PSYCHOPHOBIA IN "THE MYTH OF THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE"

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In 1964 George Dickie published an article called "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" in the *American Philosophical Quarterly*. At the beginning of the essay he quoted Gilbert Ryle approvingly to the effect that "Myths often do a lot of theoretical good while they are still new." This is from the first chapter of Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* where he is preparing the groundwork for his attempt to establish that what he calls the "official doctrine"--that there is a "ghost in the machine"--is a myth that has served its purpose and is no longer needed or useful if we hearken to the new philosophy, which has made its peace with science, which alone determines "matters of fact," and which has abandoned all metaphysics.

My discussion of Dickie's essay is limited to the first two pages where he purports to show that what he calls the "strongest variety" of the aesthetic attitude theories, that of Edward Bullough, merely introduces technical terms to say what can be said in quite ordinary language and "does nothing more than send us off chasing after phantom acts and states of consciousness." I will not be concerned here with his further criticism of other aesthetic attitude theories nor with his claims that the aesthetic attitude is also misleading, not just useless.

According to Bullough we establish psychical distance from an object, whether it be a painting, a bit of music, or a fog at sea, when we put it "out of gear" with our practical, cognitive, and other interests. From a historical philosophical perspective, psychical distance is a variant of Kant's notion of "disinterested attention," which marked a turning point in the way that western philosophy attempted to isolate a vast category of human concern that is neither religious, nor ethical, nor cognitive, nor useful, i.e., the aesthetic concern. Bullough's view is a child of Kant's endeavor. Bullough takes an openly psychological rather than Kantian transcendental approach to the issue. His key concept is that of psychic distance. We gain "psychic distance" in so far as, and to the extent that, we cut ourselves off from all other considerations save those by which nature and human artifacts are experienced qualitatively. The supreme instances of human artifacts experienced in that frame of mind are what we call masterpieces.

What is wrong here? According to Dickie, the question is: Are there actions denoted by "to distance" or states of consciousness denoted by "being distanced"? His answer is brief and may seem compelling:

> When the curtain goes up, when we walk up to a painting, or when we look at a sunset are we ever induced into a state of being distanced either by being struck by the beauty of the objects or by pulling off an act of distancing? I do not recall committing any such special actions or of being induced into any special state, and I have no reason to suspect that I am atypical in this respect.

Dickie provides the rejoinder that might be expected from a distance theorist: "But are you not usually oblivious to noises and sights other than those of the play or to the marks on the wall around the painting?" Dickie's answer is: ". . . of course yes, but if to distance and being distanced simply mean that one's attention is focused, what is the point of introducing new technical terms and speaking as if these terms refer to special kinds of acts and states of consciousness?"

Dickie thus deftly avoids considering the fact that every instance of a person gazing upon a work of art while it works in one is contemplation. This is especially clear when the contemplation that arises is augustly captivating as in *Lear* or *The Potato Eaters*, but it is no less true in minor works like *Donald Duck's Revenge*.

Dickie envisages persistence. "The distance theorist might argue further. But surely you put the play (painting, sunset) 'out of gear' with your practical interests." This question seems to Dickie "to be a very odd way of asking (by employing the technical metaphor 'out of gear') if I attended to the play rather than thought about my wife or wondered how they managed to move the scenery about." He concludes that "To introduce the technical terms 'distance,' 'underdistance,' and 'over distance' does nothing but send us chasing after phantom acts and states of consciousness."

Now what difference does it make what kind of words we use to describe our stance vis-à-vis the features of nature or works of art either as "paying attention or not paying attention," on the one hand, or "establishing distance or failing to establish distance," on the other? Is Dickie merely quibbling, and would those who might oppose him be just quibbling back? I do not think so. There is quite a bit at stake

here that would be totally covered up by dismissing the whole thing as merely a matter of economy and ordinariness of language as opposed to technical, complicated jargon. All of us are quite capable of watching a play without an aesthetic theory of what elements of such an event constitute what is specifically "watching the play" or "being distracted from watching the play." Dickie would not have gone to the trouble of writing his essay if all he wanted to do was to bring our attention to the fact that some people use rather technical language to describe what purportedly can be described perfectly adequately in quite ordinary language. He believes that mythical components are involved in technical language and they bother him. It is those "phantom acts and states of consciousness," persistent and conspicuous in the psychic distance theory, that constitute what he calls "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude." The "Ghost in the Machine," exorcised by science and a duly chastened philosophy, threatens to use aesthetics to return to haunt philosophy, and he wants to help put that ghost to rest forever. Since without consciousness our life would be nothing, any attempt to discredit its existence seems to be a sort of philosophical aberration that may be called psychophobia.

Consider drama. What is it that really takes place before me as I sit in the theater? If what this question alludes to is what is *really* going on out there on the stage, and if it is going to be answered insightfully and realistically, one of the first things that might occur to us is that the "persons" and "events" are an ambiguous sort of reality. The effort to deal with such questions not only provides understanding of the nature of theater but also an understanding of our own being. Our imaginatively laden perceptual activity constitutes the magic and mystery of the reality that is theater--or cinema for that matter.

In familiar terms Scarlet O'Hara is a role played by Vivien Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*. In ontological terms, Leigh is both a real person and a theatrical being, an imaginary being, a cinematographical being, in any case someone who is not "for real," but who also is certainly not nothing. Similar things must be said for the *conversations and the actions she engages in qua actress* that are, and yet are not, "for real." The actress *qua* actress is not an ordinary being. We *have* to say strange things if we are going to wonder just what is most appropriate to say when we talk about these un-ordinary realities as realities. Suppose that it is alleged that "unreal being" is simply an oxymoron. So be it. Then drama does not exist. But that is simply preposterous. Where do the actions of

the cinema take place if not in that ambiguous field of psychic force which each viewer maintains, where coquettish and single-minded Scarlet pursues her destiny? An empty cinema where *Gone With the Wind* is being projected is a "movie" in name only.

If the standard logic of "real" refutes the existence of unreal beings, so much the worse for standard logic. The hard fact is that when we watch *Gone With the Wind* we watch Scarlet O'Hara. Shall we say that we have been converted to the poetic faith which is a willing suspension of disbelief? Why not? At no moment does this faith extend to believing that Scarlet is a real person, and yet it is Scarlet that we are watching through the eyes of poetic faith. We might want to say that we are watching Vivien Leigh *as* Scarlet. We might want to say that Leigh has "become" Scarlet, but a human being cannot become an imaginary being. Though Leigh does not "become" Scarlet, she is Scarlet in our fantasy, which is simultaneously perceptual. However perplexing it is to talk explicitly about imaginary beings and their relationship to real beings, everyone usually has a remarkable capacity not to confuse these two fundamentally different forms of being, except perhaps in religion and politics.

Whatever positive reality cinematic and theatrical beings have (fictitious, imaginary, immaterial, mental, psychic), they are precisely what we are involved in and watching when we "pay attention," as Dickie would have it, to a play or a movie. The point is that it is inconceivable that Scarlet could exist without, or outside of, or independent of, "states of consciousness" (whatever they may be). The nonpsychic existence of the drama or play is as inconceivable as an unseen mirage. Following Plato's lead, Aristotle called the actions of the stage imitations. It took the fundamental changes in western philosophy that we know as modern philosophy to get us to regard those beings as imaginary. So there is no need to detect the psychic component in art in order for us to speak effectively about it. But not only is it true that the contemplation of art is activity of mind, of "acts and states of consciousness," but the frank acknowledgment and keener awareness of this fact adds immensely to the variety and richness of our expressions about these matters.

José Ortega y Gasset in *The Idea of Theater* tells a wonderful story. Don Quixote stands in a dark corner of a mess hall at an inn where "the whole village" has assembled to watch the master puppeteer Pedro. "Lanky, squalid, graceless, his eyes ablaze with the perpetual fever of inopportune heroism,"

Quixote watches the puppet who *is* (theatrically) Don Gaiferos, the French knight, cousin of Roland and vassal of Charlemagne, who has just freed his wife, Melisandra, who had been held prisoner by the Moors in Zaragoza. The bold knight, Gaiferos, has managed the escape of Melisandra, and the two lovers are galloping away to France with the Moors in hot pursuit. At this point Ortega tells us that Don Quixote cries out from his dark corner, "Never as long as I live, and in my presence will I permit such violence to be done so famous a knight and so bold a lover as Don Gaiferos. Halt, lowborn rabble; cease your pursuit and persecution, or else ye shall do battle with me." And without further declamation, Quixote bounds upon the stage and furiously slashes the Moorish puppets, beheading one, crippling another, mangling a third.

Don Quixote is here the archetypal bumpkin who has lost the psychic distance that makes puppet shows possible. He has become personally and totally involved in what ordinary humans see as a puppet show. There is no imperative that we use "psychic distance" or "the aesthetic attitude" or any other term or combination of terms to speak intelligently about what happened to Don Quixote in these circumstances. We could have said, for example, what Ortega himself says:

> The imaginary and magical region of the state where unreality is generated has a less dense atmosphere than that of the rest of the mess hall. The density and atmospheric pressure of reality is different in each space and as happens with the air we breathe, this differential between atmospheric pressures creates a current of air from the area of greater to that of lower pressure. The stage's mouth breathes in the audience's reality, draws it into its less dense realm of unreality. At times this flow of air becomes a whirlwind. . . . the imaginary world of Master Pedro's puppet theater breathed in the unstable weightless soul of Don Quixote, causing it to travel from the hall to the stage. By so doing he does not enter into what it is not; he destroys it. (182-83)

There may be details here with which one would wish to take issue. But what would be the point of belittling this as the "vortex" or "atmospheric pressure" theory of drama? What Ortega is freely, imaginatively, and carefully describing is *the idea of theater*, and to do so is to describe human psycho-dynamics.

Dickie takes Sheila Dawson to task for her defense of the aesthetic attitude on grounds that it leads to conclusions that he says are so curious that they throw suspicion on the theory. He quotes her as follows:

> One remembers the horrible loss of distance in Peter Pan--the moment when Peter says, "Do you believe in fairies? . . . if you do clap you hands!", the moment when most children would like to slink out of the theater and not a few cry--not because Tinkerbell may die, but because the magic is gone. What, after all, should we feel like if Lear were to leave Cordelia, come to the front of the stage and say, "All the grown ups who think that she loves me, shout 'yes.'"

"It is hard to believe," Dickie objects, "that the responses of any children could be as theory bound as those Dawson describes." The children need a theory to respond as they did as little as they need a theory of grammar in order to talk. Only contemporary critics and art buffs need a theory in order to appreciate some contemporary works of art. (Cf. Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*.) Dickie states:

> In fact, Peter Pan's request for applause is a dramatic high point to which children respond enthusiastically. The playwright gives the children a momentary chance to become actors in the play. The children do not at that moment lose or snap out of a state of being distanced because they never had or were in any such thing to begin with.

Whether the children slink away and cry, or burst out in applause is not relevant to the central issue. Both responses are healthy and normal. The one is a consequence of shattering the magic by what is taken as an impertinent question, an intrusion, a distraction. The other response is, as Dickie says, "an enthusiastic response." In Bullough's view, the children clung so intensely to the psychic distance generated by the movie that they momentarily raised their belief in fairies to another level. That is something to clap about. That is why some children responded enthusiastically.

By whatever name, the psychic distance theory is actually necessarily implied by examining the mental dynamics that Dawson brings to our attention. The mental dynamics of "watching Peter Pan interacting with the fairies" and "clapping

at Peter Pan's instigation" are quite different. The distinctions can surely be made independently of any explicit metaphysics of mind. But they can be made only by distinguishing what we can also recognize as different psychological dynamics, and realizing this may actually help with matters that per se require no explicit recognition of mental dynamics. Dickie claims that "the playwright gives the children a momentary chance to become actors in the play." The children can become actors in the play only by pretending that they are in the play. If they can be said to have done that here, it was because they were able to make a mental shift from spectator to actor. Ortega said that Quixote destroyed the drama by "entering into it," and Dawson felt that the children who joined Tinkerbell's aside had done the same. Had "the whole village" laughed in glee, Quixote would have become an unwitting actor in an "improvisation" introduced by a madman into Master Pedro's play. All of these may remain debatable issues.

However, whether the psychic distance theory is helpful or misleading in such debates is peripheral to the issue of whether there are any mythological elements in it. And if what Dickie calls "phantom states of mind and acts of consciousness" are in fact the most decisive real conditions for the possibility of art, then "dispelling the myth" is verbal magic that may work for those who are taken in by it, but even for them it works only in words.

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