial tenets with the relevant facts of artistic creation and enjoyment. To be sure, I do not find their efforts successful: but in fairness to them, one must, I think, trace out their failures from the basic statements (E) and (F).

The most important fact about these two statements is that by conjoining them Idealist æstheticians have absolved themselves from facing a prior question: namely, what reasons have we for thinking that the word Art stands for some *one* thing? Two purely logical considerations are pertinent here. (i) Our use of an abstract word such as 'Art' does not necessarily imply something common to all the objects we apply it to. Such a word might stand for a group of entities between whose every member and at *least two others* there hold two *different* relations of likeness (or relations of likeness in two different respects). This would be enough to justify our use of the word in 'blanket' fashion. The phrase 'family resemblance' is the eponymous instance, in modern logical theory, of words of this sort: the word 'play' provides another instance. (ii) Even when all instances of an abstract word have something in common, it by no means follows that this something is the most important feature of each instance of that word or the feature in virtue of

[1] 'The justice of this account can readily be proved by recalling the lay-out of Collingwood's *The Philosophy of Art*, or of ch. iii of Croce's *Æsthetic*, or chs. xii and xiv of the *Biographia Literaria*. Interesting historical and psychological evidence as to the first infection of modern æsthetics by essentialist ways of thinking can be found in the autobiographical writings of Vico and Coleridge. (See Vico's *Autobiography*, Part A, 1725; and *Biographia Literaria*, chs. v to ix.)

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which we most readily understand each instance. Think, for instance, of the word 'king'. A king is always male: but in different ages to be a king has meant to be now a priest, now a war-leader, now a sovereign or supreme executive, now a constitutional servant. Now it seems to me, in view of the bewildering variety of objects and activities that have been prized as art in different civilisations and in different ages, that the word 'Art' may well be of the sort described in (i) above. And even if we confine attention to limited periods, it seems certain to me that the word 'Art', as used within such limited periods, is often of the sort described in (ii) above. More positively, there are such things as *revolutions* in artistic taste and inspiration, and after such a revolution certain things are classified as Art which were not before, while other things are no longer classified as Art.

How is it that Idealist æstheticians, most of them scrupulous historians of art and artistic ideas, have failed to ask themselves, whether the word 'Art' in fact stands for some *one* thing? The explanation goes back to their initial view: that there is one total Spiritual Activity (or Notion or Logos), and that Art is one of the distinguishable grades or categories in which it acts. The metaphysical, monistic and mentalist, character of this view is quite as important as its logical, essentialist, character (the former is in fact a special case of the latter, being derived from the senseless statement that *Esse* is, essentially *percipi* or *intelligi*). Granted, however, that this view were meaningful and true, it would follow that our initial question was redundant, and the autonomy of philosophical æsthetics within an Idealist philosophy would be ensured. The job of philosophical æsthetics would be to articulate the essence of Art as one grade of Spirit (this means, as a rule, equating it with Imaginative activity) and to exclude from the category of Art those features, ordinarily ascribed to works of art or to artistic creation and enjoyment, which cannot be comprised within this essence or equation. But how can this procedure be squared with a recognition of revolutions in artistic taste and inspiration? Quite easily—granted the truth of statements (E) and (F). For we can then claim either that such revolutions are only *clarifications* of men's single, though too often blurred, conception of what Art is, or that such revolutions, although of great consequence to Art, do not affect its essence. (For example, history opens up new subject-matters, or technology provides new material mediums, for art, and the resulting revolution in artistic interests may be enormous. But since neither subject-matter nor material medium belong to the essence of Art, it isn't (essentially) an "artistic revolution".)

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Such, in briefest outline, is the genesis of Idealist æsthetics: let us now turn to its consequences as expressed in statements (A) to (D). Here again we might naturally expect that the somewhat paradoxical statements (C) and (D) have been put forward to account for some unsuspected features of artistic creation and enjoyment which a close examination of these has disclosed. But statements (C) and (D) are virtually necessitated by the initial tenets which we have just discussed, and in so far as they are supported by an examination of relevant fact this is a very one-sided affair, aimed only too obviously at "saving the appearances".

If we begin with the assumption that Art is essentially one grade or activity of Spirit, then we are faced with some pretty obvious difficulties. For, to common sense, the word 'Art' suggests a complex situation in which three distinct factors are involved: artist or artistic activity, works of art, and the enjoyment of works of art. Idealist æsthetics, given its initial assumptions is committed to reducing this triadic situation to unity—to a monadic *act* (Art being, by definition, a grade or activity of Spirit). The required reduction is made first by eliminating the *work* of art (or material embodiment) from the essence of art (statement D), and secondly by identifying the 'act' that creates art with the reading or enjoyment of it (statement C). The first step is equivalent to the doctrine that "the true work of art is the internal picture", in the mind either of its creator or of the spectator or reader. This doctrine, it seems to me, owes its plausibility to a confusion between the value and the existence of works of art. That the value we attribute to a work of art really belongs to its creator or to those who enjoy it is no doubt true: (though to say that the values that belong to creating and to enjoying a given work of art are identical is quite another, and far less plausible, story). On the other hand, only those who have already adopted a very naïve mentalist philosophy would claim that works of art *exist* only in the minds of those who create or enjoy them. Works of art exist all right, in galleries, books, musical-scores, etc., for us to go to them and enjoy them: there is really no question about this. The relevant question is whether such 'material embodiments' as the sounds producible by a certain instrument, the effects to be got from a certain pigment or stone, are relevant to the existence of what we enjoy in —or from—works of art. Do these elements contribute to our enjoyment? It seems to me perfectly obvious that they do: and, from the side of the artist, the history of art contains countless instances of how new materials, media, instruments, etc.,

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have determined both the direction and the vitality of artistic inspiration.

The first step in the required reduction, then, is, to say the least, far from plausible. If it were justified, however, would the second step follow ? At first sight if might seem to ; for artistic communication has somehow to be accounted for, and if the material embodiments of art are inessential to it, it is hard to see what artistic communication could consist in, unless in an identity of creative ' act ' and appreciative ' reading ' or response. On the other hand, Idealist æstheticians have to my knowledge nowhere even tried to produce positive evidence in support of this second step ; and, as will become clearer after an examination of statements (A) and (B) this is hardly surprising, since the proposed identification rests on a crude (though still common) misunderstanding of what is involved in reading or appreciating a work of art—or for that matter a single sentence or significant symbol.

We can now turn to statements (A) and (B), statements with which Idealist æsthetics makes its first contact with the facts of artistic creation and enjoyment. Both these statements are, of course, entailed by statement (C) which states their ' ideal identity '. We shall see, however, that they certainly state different things, different falsehoods, which require different logical and empirical considerations to expose their respective falsities.

At first sight statement (B)—that there is one act of Imagination that makes a particular work of art and gives it its individual meaning and value—seems simply one more instance of the bad philosophic practice of inventing unique ' acts ' to correspond to, and account for, distinguishable ' mental products '—judgments, statements, arguments, plans, choices, and so on. In fairness to Idealist æstheticians, however, one must acquit them of the worst consequences of this common error, that of taking invented ' acts ' as *actual*, of assuming that somehow, some day, they must be discoverable and describable, either directly, by improved introspective methods, or indirectly, on the evidence of causal inferences based on the supposition that they exist. Idealist æstheticians realise only too well that no empirical evidence could support the hypothesis of single acts as the necessary and sufficient causes of different works of art. The ' acts ' they write of are *ideal ;* attempts to describe them in experimental terms, to pin-point them in time or trace out their causal properties, would be utterly useless and misleading. Their ' ideal acts ' answer simply to their conception of what is needed to

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account for the existence of different works of art, each having its own unique unity or wholeness. Quite obviously, Idealists insist, every successful work of art is a unity : therefore, on the principle that different fat oxen must be driven by different fat men, a distinct act of Spirit (acting in the grade or category of Art) is needed to account for every different work of art.

This conclusion presupposes that no alternative account of the unity of works of art can be given. Now it is at this point that the empirical evidence, which Idealists brush aside so hastily, becomes relevant. It is no use, to be sure, to point out, as against the Idealist æsthetician, that a certain poem took a long time to write, that different parts of it were composed or suggested at different times, that fresh starts had to be made, false developments cut away, and so on. The Idealist will blithely subsume—or synthesise—any such ostensible variety and disjointedness in a piece of artistic creation under one of his ideal, unity-ensuring ' acts '. What one must do is to use the empirical evidence—what artists have to tell us about their inspiration and methods of work—to suggest a framework of ideas which will account for the unity of at least *some* works of art, and do this much more convincingly than does the ' one act ' theory of the Idealists. This, however, would be a major task in philosophical æsthetics ; and all I can attempt, here, for the argument's sake, is the barest sketch of such an alternative theory, confining it, in the first instance, to the sort of unity we find in a good short poem. Among the tenets of this alternative theory would be : (i) The initial inspiration of a poem (for all that this may trail clouds of glory far back into the poet's past experience) is selected or recognised by him as the opening line (or core, or close) of a possible poem because of certain immediately striking features or values which it possesses. (ii) The extension or development of the poem can hardly be attributed to these same features, however ; on the contrary, it will almost certainly be due to either (*a*) certain *other* features of the initial line or stanza which suggest, not its value, but its lack of value so long as it remains as it stands—*i.e.*, incomplete, or (*b*) some further, relatively independent " inspiration "—*i.e.*, a line or stanza which was *not* in the poet's mind when he selected, or recognised the value of the " initial inspiration " of his poem. (iii) The further ' organic ' development of the poem is to be explained on similar lines : *i.e.*, at different stages of the poem's growth different features of the lines or stanzas already formed suggest different developments. Thus in (ii) above we saw how certain negative features or lacks in the " initial inspiration " might call out the first extension of

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the poem. Later, when his work seems to the poet all but complete, some quite different negative feature of its opening lines may strike him, and suggest an appropriate ending for the poem. (iv) On this account there is no reason whatever why the poet, when he sees, say, this last relevant feature of his initial inspiration, should have clearly in mind—or should be able to revive in himself—those features in virtue of which he originally felt it as " the beginning of a possible poem ". In other words, the poem's unity will not depend on some single, all-embracing act of the poet's imagination, but rather on the palpable incompleteness of his work at every stage—an incompleteness that keeps him at work until he has made of the poem as real a unity as his poetic capacity, his initial inspiration, the conventions of his literary form, and the genuis of the language he uses, will allow.

I have sketched out my alternative to the ' one act ' theory in terms of poetry, and of a poem that could be written by one man in one sustained creative effort. But it should be remembered—and this, I think, suggests an absolutely conclusive argument against the ' one act ' theory—that much of the very greatest art is not of this kind at all—not the work of one sustained effort or of one man or even of one generation of men : for instance, some of the greatest works of architecture, works of many minds and many hands, which we nevertheless *do* admire as unities. Does the Idealist æsthetician seriously maintain that one act of Imagination is responsible for, say, Cologne Cathedral ? His knowledge of architecture must assure him that in such cases later developments and extensions are often of a kind that the original architect could not have imagined. The ' one act ' theory of artistic creation simply collapses before facts such as these. On the other hand, the alternative theory sketched out in the preceding paragraph can easily be adapted to take account of them. What could be more natural than to claim that late developments of a vast slowly-reared architectural work embody ideas suggested by the work as accomplished up to a given date—ideas coherent with, though not included in, the original design ?

What of statement (A) ? This at least, it may be felt, is an innocent enough statement. For, if there were not one way of reading, *e.g.*, a particular poem, how would objective criticism—nay, how would the merest comparing of notes on artistic subjects—be possible ? But, in spite of this argument, informed common-sense will have its doubts. Is there only *one* way of ' reading ', *e.g.*, King Lear, or Rembrandt's self-portraits ? Certainly the history of literary and artistic criticism is full not only of reversals but of the most surprising developments in the appreciation of

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such masterpieces. (This accords with our natural feeling, in face of great works of art, that they contain much more than we have found in them.) But there is a much more powerful and general argument to be brought against statement (A). For this statement pretty clearly rests on the assumption that there is one way of reading every significant sentence or symbol, meaning by this that there is one 'thought' or 'inner experience' which every sentence or symbol must give rise to if it is properly understood. The fact is, on the other hand, that a sentence or any other significant symbol has meaning in as much as it can be interpreted in *any one* of an indefinite number of ways, logically connected to be sure, but emphatically not all contained or actualised in any single 'act' of understanding.[1] Two people no more need to have the same actual "thoughts" in order to communicate information to each other than two people, *e.g.*, a mother and her infant, need have the same "thoughts" in order to communicate feelings of love to one another. For instance, two men read a road-sign marked 'To OXFORD'. To the one, to judge by his immediate thoughts and actions, it means that he is on the right road and going on the right direction, for Oxford is his goal. To the other it means he is on the wrong road, or at least going in the wrong direction, for his goal is Cambridge. Yet they have both read the sign aright, or, if you like, have understood it. But how can we, or can they, know this ? Well, let us suppose that the sign is in fact wrongly directed : the two men then proceed in what are for them wrong directions and traverse weary miles, making useless minor corrections of their courses, till nightfall ; and let us suppose that their circuitous wanderings bring them together again. Each tells the story of his misadventure, *wholly different at every stage from the other's.* But they both come back in their narratives to the road-sign, and at once each sees that this was the cause of his own, and of the other's, error. To generalise, the test of whether two people have read the *same* sentence or symbol is always a kind of coherence test in respect of their subsequent practice as well as a consistency test in respect of the language or symbolic system to which the sentence in question belongs.

And now to apply all this to the reading of a picture or a poem. Again two men look and read together. But the features of the

[1] To have made this clear is, in my belief, one of the greatest achievements of modern philosophy. The above formulation is due to Peirce : other, to my mind, less adequate formulations are, (*a*) That the meaning of a sentence is equivalent to the sum of its consequences, and (*b*) that the meaning of a symbol can only be shown only through its *uses*.

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picture or poem that are emphatic to the one, that give the lead to his interest, are regressive to, or utterly ignored by, the other. (For proof, look at the different reviews of any original work of art.) These initial differences, however, can be overcome, or at least reduced, by patience, honesty, and good-will. But the possibility that other differences will arise, on further closer readings, can never be eliminated. And this points to an all-important difference between the reading of works of art and the reading of everyday information or history or science. In the case of scientific sentences the context helps us to delimit fairly rigorously the range of their relevant 'interpretants'; historical and ordinary informative sentences have a wider fringe of possibly relevant interpretants, whose limits are much harder to determine; sentences in poetry, or the arrangements of objects in a picture or of notes in music, not only have a yet wider fringe of interpretants, the very notion of 'interpretant' has in these cases to be widened to include such things as the relevant kind of association or the balancing chord or mass or line. A full articulation of these differences should on the face of it be one of the main tasks of philosophical æsthetics; but it is obvious that Idealist æstheticians have neglected it entirely.

The Influence of Idealist Æsthetics. How, in view of their grave logical defects, have Idealist theories of Art exercised so strong an influence on literary and artistic criticism? In terms of statements (A) to (F) and our criticisms of them, we can now give an answer, at least in outline.

Many errors in contemporary nineteenth century criticisms are traceable to the tenets expressed in statements (E) and (F); for instance, the doctrine that moral or religious considerations are wholly irrelevant to all the arts, or its contrary, that they provide the final canons in all; the doctrine that all art involves an element akin to knowledge, or, again, its exact contrary; the doctrine that all art is a form of craft, or, on the contrary, that the crafts, essentially, contain no artistic element. None of these sweeping assertions, attractive though they may be to bad critics whose great desire is to be done with thinking and be free to pontificate, can be maintained for a moment in face of what we actually find in the different arts, or even in different instances of what commonsense brackets as 'one art'. Thus, to take only literary examples, it seems clear that genuine religious feeling matters supremely to religious poets, but not to others; that some writers are prized for their moral strength (*e.g.*, Scott), while others are not (*e.g.*, Byron); that in one novelist (*e.g.*, Flaubert) the informative element is important, while in another

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it is slight (*e.g.*, Hardy); that one writer certainly reminds us of a craftsman at work, whilst another seems " but a wandering voice ". More important, however, are some of the beneficial effects traceable to these same essentialist tenets, for, to give Idealist æstheticians their due, these tenets do express, however misleadingly, a philosophical interest in problems arising from art and criticism. And this is more than can be said for those Naturalistic theories of art which have been the main rivals of Idealist theories for the past century: Taine's sociological theory of art, for instance, or Spencer's evolutionary theory, or Lombroso's, or Freud's psycho-pathological theories. These combine, really remarkably, the initial error of Idealist æsthetics (they assume that the word ' Art ' stands for something common to all the arts) with a complete lack of interest in those problems that arise *exclusively* from the arts; and their effect can only have been to distract countless gullible readers from the arts themselves to their allegedly most important causes—soil and climate (with Taine), the needs of evolution (with Spencer), atrophied muscles (with Lombroso) and sexual repressions (with Freud). In their polemic against such theories as these the best Idealist æstheticians Coleridge and Croce, for instance, stand up as lovers of art, and even as philosophers.

For somewhat similar reasons an educative value can be ascribed to statements (A) and (B). These at least have the merit of emphasising as against Naturalistic theories, that, if we are to understand art at all, we must begin from what we see or read, or fail to see or read, in different works of art and from what seems to us to be said or done or intended by them. On the other hand, I find it hard to ascribe any value whatever to statements (C) and (D). The latter, which excludes the material embodiment of art from its essence, has served only to underwrite two dangerous tendencies which have pervaded criticism since the Romantic period. The first of these is the tendency of critics to discourse about their own feelings on, after, or before reading the work in front of them, instead of concentrating on the work itself; the second is the tendency to describe the (presumptive) impulse or motive of the artist rather than the job he has actually done. Statement (C), which identifies ' imaginative act ' and appreciative ' reading ', has had perhaps more baneful effects. For, if the plain man is told that there is one way of reading a poem and that this gives us its value, complete and perfect, he may feel some doubts. But when he is told that this one way of reading can be shown—on philosophical grounds, in particular on the ground that any *discussion* of the poem pre-

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supposes it—to be identical with the creative act that produced it, then he is likely to be cowed into silence. Idealist æstheticians have here proved themselves useful allies of arrogance and dogmatism in criticism, qualities that stand out unpleasantly in some of their own critical writings.

Alternative Methods in Æsthetics.—What are the alternatives to Idealist and to Naturalist theories in æsthetics ? There seem to me to be two important candidates for consideration, though to the best of my knowledge neither has anywhere been fully elaborated or even distinguished with a name. The first I shall call the attitude (rather than the theory) of informed scepticism. This scepticism, let it be emphasised at once, is confined to the possibility or worthwhileness of philosophical æsthetics—it is not scepticism about the worthwhileness or meaningfulness of criticism and valuation in the arts, still less is it part of a general sceptical philosophy. Its natural starting-point is the kind of criticism levelled in the previous section against statements (E) and (A). The informed sceptic will *deny* that the word ' Art ', as commonly used, stands for any one thing, and will deny that for every given work of art there is one way of ' reading ' that gives us its meaning and value. He will endorse what I have written above about the ill effects of these Idealist tenets on literary and artistic criticism, but he will push this line of attack much further. He will track down essentialist habits of thought in various departments of criticism, pointing out, for instance, the dangers of superficiality, if not of downright nonsense, in all discussion of " the lyric ", " the drama ", " the concerto ", etc. Unlike Idealist æstheticians, who make free play with analogies between the different arts, he will inveigh against the use of such phrases as the " music of poetry ", " the logic of music ", " the poetry of colour ", etc., reiterating such important platitudes as that when words do something that is described as " musical " they can't possibly be doing what notes do ; that although every piece of music has some structure and some have a peculiarly intelligible structure, this never bears a useful or illuminating resemblance to the structure of arguments ; that, if certain colours thrill us as intensely as poetry does, the same is probably true of skating, high-speed motoring, and so on. In general, he will insist that every work of art is what it is and not another thing, and that, although a certain amount of comparison may assist critical judgment and appreciation, the job of criticism is not to show what is common to one work of art and all others—something that, if it existed at all, would be utterly trivial—but to show what is unique, and therefore important, in a given work.

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The informed sceptic will also be on his guard against subtler forms of essentialist and dogmatic error in æsthetics. To give but one example: Croce has powerfully exposed the errors in criticism that result from a simple-minded acceptance of traditional artistic classifications. To Croce's arguments on this score the informed sceptic will readily agree; but he will refuse to conclude from them, as Croce does, that the only difference between works of art is their respective artistic perfection (in Schleiermacher's phrase, *Volkommenheit der Kunst*); for this is simply another version of the essentialist tenet that Art *is* Imagination or the effective exercise of Imagination. On the contrary, the informed sceptic will insist that what is called "the exercise of Imagination" is one thing in connexion with one subject-matter or material, another thing in connexion with a second. What is attempted and done in one novel, *e.g.*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is not simply better—or worse—done than what is attempted in another, *e.g.*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. The "exercises of Imagination" attempted in the two novels differ in kind; or, as we would more naturally say, the author tries to "go deeper" in the former novel than in the latter. And on this ground the informed sceptic will endorse the common-sense conclusion that in the arts, as in moral life, level of aim counts for something—though, of course, not for everything: a fact which Croce, in this the most explicit of Idealist æstheticians, is forced to deny.

The informed sceptic, as I have presented him, may seem a thoroughly negative, even a pedantic, character: but in fact he is very far from being this. His scepticism and polemic are not simply an attack on loose thinking in criticism in so far as this results from loose thinking in philosophic æsthetics; they are also a defence of freedom, individuality, freshness, uniqueness in the arts—the very things for which, in our age especially, the arts are most widely prized. As regard philosophical æsthetics, indeed, his attitude is entirely negative: he sees the philosopher's task simply as the correction and elimination of those philosophical errors, Idealist or Naturalistic, which have hitherto distorted serious criticism. But in other respects he is positive enough: he is the friend of serious criticism, and more, he is its gad-fly. He encourages criticism to stand on its own feet and to have confidence in its own autonomous judgments and methods, without looking for support to some showy philosophic scaffolding. He believes that whatever assistance Idealist æsthetics, for instance, have given to criticism could have been provided equally well, first, by a wide knowledge of the varieties and inter-

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connexions of artistic traditions, styles, techniques, etc., and, secondly, by a closer examination of what is involved in reading, and in reaching agreement as to what can be read, in selected works of art.[1] This last proposal, we must emphasise, does not presuppose that there is only *one* way of reading every work of art or that there is something common to *what can be read* in any and every work of art. What the informed sceptic is proposing is not a supremely general enquiry of the kind that is naturally called *philosophical;* it is a continuous job for criticism itself—the attention which critics should always give to their own tools, tools which have to be used in markedly different ways in different departments of criticism.

Is this position satisfactory? It seems to me to mark an advance and an immense advance, in force, consistency, and practical usefulness, on any previous "theories" of æsthetics. And I believe that any future "philosophical æsthetics" must take most of the conclusions of informed scepticism as its starting-points. There are, however, two pretty obvious weaknesses in the informed sceptic's position. First, he admits that a certain amount of comparison between different works of art will help a critic in discussing their individual merits or failures; and here he leaves the matter, thinking no doubt that such comparisons must be of minor importance in as much as the critic's main concern is with the uniqueness, not the similarities, of different works of art. But we are surely entitled to ask: How much comparison is useful or justified in criticism, and comparison *within what limits?* Again—and this is perhaps the most important point—how *complete* must the analogy be between two works of art, or for that matter between two genres or schools of art, to be useful? Might not an analogy be extremely useful just because it works up to a point and beyond that point fails? Would it not, in such a case, help to bring out what is *unique* in each of the works compared?

The second weakness in the informed sceptic's position is this. He encourages criticism to examine its own methods, in particular to discover what is involved in reading, and in reaching agreement as to what can be read, in selected works of art. And he insists that this must be the job of criticism itself, since different methods, or devices or techniques, will assist to this end in different departments of art. But here again we are faced with the question of comparisons and of the limits within which useful comparisons can be drawn. And here, *prima facie*, there is a strong case for

[1] Useful experimental data on this latter point can be found in Prof. I. A. Richard's *Practical Criticism.*

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guiding our investigations by certain very broad analogies—*i.e.*, analogies in respect of very general characteristics. Let it be granted that there is nothing important that is common to all our readings of different works of art; let us concentrate on one given work of art: still, is it not reasonable, in discussing how we read *this* work of art, to compare what we are doing with what we do in reading history or gossip or mathematics or natural science? And on this issue philosophy, one would have thought, must have some useful advice to give.

These considerations point towards a second alternative method in æsthetics. It might be suggested that the job of philosophical æsthetics is to examine the main kinds of comparison and analogy found useful in criticism, with a view to determining as exactly as possible the points at which they cease to be illuminating and in fact give rise to contradictions or confusions. The informed sceptic would, however, retort that this proposal is pathetically optimistic and simple-minded. The kinds of comparison and analogy that criticism finds useful are probably as many and as various as the works of art criticism is faced with: certainly they do not fall into neat, tidy bundles. And even if the main kinds of comparison and analogy found useful in criticism could be arranged in bundles, little would be done to aid criticism: the critic himself, using his native powers of judgment, would still have to decide from which of them he must pull out the comparisons that will help to illuminate the work of art he is concerned with. What is proposed, in fine, seems little better than a card-index system for useful critical ideas.

In this retort the informed sceptic is undoubtedly right. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the suggestion just made points in the right direction: only, it is advanced wrong way on, so to speak. Could not the informed sceptic's objection be met as follows? I think he must grant that from time to time, in different departments of criticism, contradictions and confusions do arise just because a comparison or analogy, useful up to a point, is pushed too far. And he must agree, too, that some of these puzzles are peculiarly important, even though they may be relevant to only one tradition or school of art, or perhaps to the work of only one man or perhaps even to only one *work* of art. Why then do they count as important? I answer: only criticism can say why, but it is surely obvious that some lines of criticisms, irrespective of their range of applicability, are peculiarly illuminating, and that some lines of criticism which *look like* becoming supremely important get bogged down in confusions of the kind just described. Now when this happens, is it not plausible to

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suggest that the philosopher, trained as he is to resolve logical puzzles, may be of assistance? When the suggestion is put in this way it no longer carries the implication that the puzzles of criticism can be sorted out and classified, and that the philosopher can clarify them once for all. On the contrary, the natural assumption is that to every such puzzle that is resolved a hundred others will be waiting resolution. But this affords no reason for denying that such puzzles demand *philosophical* treatment. To argue in this way, indeed, smacks suspiciously of that last essentialist infirmity of philosophers—the demand that any method or technique they employ shall be universally applicable.

The alternative method I am proposing is, in the nature of the case, much more easily illustrated than described in general terms: for it is a "journeyman's"[1] æsthetics, taking up work where work is to be done, whether at the explicit request of criticism or no. I shall therefore give one fairly detailed example of this method, and then suggest a handful of further problems it might be expected to solve. The problem selected is from literary criticism: no claim is made (to repeat) that it is relevant to all literature, or even to all poetry, or even to all English poetry of its period. Nevertheless, its importance seems to me unquestionable.

Illustration of the Method Proposed.—In his preface to the 1815 edition of his poems and in the *Essay Supplementary* of the same year Wordsworth discusses "the creative or abstracting virtue of the imagination". He notes shrewdly that the word 'Imagination' has been "overstrained" and that "poverty of language is the primary cause of the use we make of it", and he tries to remedy this situation by distinguishing what he calls "different processes of Imagination". His most interesting statements can be brought together under three heads. (1) In some poems the "abstracting virtue" of imagination predominates, *i.e.*, the poet abstracts from an object "some of the properties which it actually possesses"; in other poems the "creative virtue" predominates, *i.e.*, the poet endows objects with "properties that do not inhere in them, upon an incitement from properties and qualities the existence of which is inherent and obvious". In either case the result is the important thing, *viz.*, that the object "is now enabled to re-act upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence". (2) Wordsworth complicates the matter, however, by his more specific account of the *creative* processes of imagination. While

[1] I take this phrase from Prof. Ayer. I do not know whether he would approve of the use I make of it.

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emphasising that these are in fact " innumerable ", he mentions in particular " that of consolidating numbers into unity and separating unity into number—alternations proceding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her mighty and almost divine powers ". And he illustrates what he means by " consolidating " and " separating " by the passage in *Paradise Lost* in which Satan is compared first to a fleet conceived (or seen) as an aggregate of separate ships and men, and then to a fleet conceived (or seen) as a unity. (3) Wordsworth's account is still further complicated by the following more general statement. " When the Imagination frames a comparison, if it does not strike on the first presentation, a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment it is perceived, grows—and continues to grow—upon the mind ; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and feature than upon expression and effect, less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent and internal, properties. . . ."

The main difficulty involved in these statements can be brought out as follows. (*a*) In the statements under (1) Wordsworth clearly maintains that *both* processes of imagination, the creative and the abstracting, *alter* the object (so that it "re-acts upon the mind . . . like a new existence "). We might therefore be inclined to say : Imagination, as this far described, *falsifies* for the sake of a peculiar kind of pleasure. (*b*) Now this view would seem to apply most plausibly to the process Wordsworth calls " creative ". But the illustration of this process given under (2) involves no falsification whatever. A fleet, from one standpoint (that of obeying one admiral, say) is a unity ; from another standpoint it is a large number of ships and men ; and both descriptions are true. The fact that Wordsworth's example is here not too happily chosen—that it illustrates the " abstracting" process of imagination much more clearly than the "creative " one—is here immaterial : what matters is, first, that the process of imagination described under (2) does not " falsify ", and, second, that it is nevertheless chiefly to be prized for the gratification it affords to the mind performing it (see " a sublime consciousness of the soul in her mighty and almost divine powers"). (*c*) When we came to the statement under (3) the reversal in Wordsworth's view-point is complete. The *truth* of the comparisons formed by imagination is now insisted on : but this " truth " is still of a rather odd kind—a sense of it " grows and continues to grow ", and this fact about it now seems to be the main reason for prizing it.

How and why did Wordsworth get himself into this muddle ?

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Why, first of all, does he talk about the *abstracting* virtue of imagination ? Presumably, because in those poems which (through " poverty of language ") he calls " Poems of Imagination ", there is always a concentration on certain features of a " real object " to the exclusion of others. Wordsworth describes this process in terms of his own poem *Resolution and Independence*. By a complex series of abstractions and comparisons we are there presented with the figure of the old man " in the most naked simplicity possible ", so that when eventually he speaks it is indeed as if some embodiment of the most " inherent and internal properties " of mankind were speaking. What Wordsworth calls " the abstracting virtue " of imagination does stand, then, for certain easily recognised effects which we meet in certain poems. The basic issue is whether effects of this kind are more akin to arbitrary fiction and illusions or are more akin to the discovery of general, hitherto unsuspected, truths.

At this point we may usefully recall two contradictory philosophical positions with regard to abstraction. There is the well known Idealist view that all abstraction falsifies ; and there is the more ordinary view that abstraction is a process necessary for the attainment of much of our most certain knowledge, mathematical knowledge for instance. It is unnecessary here to articulate fully the latter view, or to explain fully how and why Idealists have misconceived the nature and uses of abstraction. Let us simply try to recall, in the homeliest terms, some of the reasons why abstraction is so fruitful a method in the mathematical sciences, why it helps us to see so many new truths. One obvious reason is that it allows us to concentrate on a limited class of properties, or, the other side of the same penny, that it frees us from the distraction of *other* properties which " in reality " (in perceptual experience) upset the simplicity which mathematical reasoning requires. But the concentration which abstraction makes possible is not a fixed concentration—on a given figure, say : rather it is a concentration that enables us to pass rapidly over an immensely wide range of relations in which the figure, or certain parts or properties of it, might (and in some instances actually does) stand to other figures (or parts of properties of figures). This much is really obvious : though, needless to say, it isn't the whole philosophical story of the rôle of abstraction in mathematics. It is sufficient, however, for our present purpose—to illuminate Wordsworth's puzzle with regard to the " abstracting virtue of the imagination ".

What he was trying to say, I think, was this. When a poet " abstracts ", what he succeeds in doing is to make us aware, in

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a manner somewhat analogous to the geometer's, of unsuspected relationships between an object he is describing and certain other objects. Looked at from this side his abstraction contributes to truth, to new general knowledge, even though the instance that gives rise to it be purely fictitious. On the other hand, there is one profound (and relevant) gap in this analogy. The abstractions of the geometer enable him to see and state with exactitude certain " new " relationships of the figure or properties from which he begins ; the abstractions of the poet enable him to do nothing like this, nor ought we to expect them to. The poet's abstractions strip the object from which he begins of " casual and outstanding " properties, and they leave us—with what ? With a hitherto unsuspected resemblance that may not strike us on the first presentation, as Wordsworth confesses, and which, when it does strike us, " grows and continues to grow ". This resemblance is not, like the relationships which the geometer constructs or demonstrates, clear-cut and definable : on the contrary, its effect—the thing that matters in poetry—is to be measured by its wide suggestiveness, by the way it touches, or half touches off, ideas held " in power ". In other words, a comparison that depends on " the abstracting virtue of the imagination " makes us aware of the vast range of unexplored relations in which our initial object stands to others. In this way abstraction " enlarges imagination ".

Our discussion of Wordsworth's problem can now be summed up in a few words. The relevant point about abstraction, as used in mathematics, say, is that in abstracting we seem at first to be simply omitting certain facts from consideration, and yet, as a result of this, we are enabled to see an immense number of further, and usually more general, facts. Up to a point the effects of abstraction in poetry are analogous. There is, however, the all-important difference, that while the " new truths " gained by the geometer's abstractions are explicit, definable, and deducible, those gained by the poet's abstractions are inevitably vague and indefinite in their range. And that is a most important feature of them ; indeed, it is responsible for the peculiar " pleasure of the imagination " to which they give rise. This pleasure requires, first, that the comparisons framed by imagination shall be so *new* that the object they start from shall come to " re-act upon the mind . . . like a new existence ", and second, that such comparisons shall not be too explicit : otherwise it would be impossible for a sense of their truth " to grow—*and continue to grow* ".

This problem, chosen to illustrate the journeyman æstheticians's methods, is by no means the only one of its kind that arises from

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Wordsworth's great prefaces. Others arise from his contradictory statements regarding the " general and operative " *truth* of poetry and the " duty " of poetry " to treat of things, not as they *are*, but as they *appear* . . . to the *senses* and the *passions* ", and from his theory of " poetic diction ". The problem chosen is, however, probably the most important of all these, and it has the advantage of suggesting two other closely related problems that arise from the criticism of literature and of the plastic arts: one of these is provided by the fact that critics habitually praise *concrete* details, illustrations, allusions, etc., in poetry or prose of a generally reflective tenor, and habitually condemn details, allusions, etc., that are *personal* or, at least, *subjective ;* the other is provided by the idea of *abstraction* as used by Cezanne in his analysis and vindication of his own methods of painting. I would not wish to urge, however, that the problem I have dealt with occupies a central or pivotal position among æsthetic problems. Others, quite as crucial, arise from the attempt to clarify the notion of reading a single work of art and of establishing agreement or coherence as between different readings of it. (It is by this approach, I suspect, that the whole problem of the *units* of meaning and value in the different arts can best be examined.) But, in general, no suggested list of æsthetic problems could possibly be exhaustive, or for that matter representative: for no one can lay down in advance the lines along which criticism must go, or can forsee the kinds of difficulty critics may not run into. Finally, while I believe that the method employed above is typical of the kinds of method which journeyman æstheticians will find most useful, I don't want to dogmatise or to be interpreted too narrowly on this point. New and more penetrating philosophical methods, highly relevant to æsthetic problems, may be produced at any moment, and it is the duty of journeyman æstheticians to look out for these and apply them. Indeed, why should journeyman æstheticians deserve a hearing, if they do not bring to their problems the best logical tools available: if they cannot claim, in the words of the most philosophical of all great poets,

" Selber
Bringen schickliche Hände wir."

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