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AN AESTHETIC PARADOX IN GREENE

As T. R. Greene approaches the conclusion of his massive volume on *The Arts and the Art of Criticism*, the greater climax which the reader has been expecting dissolves into a frustrating paradox. And yet there are elements through the book when, if given greater weight, could have prevented this final disappointment.

In the last section of the book Greene is building up three categories which he believes are necessary for the art of criticism. These are artistic perfection, artistic truth, and artistic greatness. Artistic perfection requires the resolution of three poler tensions; simplicity versus complexity to produce unity; order versus novelty to produce originality; and the denial versus the idolatry of the medium. The category of artistic truth is set up because art is an attempt to interpret reality; artistic expression something, and this something may be true or false. Artistic greatness is a third category. It is needed because there can be artistic perfection without truth, and truth without profundity. An artist may interpret the universe perversely; he may lack true insight and yet be highly competent in technique. His work will then be perfect, but because of its perversity cannot be great. Green refers to Felicien Rops whose philosophy of life "even according to the very low standards of human decency . . . is morally perverse and spiritually diabolic. Yet there is nothing trivial or superficial in his art, for it expresses an intense imaginative understanding of human depravity in some of its most extreme forms" (p. 464).

This analysis by which the greatness of a work of art is proportional to the normative truth of its philosophy of life promises interesting developments. But, to our disappointment, Greene goes on to say (p. 468), "this general account of . . . artistic greatness . . . leaves unanswered three perplexing questions." First, he questions whether a critic can legitimately apply to art a non-artistic standard. Second, if a critic judges artistic greatness on the basis of his own philosophy of life, can he claim objectivity in his judgment? And third, does not appraisal of greatness in terms of philosophical viewpoints necessitate invidious comparisons between masterpieces which express different philosophies? "More specifically," says Greene (p. 473) "how can a Christian critic assert the greatness of a pagan masterpiece, or a naturalistically minded critic the greatness of a work of art which

expresses a Christian philosophy of life? In short," Greene continues, "are we not compelled, after all, either (i) to redefine artistic greatness so as to divorce it from truth, or (ii) to require the critic to indulge in that type of appraisal, already described, which he would certainly regard as invidious and odious, or (iii) to abandon the category of artistic greatness altogether?"

Each of these three alternatives, Green declares, does violence to the critical enterprise. Most critics are unwilling to divorce truth from greatness. All sensitive critics consider the application of philosophic standards distasteful. And although the modern temper has lost its sense of objective values, and would therefore rather readily discard the category of greatness the great critical tradition shows a persistent tendency to use this category.

It is in Greene's attempt to manage these paradoxes that some readers are disappointed. The paradoxes arise from, and the key to their solution is found in, as Greene seems to think the fact that the critic does not have an omniscient grasp of ever detail of absolute truth. From this admitted fact Green draws an inference which in my opinion is invalid. On the basis of the critic's lack of omniscience Green concludes that the several persistent types of philosophy all express some genuine insight and satisfy some basic need of human nature. The Avignon Pieta, to use Greene's examples, expresses a belief which sincere Christians have cherished and will continue to cherish; and at the same time a Cezanne landscape expresses the naturalistic view that man is engulfed in an impersonal universe which cares nothing for human values. Somehow or other, Green seems to consider both viewpoints as true insights. Neither is the complete truth to be sure, but both are valid evaluations of the universe.

In this passage Greene's language is shifting and unsatisfying. By saying that the one painting expresses what some thoughtful men have regarded as a true insight and that the other painting expresses what other thoughtful men have regarded as a true insight, he avoids putting in his own mount the explicit statement that both paintings and both philosophies are true. Yet the course of his argument requires the assertion that the several generic types of philosophy are indeed equally true evaluations. Since otherwise the passage would have no point, the discussion must proceed on this assumption.

Now, this attempt to solve the paradoxes is unsatisfactory for several reasons. In the first place, there is no possible sense in which Christianity and atheism can both be genuine insights into reality or equally valid interpretations of the universe. Since these views are logical contraries, their

harmonization is inconceivable, quite apart from anything Greene says in the context. Nor does the specific context succeed in avoiding this logical impossibility, for the reasons Greene adduces do not lead to any such conclusion. No amount of finitude and ignorance can justify the attempt to make contrary and antagonistic views partial expressions of the same truth. The trouble which gives rise to the paradoxes cannot be located in the human lack of omniscience. It does not require a complete grasp of every detail of absolute truth to know that Christianity and atheism can never be parts of the same metaphysical system. This is so obvious that it probably explains why Greene attempts to avoid committing himself and shifts the onus to the many thoughtful men throughout history who have disagreed one with another.

Then, in the second place, what Greene did not say is almost as significant as what he did say, and this too shows the insufficiency of his solution. He might have said that the choice of a basic philosophy is as difficult as it is important, and that an art critic who must amass a large fund or information on the history of art, who must spend a great deal of time visiting the museums of the world, who must ponder the styles, the techniques, and purposes of many artists, cannot be expected to know very much about philosophy in addition. Therefore, he, the critic, will not insist that all artists should express the one true philosophy, but he will be satisfied and will judge a work of art great if it expresses any one of the major competing philosophies. Thus the Avignon Pieta is great because in addition to its artistic perfection, it is a consistent and clear expression of Christian philosophy; while at the same time Cezanne's landscape is a great work of art because, in addition to its artistic perfection, it is a clear expression of naturalism. This is what Greene might have said; it would have been more consistent with the human finitude on which he tries to base his solution to the paradoxes; and by itself it would have been a better conclusion than the one he actually adopts; but it would have been inconsistent with some of his best earlier remarks. Although Greene indicates that the application of nonartistic standards is odious and results in invidious comparisons, he has himself made such applications and comparisons. Remember Greene's judgment of Felicien Rops. Rops' work, he says, is characterized by “an intense imaginative understanding of human depravity in some of its most extreme forms.” It would be great art, if greatness were defined solely in terms of penetratinginsight. But, and note carefully Greene's judgment, “But when the work of Rops is appraised in terms of a more comprehensive philosophy of life, the perversity of his moral outlook . . . becomes at one apparent,” and, we may conclude, Rops work therefore is not to be judged great. Or, conversely, Greene should not have objected to Rops' depravity, but should have judged his work to be as great art as the Avignon Pieta, if indeed the critic is not permitted to apply non-artistic standards and must by all means avoid

odious comparisons among competing philosophies.

Green asserted (p. 409) that a critic “must find” this kind of comparison “peculiarly odious.” But surely Green did not think his own comparisons odious nor did he refrain from applying non-artistic standards when discussing Rops; and I believe that if Greene had had the courage of his convictions, if he had stressed rather than modified and minimized some of his earlier statements, he could have come to a much better solution of his problem.

II.

But it will require a little courage and somewhat more logical rigor than is pleasing to artistic temperaments to advance a theory that some critics are sure to scorn as moralistic. It would seem that Green fears the charge of moralism, for he makes a series of statements to avoid such an accusation. Unfortunately, however, in so far as he avoids a moralistic aesthetics, he loses in consistency and logical rigor.

For example, he objects to Plato's moralistic overemphasis as myopic (p. 125).

Several times he asserts that the purpose, or at least the primary purpose of art is not to initiate action or to induce spiritual commitment. It refrains at its best from every form of propaganda (p. 230). The goal to which the artist is committed is not practical or spiritual commitment. For in proportion as the artist assumes the role of prophet, moralist, or evangelist, he renounces artistic insight for its own sake (p. 255).

And yet most of the book is not written in this tone. Although the last reference implies the value of artistic insight for its own sake, Greene in another place, says, “Only the 'aesthete' has subscribed to the thesis of 'art for art's sake'; the motto of the conscientious artist has been 'art for life's sake'” (p. 229). “It is only in periods of cultural and spiritual decadence, periods characterized by a loss of inner assurance in spiritual values, that the 'aesthete' (in the narrow and derogatory sense) has made his appearance and proclaimed that art is reducible to aesthetically agreeable patterns of sound and color and is therefore an escape from reality, mere play, an object of aesthetic delight and nothing more” (p. 233). It is worthwhile to emphasize this quotation by repeating its ideas positively. Here Green has said that art is at its best in ages of spiritual assurance and commitment; art is more than

aesthetically pleasing patterns and instead of being an escape from reality is seriously connected with the issue of life. Again, the enjoyment of beauty is not the only end of art or even its chief end (p 233). And if all this does not have a decided moralistic tone, a final quotation should clinch the matter, for Greene asserts in so many words that “morality may be said to constitute art's ultimate subject matter” (p. 266).

Indeed, when he repudiates art for art's sake and insists on art for life's sake, he argues that were it not so, art would have little or no significance. Play, escape from reality, or mere aesthetic enjoyment can be only trivial. But Green is so convinced or art's importance that he gives the artist a pre-eminent position in society. “The scientist,” he says, “is too far removed from life to comprehend its human quality and import” (p. 240). Science is impersonal, objective, and abstract. It is aloof and dispassionate, and ignores moral and religious considerations (pp. 237-238). On the other extreme the common man is immersed in a temporal process and cannot avoid commitment and action. He faces forced options (p. 236). And thus “the common man is too close to life to see it in perspective without subjective prejudice” (p. 240). And then Green concludes, “Only the artist is able to mediate between the extremes and to view life as a human being . . . with passionate intensity yet with dispassionate lucidity . . . He is able, as no one else, to apprehend the man in men and to speak to use with a profoundly human impersonality (p. 240).

This is such high praise for the artist that philosophers must feel a bit uncomfortable. But if even half of this is true, aesthetics can hardly avoid being moralistic. It would have to be the aim of art to tell the truth about life. It would have to tell the truth, not merely that Rops' debauchery exists factually, or that war and patriotism are phases of life which Rude and Delacroix can portray, but art must also tell the truth that one type of life is morally superior to another. That is, art not only may be ought to induce spiritual commitment.

It is difficult to see how Greene can avoid this conclusion. Aside from assigning the artist the only proper perspective from which to view life, Greene also says that “It is of the very essence of literature that, whatever the subject treated and in whatever manner it is dealt with, it is so presented as to quicken our imaginative comprehension and to evoke our emotive and conative response” (p. 179).

Now, an emotive and conative response is hard to distinguish from spiritual commitment. And if it is the essential function of literature to induce a conative response, it would seem that the other arts

amy legitimately and within their limits share the same essential purpose.

III.

For a final section I would like to support he same conclusion by an appeal to the category of artistic truth. The forgoing quotations came from passages closely connected with the details of the several arts, principally in the sections of Artistic Form and Artistic Content. The following treats of the broader and more philosophical principles of aesthetics.

Under the subtitle “Art possesses cognitive significance,” Greene in effect defines the function of art. “In a work or art,” he says, “reality is interpreted and expressed in a distinctive way” (p. 229). The distinctiveness of the expression relates of course to the artistry and is comprehended under the category of perfection. What is to be emphasized now is that art interprets and expresses reality. The importance of art is essentially conditioned by its reference to reality. “Its subject mater,” says Greene, “embraces every kind of reality known to man,” and the artist's goal is . . . the comprehension of reality in its relation to man as a normative and purpose agent” (p. 230).

Now, one may wish to hold that the purpose of art is exhausted in aesthetic enjoyment, and that therefore it is not necessarily restricted to the interpretation of reality; but if on the contrary serious importance is to be attributed to art, some closer connection with life and reality seems to be called for. Only be assigning art cognitive significance can one avoid viewing it as “An escape from reality into an ivory tower” (p. 229). If these sentiments, which require artistic truth as a category of criticism, are to be developed consistently, they should not be subjected to paradoxical modifications. No one denies that a work of art must be judged by artistic criteria. The mere fact that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* interprets reality is not sufficient to make it a work of literary art. The present discussion concerns objects which for artistic reasons are already identified as art. It should not need mention, but to remove all excuse for misunderstanding on the part of those who scorn moralistic aesthetics, let it be noted that, as Greene says, “the artistic form of a work or art is the peculiar locus of its artistic quality;” yet to return to our argument “this form is not merely an end in itself but also, and essentially, a means . . . whereby the artist can express himself and communicate his ideas to others” (p. 123).

If, therefore, the artist interprets reality and wishes to communicate his ideas to others, it

necessarily follows that a work of art, no less than Kant's Critique, must be either true or false. Interpretation of reality, of nature, of the universe, cannot avoid being either true or false. And Greene, I should say, is entirely justified in asserting that artistic truth “is genuine truth and not something entirely different, masquerading under the name” (p. 424) Green is also to be commended in conceiving “truth and falsity . . . as properties of one and only one type of entity, namely, of propositions” (p. 425).

If Green had continued rigorously along this line, he would have avoided the inconsistency of his frustrating paradoxes. But it is here that he adds further crippling modifications. Or, rather, it is here that he adds unintelligible modifications. Although truth is all one genus, Greene distinguishes two species. In addition to the ordinary species, e.g. the cat is black, there are some propositions which cannot be expressed in concepts (pp. 427, 437). Green admits that he conceives of propositions much more broadly than is usual. But does not this admission indicate his failure? He began by asserting the common meaning of truth; he repudiated a masquerade. Now he wants to make the common meaning of truth a property of a type of proposition whose meaning is not only uncommon but undefined. But if the common meaning of truth is conceptual, as I take it to be, it cannot be a property of some fanciful nonconceptual proposition.

The motivation behind Greene's search for nonconceptual propositions is clear. He believe that certain aspects of reality can be expressed more accurately in artistic media than in words. In fact some truths can be expressed in bronze but not in paint, in music but not in architecture. In such cases the truth cannot be translated from one medium to another. Greene wishes to deny that a work of art can “merely express inaccurately and vaguely what can be expressed precisely only in a conceptual medium” (p. 427). He even asserts that it is inherently impossible to express scientific laws in words; and of course poetry cannot be translated from one language to another without vital loss (p. 438).

All of this seems to rest on a confusion. Scientific laws, no matter how complicated the mathematics, are not inherently inexpressible in words. To be sure mathematical symbols save space, and to translate them into English would be extremely awkward. But it is not inherently impossible. We can write 'one plus one quals two' as well as '1 + 1 = 2'; and we can put quadratic equations in words with a more cumbrous English sentence; higher mathematics can likewise be translated — only it is not worth the trouble.

Poetry too can be translated. That is, the truth or falsity which Goethe expressed in German can be just as well expressed in English. This is not to say that a metrical English version of Faust is art. In such versions there is, as Greene says a vital loss; but it is a loss of artistic quality, not of truth and falsity. This is precisely where Greene's confusion is located. Because the English version of Faust is poor or at least poorer poetry than the German original, Green sees what we all see, namely, that something has been lost. He is mistaken, however, in concluding that the truth has been lost.

Greene attempts to illustrate his point in two footnotes (pp. 438, 439). ”A mathematician once said to me, in discussing my claim that a particular poem expressed genuine insight: ' I'll consider your claim if you will re-express in the language of mathematical physics what the poem seems to you to say,'—a remark which invited the answer: 'I, in turn, will consider the truth of mathematical theories if you will translate it into music.' The absurdity of both requests illustrates the point at issue.”

Greene's retort was clever enough, but instead of illustrating the point at issue, it illustrates the confusion. Among all the languages in existence, French, German, English, music, and mathematics, some have greater potentialities of expression than others. Only if music and mathematics were suited to the expression of the same truths, could translation from one to the other occur. And because each of these two languages is a restricted medium, and restricted by different limitations, the mathematician's request was absurd. Mathematics can express quantitative relationships, but it cannot express botanical classifications, the principles of political science, or emotional upheavals. English and German, on the other hand, are languages which can express all of these, and the fact that the truth expressed in a piece of music cannot be put into mathematics does not be any means prove that it cannot be put into conceptual prose.

In the second footnote Greene attempts to reply to a criticism by W. T. Stace. Stace argued that all truths consist in the correct ascription of a predicate to a subject, and that therefore whatever truth is expressed in a work of art cn be translated into English. Translation may be difficult, but the difficulty is practical because verbal language is a very crude instrument of expression. Green replies that verbal language is an excellent medium for some kinds of truth, but is very inadequate for other types of knowledge.

Now, it seems to me that Stace is right in asserting that all truths consist in the ascription of a predicate to a subject, and Greene nowhere gives an argument against this position; nor does he

succeed in making clear what other kind of truth there could possibly be. Stace is also correct in saying that translation from music to English is difficult, but I would not accept his reason, namely, that verbal language is a crude medium. I would say with Greene that verbal language is an excellent medium, but I would add that is excellent not from some type of truth only, but for all truths because there is only one type. The difficulty of translating artistic expression into English does not lie in the verbal language but in the music or painting. The several arts have limited potentialities for expressing reality; the conditions which make them artistic all them to express some truths clearly, other truths ambiguously, and still others not at all. Conceptual language, however is adapted to express all truths. The difficulty therefore in translating into English the truth expressed in a Mozart sonata is the difficulty of determining what truth the sonata expresses. It is an interpretation, I presume, of some aspect of reality; but which? Music is of all the arts the most vague, broad, and ambiguous. And while conceptual prose also faces difficulties, as all philosophers know, it is the least ambiguous of all.

If Greene had in this way carried through the implications of his category of artistic truth, he need not have contradicted himself nor have concluded with his frustrating paradoxes. Each of the three questions can be clearly answered. The first question was, Does the application of a non-artistic standard exceed the prerogatives of a critic? The answer is, No. The critic must indeed judge the artistry by the artistic criteria of perfection; but only an artificial limitation on the title or function of critic could refuse the title to men who in addition to the category of perfection us the categories of truth and greatness also.

The second question was, If the critic judges the philosophy of the work of art, and in doing so uses his own philosophy as a norm, will not his judgment be prejudiced and subjective? The question is misleading. It suggests that so long as a critic restricts himself to matter of artistic perfection, his judgment will be objective, but that as soon as morality or the wider aspects of philosophy are introduced his judgments become vitiated by subjectivity. Now it may be granted that judgments on perfection and greatness offer twice the scope of mistakes in judgement. But the subject of artistic perfection is no privileged domain where subjectivity is automatically excluded.

The third question concerned invidious and odious comparisons. A consistent refusal to make such comparisons requires more than scorn for myopic moralism: a critic would have to accept a thorough-going moral skepticism. Perhaps he would have to reject the possibility of any truth whatever. For, if, in any way, some truth concerning reality can be obtained, no prohibition against using that

truth in matters of art can be logically defended.

The application of non-artistic standards in judging objects that claim to be works of art will not identify them as art or not art. But once artistic criteria have established the artistry of an object, there is no good reason for refusing to judge its greatness on the basis of truth. And if art is to be more than trivial, one can easily accept as the function of all the arts, that which is obviously a function of literary art, namely, spiritual commitment.