

Critical Disinterestedness and Ideological Commitment: An Impasse?

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Is critical disinterestedness possible? Or, is it, for that matter, even *desirable*? These are the major questions that hover above this essay - large questions which we face at the outset. For the moment we need to establish, first, what might be meant by 'disinterestedness'. For those whose major business is with the English literary tradition, the first name that will unfailingly come to mind when the term is mentioned is that of Matthew Arnold. The word 'disinterestedness' famously occurs in what remains one of the most widely read of Arnold's critical essays, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'. Arnold pauses to ask, what rule ought to condition the activity of English criticism? His answer is as follows:

The rule may be summed up in one word - *disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things'; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches.¹

This is only the most explicit of those passages in which Arnold deals with what for him is a crucial critical ideal - which is also, in fact, a literary ideal. It is clear from a statement in the 'Preface' to the 1853 edition of his poems that one of the things he most values in the writers of the Age of Pericles (Arnold's constant touchstone of cultural excellence) is what he calls 'disinterested objectivity'.²

Now there are good reasons for acknowledging at this point that Arnold's acceptance of the very possibility of objective evaluation is bound to appear naïve and old-fashioned. One well-known commentator on postmodernism, for example - Patricia Waugh - dismisses the whole notion of an objective overview of any given cultural situation when she states that 'we can no longer seek transcendence', and goes on to add: 'There is no Kantian "view from nowhere", no conceptual space not already implicated in that which it seeks to contest'.³ (Or - to escape for moment from that vocabulary of contestation and conflict which so readily enters into statements of modern critical theory - 'that which it seeks to *evaluate*'). We must then retort to Arnold that, even as he seeks to promote the ideal of disinterestedness, he is still acting at the behest of his own ideological agenda. Or, on a less sophisticated and theoretical level, we find Oliver Sacks simply taking it for granted that objective perception/evaluation is a non-starter. In an article published in 2004, he at one point observes that

we deceive ourselves if we imagine that we can ever be passive, impartial observers. Every perception, every scene, is shaped by us, whether we intend it, know it, or not.⁴

And of course it may still come as something of a shock to recall that even science, that discipline which above all others takes as its *raison d'être* a capacity for objective observation, found itself bedevilled, in the new physics of the early twentieth century, by an unavoidable and obtrusive input on the part of the observer.

It is clear, then, that it is rather more difficult for us to endorse the notion of disinterested objectivity than it was for Arnold. Yet rightly, and as a matter of pragmatic necessity, we continue to hope that some degree of objectively founded agreement is after all possible, both in our perception of 'reality' and in our (collective) response to art-works (including literature). Severely hampered as we

unavoidably are by a pervasive modern scepticism, we have to accept how difficult it is to arrive at a position of disinterestedness; yet, on the other hand, we do not entirely abandon all attempts to arrive at a consensus based on the available evidence. Disinterestedness, then, may remain as an impossible ideal to which, nonetheless, we may approximate.⁵

What engages me most in Arnold's attitude is the way in which he situates 'disinterestedness' at the heart of both culture and politics. When, in the passage quoted earlier from 'The Function of Criticism', Arnold advocates that we should 'remain aloof from what is called the "practical view of things"', he may be said to be opposing his ideal of 'the free play of the mind' to *praxis* in general, including, we must infer, political *praxis*. Whether the 'play of the mind' can ever be truly 'free' - free, let us say, of subjective and perhaps unacknowledged prejudice - it might at least try to bypass acknowledged or *conscious* prejudice. Or, in other words, refuse to commit itself *a priori* to a clearly formulated ideological position.

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What is perhaps required, however, at this point is a weightier philosophical - and indeed literary - vindication of disinterestedness (in particular, *aesthetic* disinterestedness) than that provided by Arnold (whose reputation no longer stands as high as it did even some fifty years ago). I turn, then, to a substantial and significant essay by Diane Collinson, in a collection of essays on philosophical aesthetics, edited by Oswald Hanfling.

One prominent concern in Collinson's account of aesthetic experience is the notion of *disinterested contemplation*. She defines disinterestedness as 'an impartial or unbiassed attitude in which one has no personal axe to grind ...'⁶ Collinson first of all shows how Aquinas, following Aristotle, characterises aesthetic perception as 'contemplative'; that is to say, the observer or recipient responds to the work of art in a mood of 'attentive contemplation' (p. 118: Collinson's phrase). She rightly notes the influence of Aristotle and Aquinas on the youthful Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait*, and she cites Stephen's aesthetic discussion with Lynch in the final section of the novel. Following Aristotle, Stephen first speaks of our response to Tragedy:

You see I use the word *arrest*. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic emotion is. The feelings aroused by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographic or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion ... is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.⁷

Later in the same discussion, dealing with Aquinas's notion of *claritas* (the vivid apprehension of the quality of an object), Stephen speaks of the experience in these terms:

The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure, a spiritual state ...⁸

Both Joyce and Stephen, as we know, use the term 'epiphany' to describe this moment of vivid apprehension - epiphany meaning 'revelation'. Joyce, however, typically refuses to accept that there is anything metaphysical or transcendent in such a revelation, and the moment of epiphany remains wholly

rooted in the natural order; it arises from a happy conjunction of the mind's cognitive potential and the inherent formal properties of the object. Nevertheless, the idea that the moment of aesthetic perception may point to an order or dimension beyond the immediate object remains a Platonic temptation which may be difficult to resist. And aesthetic perception, as Stephen's exposition suggests, and Collinson also stresses, 'need not be confined to works of art'. We can, she adds, 'be moved in much the same way by natural phenomena, things and beings ... and the human face and form' (p. 114).

This view was one shared by Arthur Schopenhauer; and, unlike Joyce, Schopenhauer had no reservations about making use of a Platonic vocabulary. Of the objects in the world, it is the example of the tree that Schopenhauer invokes in order to illustrate the possibility of our perception of the Idea of the tree. Insofar as we know the tree as Idea, the perceived tree, as Collinson puts it, 'is plucked from the stream of the world's course', and becomes (in the words of Schopenhauer) 'a representative of the whole, an equivalent of the many in space and time (Collinson, p. 128). The individual tree is idealised as *the* Tree, or as essential 'tree-ness'.

Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory derives from his philosophical views as a whole, and Collinson helpfully situates the aesthetic theory within that larger context. According to Schopenhauer, the world is to be conceived as a blind and fecund energy which he calls 'Will'; or, as Collinson summarises it, the dynamic in the world is 'blind force without lucidity or reason' (p. 126: we could, perhaps, think of 'Will' as a kind of *elan vital*, but conceived in the most negative terms). We are all at its mercy⁹; and one of the clearest indications of our subjection to this blind and irrational force is to be found, for Schopenhauer, in the area of sexuality. In the sexual act, as well as in the choice of sexual mate, we are in fact - whatever illusions of freedom we may have - acting at the behest of the blind and irrational Will.

Yet we are not wholly doomed to this subjection; for although we appear to be at the mercy of the Will, Schopenhauer points to the further possibility that 'behind our existence lies something else, that becomes accessible to us only by our shaking off the world' (p. 126). This other reality is revealed when, in Schopenhauer's phrase, a 'denial of the will' occurs (ibid.). Thus, for Schopenhauer, the urgent need is somehow to transcend the blind promptings of the Will, and find something that will raise us (in his own words) 'out of the endless stream of willing' (p. 127). This we can do (as we have already seen in the example of the tree) when, in our dealings with the real world, a moment of contemplative stasis allows us to see the object in its purest form; at such a moment, in Collinson's summary, 'the particular, contingent variations of an object ... fall away to reveal its Idea' (p. 128; Schopenhauer's masterwork (1819) carries the title *The World as Will and Idea*).

It is, however, particularly in works of art that this possibility of contemplating the object-in-itself is offered; for just as, happily, the tree may lose, in a moment of contemplative perception, its particular or contingent properties, so too in the work of art - *but by design from the outset* - the inessential or contingent is eliminated, and the essential emphasised (p. 129). Art, it might be suggested - whether it be Michelangelo's statue of David or Shakespeare's *King Lear* or a Rembrandt self-portrait or one of Beethoven's last quartets - strives to reveal, in Schopenhauer's terms, the essential stripped of the inessential.¹⁰ In the moment of aesthetic contemplation the all-pervasive energy of the relentless Will is temporarily placed in abeyance; in the formula found in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, we see (or, as scepticism here insists I should add, think we see) 'into the life of things'. This is Schopenhauer's own account of the aesthetic experience:

The attention is no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them ... Then all at once the peace, always sought but

always escaping us on the first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us ... aesthetic pleasure ... is delight from pure knowledge and its ways.

(p. 115)

Obviously the phrase 'without interest' recapitulates the whole notion of 'disinterestedness', as does 'purely objectively'; while 'pure knowledge' is correlative with Arnold's 'free play of the mind'.

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In the remainder of her essay, Collinson seeks to validate the notion of disinterestedness by invoking, *inter alia*, Kant's *Critique of Judgement*; and, using Kant as authoritative source, further stresses the formalist aspects of this kind of aesthetic approach. First, on the question of disinterestedness, Collinson provides this summary of Kant: 'Taste is a person's capacity to judge things by means of a contemplative delight in their beauty; it is the capacity for disinterested aesthetic experience' (p. 136). As for formalism, the following from Collinson serves as a gloss on Kant's 'purposiveness without purpose':

According to Kant, beauty in a representation is its formal properties, its appearance of being designed, but for no specific purpose ... When we experience beauty we are recognizing and responding to formal properties.

(p. 139)

And following this Kantian emphasis on formal properties Collinson is able to proceed to a consideration of Clive Bell's definition of (visual) art as 'Significant Form' (p. 145).

Having looked finally at such theorists as John Dewey, Edward Bullough, Monroe C. Beardsley and George Dickie, Collinson summarises her findings, seeing a broad similarity in all of these theories:

it is obvious that most accounts of [aesthetic experience] focus on groups of features or characteristics that are broadly similar; for example, concepts such as stasis, will-lessness, detachment, distance and disinterestedness have a great deal in common ...

(p. 170)

Such, then, we may conclude, is the traditional or mainstream emphasis in theories of aesthetic experience. But how fares such a concept as disinterestedness in our own embattled, post-Foucauldian contemporary criticism? And how fares the related concept of will-lessness (with or without reference to Schopenhauer)?

In a work significantly titled *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990), Umberto Eco complained - in my view, rightly - of 'a general tendency' in recent critical studies to legitimise a 'free reading' which cedes the initiative to 'the *will* of the interpreters'.¹¹ The literary text, thus manipulated by the interpretative will, is forced to give up its aesthetic autonomy. As an example of this manipulative will, Richard Rorty, apparently without disapproval, refers to a type of critic who 'asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions, but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose'.¹² The idiom of violence here is striking: ignoring any possibility that the text may possess a degree of objective inviolability as object-in-itself, the critic feels free to commit ideological rape, mastering the text and making it serve his/her own agenda. So much for Diane Collinson's cautionary formula: that the aesthetic object, as 'something that reveals itself as complete and whole in itself is recognized as something upon which, in a certain sense, one cannot and would not want to intrude' (p. 120). Far from

not wanting to intrude, the ideologically driven critic may trample down the flower-beds, insouciantly scattering aesthetic blooms in all directions.

Let me conclude this phase of the argument by taking particular note of two quotations from Collinson's essay which serve to reveal how far many contemporary critics have moved from earlier, traditional emphases. Here, first, is Schopenhauer: 'everyone has to stand before a picture [or, we might add, a poem] as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him ... ' (p. 133). Schopenhauer's symbol of the prince is not, of course, adventitious: it is part of an argument which would deliberately empower the art-work, not the power-hungry critic. The second quotation is even shorter but is pithy and striking in its brevity. It comes from C.S. Lewis: 'The first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender' (ibid.). To surrender, however, is to abjure ideological control, ceding the (propagandist?) initiative to the text; and this is what the feminist or post-colonialist or post-Marxian or similarly motivated critic cannot bring herself to do.

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In the title of this essay, I describe the tension between ideological commitment and critical disinterestedness as an impasse; which suggests that both parties to the dispute have such a strong claim on our sympathy that we cannot, in the interests of finding a speedy resolution, dismiss one at the expense of the other. For, even as I undertake to act as devil's advocate on behalf of disinterestedness, I am obliged to recognise that it is not possible to ignore totally the claims of ideological reading. Nor can we return, blindly, to a pre-theoretical innocence, in which we spontaneously respond to the aesthetic appeal and emotive power of the literary work (or work of art), ignoring its inescapable ideological implications (though in some literary works these will be less central than in others). If I have acted as devil's advocate on behalf of aesthetic appreciation, it is because I fear that, given a number of obvious trends (including the broad tendency of literary studies to lose its centrality in the English Department as it is displaced by an increasingly potent cultural theory), we shall decide simply to resolve the impasse by giving priority to ideological implication above all else.

Not long ago, in an article in *The London Review of Books*, Terry Eagleton usefully reminded us of Fredric Jameson's admonition (in *Marxism and Form*) that 'no theory of the [literary] work is likely to be worth much if it does not "come to terms with the shape of the sentences"'.¹³ That provides, at least, a gesture of reconciliation; but even here the emphasis tends to fall, still, on the ideological, since, *au fin du compte*, the 'shape of the sentences' may be adjudged acceptable only insofar as they articulate an ideological content that can be of use to the critic. We may (alas?) have to resign ourselves to the fact that what Arnold advocated as disinterestedness belongs to a former epoch, and that it is naïve to hope for an immersion in some profound aesthetic satisfaction.

And yet, and yet ... when one stands in front of certain paintings, by Botticelli or Renoir or Van Gogh or whomever; or listens to music by Bach or Schubert or Brahms or countless others; or responds to the emotive appeal of some of George Herbert's lyrics or the aesthetic finesse of *The Rape of the Lock* or the sublime passages of *The Prelude*; or bears witness to the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, or is moved beyond words by the statue-scene in *The Winter's Tale* - it is hard not to believe that there may be some minimal validity in the case made by Schopenhauer. But under what -ism, and in what critically acceptable language, is such a subjective/intuitive experience to be expressed?

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- ¹ Culler, A. Dwight, ed.: *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 246.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 203. In the same passage in the 1853 'Preface', such 'objectivity' is implicitly contrasted with the problematic subjectivism of modernity, which gives us (in another famous phrase) 'the dialogue of the mind with itself', as well as the 'discouragement' of Hamlet and of Faust.
- ³ Waugh, Patricia, ed.: *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p. 5.
- ⁴ Sacks, Oliver: 'In the River of Consciousness', in *The New York Review of Books* (January 15, 2004), p. 44.
- ⁵ See, for a pragmatic view on the matter, James, William: *Pragmatism in Focus*, ed. Doris Olin (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 109: 'The "absolutely" true meaning what no further experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge ...'
- ⁶ Collinson, Diane: 'Aesthetic Experience', in Hanfling, Oswald, ed.: *Philosophical Aesthetics* (Blackwell/The Open University, 1992; repr. 1997), p. 134. All subsequent references to Collinson's essay are from this source and are given in the main text. - I pause here to note, by way of anticipation of what is argued later, the total lack of such impartiality in those ideologically committed critics (feminists, postcolonialists and others) in whom the sound of grinding axes is quite deafening.
- ⁷ Joyce, James: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. R.B. Kershner (Boston/New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 179. In rejecting the 'didactic' role of art Stephen in effect is implying that art as propaganda (art as ideological) is an inferior form of art.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ⁹ The pessimism of much of Thomas Hardy's poetry derives from an imaginative application of just such ideas.
- ¹⁰ I must in all candour confess at this point that the terms 'essential' and 'inessential' strike me as too abstract, even vague, and as more to do with the 'philosophical' than the 'aesthetic'. We would need some indication, at least, as to what the 'essence' of a work of art is; a philosophical task that is beyond the present writer. One can, however, accept that there is a particularly intense focus in some great works of art on human experience that is profoundly representative; and, in any case, the general point in Schopenhauer, concerning the different order of perception we can experience in engaging with great art, has sufficient validity to deserve a hearing.
- ¹¹ Eco, Umberto: *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 42: italics added.
- ¹² Rorty, Richard: 'Nineteenth-Century idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 151. - I here reprise an argument which is given in more detailed form in a lecture first published in 1994; see 'Voicing the Text: Authors/Auditors, Writers/Readers', in Kabdebo, Thomas, ed.: *Beyond the Library Walls: John Paul II Annual Lectures* (Maynooth: St. Patrick's College, 1995), pp. 30-43, esp. pp. 35-39.
- ¹³ Eagleton, Terry: 'Anti-Humanism' (a review of a study of D.H. Lawrence and post-coloniality), in *The London Review of Books* (5 February, 2004), p. 16.