

ON THE USEFULNESS OF NEO-FREUDIAN THEORY TO ART CRITICISM

It is often said that the only rule in both judging and making art is that there are no rules. This is because all available criteria are so open-textured as to defy provably correct application. They are therefore in keeping with Kant's observation in Analytic of the Beautiful that art proper belongs by its very nature to a realm of its own, isolated from questions of either fact or morality. Uncertainty and controversy would therefore seem to be a given of art criticism.

Followers of Freud have nonetheless hoped to reduce somewhat the degree of imprecision in the analysis of art by applying Freud's theories of symbol formation. In doing so, they could follow the example of Freud himself in his writings on Leonardo and Michelangelo. The few outstanding results seem to have occurred with literature, e.g. Ludwig Jekels' analyses of Hamlet and Macbeth. Several quite intractable problems have limited Freudian art criticism. First, Freud articulated a theory of mental pathology and a partial theory of creativity, but he had no clear concept of art. His 1908 article, "On the Relation of the Poet to Day-dreaming," for instance, makes no distinction between the fantasies of high art and those of games, jokes and so on, and hence it does not distinguish between those of the great artist and anyone else. That is, the phenomenon he analyses there is the notorious "false isolate." By the time of "Formulations Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911), he has pointed in the direction of a satisfactory solution but still does not

really provide one. Second, Freud himself was inconsistent in considerations of how unconscious the content of art is. At times he seems to think of it as a relatively simple, pre-conscious substitute gratification such as might be more appropriate to a concept of amusement; at other times, he is interested in more unconscious mechanisms such as he found in 1908 in the relation between form and content. Third, while this form-content relation is explained in terms of Freud's idea of purely formal beauty as "forepleasure," i.e. a bribe to the Superego to distract it from the unconscious forbidden pleasures of fantasy wishes, this relation was left unclear and incomplete. Fourth, a more serious and perhaps definitive problem owes to the fact that Freud's scientific investigations proceeded in reverse order from human development, i.e. from later to earlier and hence more decisive stages of development - from the oedipal to the anal to the oral - without his later discoveries contributing much to his treatment of art.

Later in his career, Freud is to be found citing his follower, Melanie Klein. Klein is neo-Freudian rather than Freudian in many respects. She locates the genesis of the Superego much earlier than does Freud; she accordingly takes as decisive the oral rather than the oedipal stage; she emphasizes the ego rather than libido; and her interpretation of defense mechanisms is much more extensive than and quite different from Freud's.

For Klein, the prototype of the art experience is to be found in the infant's solution to the "depressive position." The depressive position occurs in the first year life when

the infant

introjects the object as a whole and...becomes... able to synthesize the various aspects of the object as well as his emotions towards it. Love and hatred come closer together in his mind, and this leads to anxiety lest the object...be harmed or destroyed. Depressive feelings and guilt give rise to the urge to preserve or revive the loved object, and thus to make reparation for destructive impulses and fantasies. (The Psycho-Analysis of Children, pp. xiii-xiv.)

The classic application of this argument to art theory is by Hanna Segal in "A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics" (1952, reprinted in New Directions in Psycho-Analysis by Melanie Klein et al). For Segal, "all creation is really a recreation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self." Successful artistic creation requires for her an identification as good and giving, at least within art. It also requires an acute reality sense, where the artist must accept the full complex of ambivalent feelings of the depressive position. This emphasis on ambivalence enables her to resolve conventional problems in attributing beauty to art. Borrowing from Ella Sharpe, Segal identifies "beauty" with rhythmical goodness, the prototype for which is satisfying sucking at the mother's breast and the rhythmical beating of her heart. Still borrowing from Sharpe, she identifies the "ugly" as that which is destroyed, arrhythmic, connected with painful tension. For Segal, "the 'ugly' is a most important and necessary component of a satisfying aesthetic experience," as is "beauty;" i.e. art requires both. Those who cannot tolerate their feelings of guilt, loss, and so on, may resort to "manic" defenses such as denial of psychic reality or

attempts at omnipotent control. The result in art is "the effect of superficiality and prettiness."

The significance of successful art for the audience is explained by Segal through Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of nach-erleben, i.e. the idea that we can intuitively reconstruct the mental and emotional state of other people by their behaviour. For Segal, then, art makes concrete the inner world of the artist. To good art, the audience is thought by Segal to respond as follows:

The [artist] has, in his hatred, destroyed all his loved objects just as I have done, and like me he felt death and desolation inside him. Yet he can face it and he can make me face it, and despite the ruin and devastation we and the world around us survive. What is more, his objects, which have become evil and were destroyed, have been made alive again and have become immortal by his art. Out of all the chaos and destruction he has created a world which is whole, complete and unified.

The application of this body of thought is no easy matter. It assumes some degree of technical study, and it requires a high degree of intuition. Nonetheless, two important critics have made use of the Kleinian paradigm: Adrian Stokes and Anton Ehrenzweig.

Stokes was analyzed by Melanie Klein in the 1930s and read Segal's and a good deal of other psycho-analytic studies of art thereafter. He was, especially in his later years, a formidable critic. One of his greatest strengths was his ability to infuse with meaning the unity of art. For him, it "symbolizes the integrated elements of the self no less than of the other person" (The Image in Form, p. 120). The unity that most engaged him was, curiously enough, that which has also preoccupied the best of the so-called formalist or

"modernist" critics such as Clement Greenberg, who is most touched by a "hard-won" unity. But whereas modernist critics usually emphasize the conflation of near and far, of balanced and unbalanced, and so on, Stokes emphasizes the unity of the vitally active and the deathly still and of disintegration and integration, all for the sake of unconscious meaning. This is how he describes Luciano Laurana's courtyard at the Palace of Urbino:

In the coordination of the contrasting materials there is equal care for each: together they make stillness that, as it were, breathes. (The Image in Form, p. 126)

His treatment of Monet is equally insightful. Noting that Monet was attracted to scenes of near dissolution - reflections, snow-covered or light-bathed objects, and the like - he observed that Monet "distilled an instant yet solid loveliness" from them (p. 255). Monet, then, had his own approach to the subject: "the subject matter is broken down, reconstituted in a configuration of manifest, fragmented brush strokes" (p. 252). For Stokes, this individual bent is crucial since the artist's style must have its own urgency, obsession even. Stokes' intuition was profound, but the Kleinian model has clearly provided him with a vital entrée to the artist's personality.

The Kleinian model also alerted him to certain artistic weaknesses, especially those associated with "manic" defenses. The classicism that appeals to Stokes is that "without the arrière pensée of 'thinking makes it so'" (p. 240). The Monets that he least prefers are those occasionally found in the 1880s and 1890s in which an "over-strong...pattern of brush-strokes suggests a manipulation of the object...to exhibit the control by the artist over it" (p. 256). Clement

Greenberg has also noted such a problem in some Monets, and very convincingly so, but for him the problem is simply an extraneous precision of drawing.

Anton Ehrenzweig (1908-1966) was as much a theorist as a critic. His prime aim was to discover the "poemagogic" imagery (reflecting the theme of death and rebirth) that was for him the essence of art. His main theoretical formulations and his search for universal imagery predate his contact with Klein ca. 1949 (The Hidden Order of Art, p. 197), and neither his paradigm nor his theory of art are really Kleinian, especially not his emphasis on anal and "oceanic" imagery. Book One of The Hidden Order of Art makes an important distinction, which is nonetheless useful for Kleinian and other types of criticism, between scanning or syncretistic vision (the term comes from Piaget) and analytic or focussed vision. For Ehrenzweig, the "empty stare" of syncretistic vision is essential to artistic creativity. It allows a hidden unconscious order that is destroyed in conscious effort. (He is also following Klee's notion of "multi-dimensional" attention.) This distinction leads Ehrenzweig to a consideration of what a fertile motif might be, namely one that has "something incomplete and vague about its structure" so as to preclude premature, excessively conscious closure of artistic form (The Hidden Order of Art, p. 64). Here again, neo-Freudian considerations can amplify modernist deductions, in this case Walter Darby Bannard's highly perceptive analysis of the basic element or building block in "Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, and David Smith" (Artforum, April 1968).

Contemporary criticism has a great need to overcome the shyness about artistic personality and content that has characterized most of it. Models of whatever kind that synthesize a theory of personality and a theory of art are therefore crucial. The critical considerations outlined here are not without their hazards. Even in the case of Stokes there is a certain tendency towards romantic Paterian excesses. In the case of Ehrenzweig there is an overestimation of relatively unimportant artists like Bridget Riley for what are really only pre-conscious concerns. Nonetheless Kleinian considerations can and should lead to a re-evaluation of much of the art of our time. One thinks of the more illusionistic Vasarely whose manic triumph over the picture plane goes unrecognized for what it is. Or of that great but insufficiently appreciated master, Jack Bush, who could take a simple image of suffering to represent his angina pains and transform it into splendid art. The more the battery of critical techniques is expanded the better.