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Modernism, Modern Aesthetics and Wittgenstein

The place of art in contemporary society and the role of art in contemporary lives is not well understood despite a vast literature about art and its history, its sociology and its criticism. Especially is it not well understood what that place and role ought to be. Art does play a very definite role in the lives of particular individuals and particular groups, but it does not take much awareness of the recent history of both art and society to realise that there is no general agreement throughout our society about the role that art is to play in modern life or whether it is to play a role at all. This question belongs in part, but only in part, to the social history of art, and the full social history of art in our time has not yet been written.

We would like to think that this has not always been the case with respect to art. From the vantage point of modern historical enquiry it can be made to appear that there were periods when art not only had a substantial role to play in society and substantial connections with the lives of people, but that those roles and connections were more or less clearly understood. There have been ages when art celebrated civic virtues and victories, when it was the handmaiden of theology and the Bible of the illiterate, and when it contributed to the greater glory of kings and princes.

Changing economic, social and political conditions centred in the eighteenth century began to put an end to the patronage

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of both church and court. The artist had to accommodate himself to a new public and make his peace with parliamentary governments, bourgeois individuals and developing industrialism. It may not be altogether mistaken to say that aesthetic theory, which was itself an invention of the eighteenth century, reacted by coining, or at least adapting, the notion of the beautiful whose creation was now to be the purpose of art. Beauty came to be thought of as the *sui generis* value that had to be distinguished from the moral, the religious, the political and anything remotely utilitarian that was revealed in the special aesthetic experience that was its disinterested contemplation. This idea that the domain of the aesthetic is something unique and irreducible exhibited itself in a number of theoretical manifestations during the nineteenth century. Its principal twentieth-century expression doubtless originates with the formalism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry and can be traced more recently, at least in the United States, through Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg. The most extreme variant of this kind of formalism sought to disconnect art entirely from life. As Clive Bell put it in a frequently cited remark, 'to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions'.[1]

Whatever the adequacy of Bell's view, it can be understood as providing at least one explanation of the uneasiness that at least the first half of twentieth century felt in the presence of so much of its own art. It contributed to that popular conception of art as something that had detached itself from both the concerns and the pleasures of ordinary people and become a thing that makes an esoteric appeal only to coteries of artists and their aesthete admirers. The nineteenth century created the possibility of the general public as an audience for the works of artists and at the same time created the conditions for mutual misunderstanding and mistrust between artists and that general public. The *Salon des Refusés* of 1863 is only one obvious expression of the kind of estrangement characteristic of the period, especially when it became a matter of what from our perspective we would describe as works that made up the leading edge of art.

It is an interesting, although apt, coincidence that in the last couple of decades two books have been written on the history of the art of the last one hundred years and more with the same title, *The Shock of the New*.[2] In our recent past this estrangement has shown itself in the fact that the new has so often been

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found shocking. This has not always been so in the history of art. Giotto's work – and Giotto was on the leading edge of art if anyone ever was – was received with awe and wonder and he lived 'Established in Florence, famous, wealthy, and admired'.[3] One cannot help but make a comparison with Picasso living established in France, famous – well at any rate newsworthy – wealthy and occupying an uncertain place in the public's mind somewhere between Einstein and the Son of Sam.

There are at least three factors in the twentieth century that contribute to various perceptions that art is somehow either estranged and distanced from the life and culture of most people or exists only to manifest values that are not those of the rest of our lives. These are (1) certain developments in the practice of the arts themselves, especially the move to abstraction, (2) a certain critical and historical picture of the development and nature of modern art, and (3) the dominant trends in philosophical aesthetics and the philosophy of art since mid-century. In this chapter I will make only passing reference to the first two and deal with the third in some detail.

An indication of the position that modern art at one time occupied in the lives and minds of many people in the first half of the twentieth century can be found in that mirror of popular culture, the comic strip. Two examples from earlier in the century are worth thinking about.[4] The earlier one from 1916 was probably done with the memory of the Armory show still in mind. A mother with her small child in tow visits a painter's studio. The painter – by a gross misrepresentation – is a dandified aesthete who is supposed to be a composite of all the notorious Post-Impressionists. The child falls asleep and dreams that she is in a land where everything is cubist in character and where the artist paints by blindfolding himself and throwing buckets of paint at the canvas. The child awakens from the dream frightened at the nightmare she has had.

In the second example a small boy and his uncle visit an exhibition of modern art. The uncle finds modernism a bit beyond him, but to the boy it is intriguing and he says he would like to visit a world that looks like those paintings. They find themselves in a series of panels representing landscapes that modulate from cubist to fauvist to expressionist in style. After a while, however, they become uncomfortable and look for a way out. They ask a native – a poor thing, a distorted Picassoesque

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parody – who laments that there is no way out. In the last panel the pair head for the daylight, but as they move off they are dissolving into ribbons of colour.

Both of these strips represent the modern movement as something that is frightening or at least disorienting and uncomfortable. The world it represents is not a world in which one wants to live; everything familiar is distorted and disturbing. Indeed, it is not a world in which one could live. I mean the last remark in the most literal and straightforward sense. You could not live in a house of that shape and proportions, you could not eat fruit from those trees, you could not go anywhere in a world with that geometry. But the remark can also be understood in a figurative sense and it was doubtless that sense that captures the understanding of modern art by so many people. It may have been thought that these ways of painting do not connect with *their* world – perhaps they neither symbolise nor express life for many people – and consequently that these styles have nothing to say to them about the world in which we do live and the kinds of lives that we really do lead. This kind of painting cannot enter their lives. Moreover, it might be said, there is no way out; this art is a dead end, it has no future. Artists and the public that follows them have lost their way in an aesthetic slough of despond and will be unable to find the way back to the proper kind of painting. Michael Fried neatly encapsulated a conception of the situation that produced this public view when he said that

> In a sense, modernist art in this century finished what society in the nineteenth began: the alienation of the artist from the general preoccupations of the culture in which he is embedded, and the prizing loose of art itself from the concerns, aims and ideals of that culture.[5]

If we take the comic strip as a typical manifestation of early twentieth-century culture, then its episodes certainly reflected the attitudes of a public that was alienated from this art and was convinced that modern artists were all aesthetic shams. And that is a point that must be understood quite independently of whatever the attitude of the comic-strip artist himself may have been; it is a delightful irony that during this period the comic artists often brilliantly exploited the visual vocabulary of modernism.

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That this vocabulary was not generally understood had something to do, as Clement Greenberg remarked, using the same figure of speech, with the fact that modern art 'had to change its language so radically'.[6] This reference to a radical change in the language of art is, of course, a way of calling attention to the radical change in artistic techniques and aims that many saw as disconnecting modern art from the more familiar traditions of the nineteenth and earlier centuries. It is also, however, part and parcel of an historical and critical theory about that art that understands abstraction as the almost inevitable consummation of tendencies that have been inherent in the nature of art very nearly since its beginnings.[7]

It is true that the comic-strip perspective on modern art is an expression of the alienation that Fried mentions, and it is equally true that we cannot literally live in a landscape of abstract geometry, but there nevertheless may yet be more connections between modern or modernist art and the preoccupations of the culture than the popular view allows. How modern painting can show us something about the world in which we do live is a topic to be explored later on.

In the last two decades, however, these popular attitudes have shifted rather dramatically. Exhibitions of the art that shocked the public of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries now draw enthusiastic crowds and the amount of abstract painting that has come to grace corporate office buildings is a remarkable phenomenon in itself. Few artists these days lack sympathetic showings solely on the grounds of *avant-gardism.*

The peace that certain segments of the public has now made with 'modern' art may nevertheless leave something out of account. The abstract art of the public spaces of business houses seems to be there primarily for decoration and to harmonise with its architectural setting. Alan Shestack, the director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, has been quoted as saying that 'Museums have become part of the entertainment industry, and to some extent are in competition with movies, television, professional sports, theatre, and music for a share of leisure-time attention and leisure-time dollars.'[8] In fairness to Mr Shestack I must add he does make clear that in addition the museum does have the obligation to show the best art and seek to expand people's artistic horizons. To value art as decoration or

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entertainment is not at all a bad thing and I do not wish to imply that the late twentieth-century American public is necessarily any shallower in its approach to art than other publics in other times and places, but this way of making use of art does seem to minimise the possibility of art entering anyone's life in any *deep* sense.

I want to make the wholly unoriginal claim that art is and ought to be something important to us in ways that quite transcend recreation and cosmetics. I do not intend this remark to be taken as a call to artists to paint pictures that are more relevant to our life and likes or for them to become propagandists or ideologues on behalf of popular taste and prejudice, for I am not so much interested in the social role of art, as I am in what might be called the ethical role of art, that is in the role it can have in the life of an individual apart from public trends and trendiness – not that these two things are altogether distinct. I intend it rather as a suggestion that we take another look at our thinking about art, that is at our aesthetic theory and philosophy of art, as a way of gaining a better understanding of how it is that art does and can enter into our lives.

Like the recent social history of art, the full history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art in the twentieth century has not yet been written, nor has its history in the English speaking world been written. Although my concern for the moment is with Anglo-American aesthetics exclusively, it is not my purpose to write that history nor even to propose a prolegomena to it, but when that history comes to be written there is one question that it will have to address. Philosophical aesthetics, at least in the English-speaking world, is now dominated by what in the broadest sense can be called analytical philosophy. Forty years ago this was not the case and a proper understanding of how analytical philosophy got to its present position would help us better to understand what is going on now in aesthetics.[9] I do believe that a look, no matter how preliminary or cursory, at where we have been in the recent past will clarify some of the problems we now face in our enterprise of thinking about art and aesthetics, and a somewhat more detailed investigation of at least one or two events in the career of Anglo-American aesthetics will allow me to identify the issue that will be the focus of this essay and which I want to propose as an important matter for future consideration.

During the first half of the century there was a variety

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of philosophical fashions in aesthetics. Two were probably most significant. There was the idealist tradition represented by Bosanquet, Croce and Collingwood and, especially in the United States, the indigenous naturalism and pragmatism of such philosophers as Santayana, Dewey, David Prall and Stephen Pepper. Analytical philosophy, that spectrum of thought associated with Frege, Moore, Russell and the logical positivists, played virtually no role in aesthetics at that time. To be sure, G. E. Moore devoted a few pages of *Principia Ethica* to aesthetics, but this appeared to many as an afterthought and had little influence. The American aestheticians tended to think of what they were doing either as making metaphysical discoveries or as a kind of quasi-empirical psychology or sociology and were never attentive to nor clear about the distinctions that analytical philosophers would have insisted upon between conceptual and logical issues on the one hand, and art appreciation and criticism or the social role of art on the other. It was widely believed that if only we could learn enough about the organic interconnectedness of all things, the nature of something called experience or the physiological basis of interests, then questions of art and beauty would all fall nicely into the place provided for them by a grander general theory of the world and of value. General theory of value is not something that one hears much about these days, but it was assumed that moral and aesthetic values were all species of a common genus that a general theory could specify and explain. The very topic of this book demands that I confess a certain sympathy with any theory that investigates interesting connections between ethics and aesthetics and seeks to break down artificially rigid barriers between these species of human concern. Unfortunately, however, there is little in this kind of theory that is salvageable. Most of these theories defined value in psychological or at least naturalistic terms and were committed to theories of language, perception and philosophical psychology that no longer have any plausibility. In 1935 Melvin Rader mentioned the range of value theories competing for the attention of aestheticians and added, 'Unquestionably esthetics during the next fifty years will be very much concerned with choosing between these alternatives.'[10] Which only goes to show that predicting the future course of philosophy is just as risky a business as predicting the stock market.

While analytical philosophy had been a fixture in Britain

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since the first decade of the century and had established itself in Vienna in the 1920s, it was not until the late 1930s and the 1940s that it had any substantial impact in the United States. Nowhere, however, did it have any real interest in aesthetics. The reason for this indifference is not hard to understand. The original concerns of analytical philosophy were with technical problems in the foundations of mathematics and logic, the philosophy of language, the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of science; but it was not just this focus of interest that kept the analysts away from aesthetics. Their theories of language made it impossible for them to take the subject seriously. The stance that an analytical philosopher was almost required to take toward the data of aesthetics can be easily inferred from a remark of Carnap's. At one point in a discussion of language and meaning Carnap offered the sentence 'This rock is sad' as an example of an expression that while grammatically well formed is nevertheless meaningless.[11] Carnap, of course, was not talking about aesthetics, but we have to note that it is just such sentences that make up so much of the stuff of both poetry and its criticism which is, after all, a significant part of what aesthetics must theorise about. Recall, for example, Wordsworth's description of the landscape when his conscience begins to overtake him during a boyhood escapade, '. . . the huge Cliff / Rose up between me and the stars, and still / With measured motion, like a living thing, / Strode after me', exactly the kind of thing that Carnap's theory of meaning could not franchise. The obvious consequence of this kind of position is that aesthetics has to be regarded as nonsense – or very nearly so – because it proceeds without the most elementary regard for the proprieties of logical syntax. Neither the sentences of poetry nor of the criticism that explains and interprets it could even be formulated in the logically perfect languages dreamt of by analytical philosophy.

There was not much to be done with the whole business of aesthetics but to try out a half-hearted emotive account of aesthetic judgements as A. J. Ayer did[12] or simply relegate the entire business of art to the emotional side of our nature where it then becomes a matter for empirical psychology to investigate as Hans Reichenbach did.[13] It must have been irresistible to analytical philosophers to dismiss aestheticians for mucking about in an inherently sloppy subject matter in an extraordinarily sloppy manner in ignorance of or disregard for the rigorous restraints of

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their hard-won theories of meaning. The cognitive/emotional dichotomy and its corresponding sense/nonsense distinction was too crude an instrument to permit any serious examination of aesthetics, not to mention the fact that analytical philosophers apparently just did not have the interest in the subject to undertake any detailed examination of particular aesthetic theories.[14]

If analytical philosophy was indifferent to aesthetics, aesthetics was equally indifferent to analytical philosophy; aestheticians tended to be either ignorant of the technical demands of the new developments or openly hostile to them. The first article to appear in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* that clearly exhibited the spirit and manner of analytical philosophy did not appear until 1951,[15] although an editorial seven years earlier suggested that 'meaning-analysis' borrowed from epistemology(!) could lead to much good in making aestheticians, art critics and historians more careful about what they say and how they say it.[16]

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, some important changes took place as a number of philosophers of a generally analytic persuasion became interested in the problems of aesthetics and began to take the subject seriously. John Hospers's *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* was published in 1946 and in 1950 Arnold Isenberg wrote a report for the Rockefeller Foundation detailing various questions that analytical philosophy could profitably investigate[17] and in short order numerous works began to appear reflecting the new interest. I offer no explanation of this development in aesthetics nor any description of its historical details; all of that must await that history that is yet to be written.[18]

The one event in the story that I do want to call attention to is the publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* in 1953 and the influence it had on aesthetics in Britain and the United States. Wittgenstein's book had, of course, a great influence on philosophy in general and a very striking influence on aesthetics in particular. In its wake important articles by Paul Ziff, Morris Weitz, William Kennick and Frank Sibley, to name only a few, began to appear.

It is not at all obvious that the *Investigations* should have had as much effect on aesthetics as it did. It contains, to be sure, a number of remarks about art and aesthetics scattered here and there, but there is certainly no extended or even systematic treatment of aesthetics and one would have to do a great deal

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of extrapolating and hypothesising to come up with anything like 'Wittgenstein's Aesthetic Theory' based on a reading of the *Investigations* alone. The reason for this influence, I think, is that in the early reception of the work Wittgenstein was taken to be an analytical or at least a 'linguistic' philosopher. In 1954 William Elton published an anthology of papers in aesthetics that had all appeared before – and sometimes well before – the *Investigations*, but nevertheless exhibited the new analytical turn. In his introduction to the volume Elton wrote of his contributors:

> one may say that they share the climate of analysis to which such men as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and especially Ludwig Wittgenstein contributed. Wittgenstein . . . held, for example, that we tend to mistake a syntactically correct sentence for a necessarily meaningful one; that language resembles a game, and that there are numerous such games, depending on the particular uses of languages; . . . that philosophy, in short, is not a body of dogma, but the examination of the ways in which language is used.[19]

And more recently Richard Shusterman has written that:

> analytic aesthetics is a consequence . . . of the analytic approach to philosophy introduced by Moore and Russell and continued by Wittgenstein and others through the various phases of logical atomism, logical positivism, and ordinary language analysis.[20]

To put the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* into the same basket with Frege, Russell and Moore, indeed to describe him in words that would almost fit a logical positivist, made it easy for philosophers trained in the analytical tradition to make a place for it within their own intellectual framework. And even if he was attacking the Frege–Russell–*Tractatus* philosophy of language, it was supposed at least that the match was being played out at the same venue.

The reaction to it was divided according to the reception of what was considered to be its main line of thought: that in the philosophy of language the rigours of logical syntax are to be set aside in favour of the more flexible notion of the language game. Some saw in this a disastrous and irresponsible

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retreat from reason and dismissed it accordingly. Others saw in it the error of their old ways and underwent something akin to a conversion experience.[21] For those who did want to take it seriously and practise its philosophical techniques, the fact that Wittgenstein had at least something to say about aesthetics was enough to suggest that aesthetics was a weedy garden that would eventually blossom once it was properly cultivated.

Given the reading of Wittgenstein as an analytical or linguistic philosopher it was only natural that the new aesthetics influenced by him should focus on the 'language' of art. The first topic to be pursued under the influence of the *Philosophical Investigations* was that of the definition of art.[22] It was assumed that previous philosophers of art had been seeking the essence of art and it was now being argued that this search was based on the mistaken assumption that art has an essence, that is that there is something that all works of art have in common by virtue of which they are works of art. This mistaken assumption was said to stem from a certain view about the meaning of words and the nature of language, namely that the primary function of words is to name and that what the word names is its meaning. Thus traditional aesthetic theory was read as contending that there must be some essential feature, or set of them, to be the meaning of the word 'art'. In that way the metaphysical thesis that art has an essence was translated into the 'linguistic' theory that there must be necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the word 'art'. It was this latter thesis that Wittgenstein's methods were supposed to show false by the appeal to his notion of family resemblance.

Another feature of the aesthetic thought of the 1950s was its tendency to turn away from the traditional notion of beauty as a central concern as it followed Austin's admonition to pay attention to the dainty and the dumpy as well, an admonition that directed attention to the extraordinarily wide range of aesthetic qualities and words that denote them that play important roles in aesthetic description and assessment. The key to the nature of these qualities was supposed to be found in understanding the logic of aesthetic terms. It was debated whether these terms were 'conditioned governed', whether there are criteria for their application and whether there may be sufficient conditions for their use even if there are no necessary ones.[23] And, of course, considerable interest

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was shown in the logic of critical judgements, the logic of interpretation and so on.

Aesthetic theory and philosophy of art during the 1950s and 1960s was, on the whole, anti-metaphysical and, by and large, anti-theoretical as well to the extent that it was wary of generalisations and sought to isolate individual problems and attack them piecemeal. Fashions in aesthetics, however, like fashions in so many other things, do change and in the last few years we have seen the interesting phenomenon of philosophers whose roots are in the analytic tradition returning to rather large-scale theorising and the writing of at least moderately sized books, although by no means in the genre rejected by the 1950s.[24] Definitions are again fashionable and the new theories have a decidedly metaphysical flavour. Thus we have the institutional theory of art and theories based on elaborate ontologies that seek the essence of art in culturally emergent entities distinct from their material substrata or that attempt to distinguish artworks (not works of art) from mere real things in terms of semantic functions. The original impetus imparted to analytical philosophy of art by Wittgenstein has largely disappeared.

Indeed, the influence of Wittgenstein on philosophy in general has largely disappeared. This is why a remark such as that made by Mary Mothersill that 'Wittgenstein's contributions to philosophy of language, theory of meaning, philosophical psychology, theory of perception, are unmistakably original and important, and the extent and depth of his influence become more apparent with time'[25] is so puzzling; one looks in vain for that influence, at least in mainstream American philosophy. Normal Malcolm is far closer to the mark when he says that 'The dominant currents in today's academic philosophy have been scarcely touched by the [*Philosophical Investigations*].'[26]

But however all that may be, the linguistic way of looking at the problems of aesthetics was salutary and marked an important advance. Philosophers of art could now have a much better understanding of what made their enquiries unique and how conceptual issues could be distinguished from confused metaphysical ones, from empirical issues and from matters of art history, criticism and appreciation. There is no doubt that in the last four decades much useful work has been done in aesthetics, many issues have been clarified and certain mistakes have been uncovered that we should like to think that there is

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no need now to repeat. We are better off, for example, for the realisation that the idea that a work of art is an experience in the mind of either the artist or his audience is incoherent and no one should be tempted any more to conclude, from the fact that the manuscript of a poem can be destroyed while the poem itself cannot be destroyed, that poems are metaphysical entities with strangely adamantine natures.

Current tendencies to reconfound the philosophical with other dimensions of our thought notwithstanding, the distinction between, say, empirical statements and conceptual or grammatical ones is enlightening. Even if it proves impossible to come up with a theoretical distinction between the various logical categories of statements expressing these matters that holds generally, that is when the statements are considered in isolation from any context in which they may be employed, much good use of them can be made in particular cases. If we are to make anything at all of a statement such as 'A poem cannot be destroyed', we doubtless must construe it as a grammatical remark to the effect that no sense has been given to the expression 'destroying a poem' aside from speaking of destroying particular manuscripts and copies.

Despite the generally beneficial influence of analytical philosophy upon aesthetics I cannot help but have a certain sense of dissatisfaction, a suspicion that something has been left out of consideration. My reservations about analytical philosophy of art are not technical ones about paradoxes of analysis, the adequacy of the analytic/synthetic distinction or anything of that sort. It is, rather, that analytical philosophy has not been interested in worrying about how and why art is important. The very fact that a philosopher chooses to write about art, or any other topic for that matter, is a *prima-facie* reason for supposing that the topic is important – or at least that there is something in it to capture the interest of that individual. There are, to be sure, plenty of intellectual puzzles in aesthetics to engage the attention of any analytical philosopher, but setting aside that kind of concern, analytical philosophy has never really considered why art is important as an area of human endeavour. It just may be the case that there is something in the nature of the whole analytical enterprise that gets in the way of a serious consideration of that question.

Analytical philosophers have tended to understand their work as essentially a meta-enterprise in which some area of human endeavour is examined from the outside, as it were, and not from

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the point of view of those participating in the activity. If this is a tendency of analytical philosophy in general, it is also one of analytical aesthetics in particular. Joseph Margolis once put this metaconception of aesthetics very neatly:

> philosophy is 'vertically' related to all the usual comments people make in all the usual roles they take. For instance, if you claim that Ingmar Bergman's film *The Magician* is a much better film than his *Seventh Seal*, the philosopher will not be at all concerned to dispute or vindicate your judgment. He would be interested rather in what sort of reasons might eligibly be put forward in defense, what sort of reasons another might advance against the judgment, whether there is a sense in which the dispute could be resolved, whether one or the other view could be taken to be correct.[27]

It may fairly be said that the primary occupation of analytical philosophers of art is this kind of metacritical concern with the 'logic' of the language of art, of the term 'art' and of all those other terms that denote aesthetic qualities, with the 'logic' of aesthetic judgements and with the 'ontological' status of artworks. This kind of concern is, of course, often valuable and very much in order, but there are dangers in it as well. If the philosopher's concern is purely the metacritical one of investigating the logic of what people say about the arts, then what those judgements and descriptions turn out to be, what happens to be a work of art, and whether the word 'art' does or does not apply to some particular object could well prove to be matters of complete indifference. From the standpoint of the 'language of art' push-pin is as good as Pushkin, Ogilby ranks with Milton and there is nothing to choose between Duchamp and Bellini – on the contrary, there are those who would prefer Duchamp because his antics provide greater scope for an exercise of intellectual cleverness in constructing theories to account for the presumed artistic status of Dada and Conceptual Art. What has been lacking is consideration of why we should bother with any of this at all. What turns upon whether aesthetic terms are or are not condition governed? What hinges upon whether critical disputes can be decided? What is there about art and its place in our lives that makes these pressing questions for us? It is such issues that analytical philosophers did not and perhaps could not address, for these are not matters of

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the logic of language such as that logic was dreamt of in their philosophy, but of the role of art in life. The 'vertical relation' in which analytical philosophy stands with respect to the domain of human activity that it investigates makes it vulnerable to the temptation to suppose that the sense of the language of that activity lies primarily in the vocabulary and syntactical form of its sentences rather than in the activity itself in which the sentences are embedded. But if the philosopher is going to examine, say, the nature of the reasons that can 'eligibly' be advanced in support of a critical judgement, then he must have a sure sense of what is and what is not eligible and that means he must be to some extent a participant in the practices of art, its appreciation and criticism and not merely an observer at the meta-level. To be sure, when a philosopher examines the language of criticism he is not at that moment doing criticism, but he must have a good understanding of what it is to do criticism; there must be a practice in which he engages for him to stand aside from and reflect upon. It would require a far deeper view of the 'logic' of language to realise that it too is grounded, not in the form of the syntax of its signs and symbols, but in a form of life.

It is to the credit of that older generation of aestheticians, the generation that analytical philosophy of art saw as the enemy to be overcome, that it was concerned with the question of the importance of art and the role that it plays in human life. But this concern was unfortunately made part of that metaphysical obfuscation that was responsible for aesthetics' dreariness and could be thought of as contributing to the mistake that it traditionally rested upon, and so was submerged and lost sight of in the new demands for philosophical rigour that were supposed sift sense from nonsense.

The aesthetic theory and philosophy of art of the first half of the century were interested in the right questions. Value theory sought to establish connections between aesthetic and artistic value on the one hand and our moral and ethical values on the other, and John Dewey with his notion of art as experience tried to place art in the wider context of the whole of human activity. From the contemporary perspective, however, this work seems very badly done. Its conclusions are too much entangled in theories of metaphysics, epistemology, perception and so on that simply will not pass muster.

If we begin with the assumption – and I think we must – that art

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is a thing that is important to us, then we must be suspicious of any philosophical effort that does not make a place for a distinction between what is truly important and what is trivial. The most pressing task before the philosophy of art at this time, I believe, is to make clear why and how art is important to us and how it does and how it can enter into our lives; what, for example, its connection is with our moral life. I do not intend to approach this subject by attempting to rehabilitate the aesthetic theory of the earlier part of the century – that I think is a hopeless task. I do, however, want to rehabilitate its question about the role and importance of art in our lives. The most profitable way of doing this, I suggest, is by means of a deeper and far more careful study of the work of Wittgenstein than the one that began to influence aesthetics in the 1950s.

Despite the great effect the *Philosophical Investigations* had on aesthetics when it first appeared, philosophers of art nevertheless went wrong in their reading of it in the 1950s when they took Wittgenstein to be primarily a philosopher of language in the sense in which the philosophy of language was understood by analytical philosophers. His readers' philosophical preoccupation with words and their meanings led them to overlook the very things that Wittgenstein wanted to stress: the philosophical problems the investigation of words are intended to solve, the life in which those words are embedded and which give them their sense and their point, and the difference it makes in our lives to achieve a solution of those problems. As a result of their preoccupation with the 'language of art' they were led to turn away from our actual traffic with art and the place it occupies in our life.

Characteristic of this way of thinking about Wittgenstein is Francis J. Coleman's article 'A Critical Examination of Wittgenstein's Aesthetics'.[28] Coleman bases his examination almost entirely on material from the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. He talks primarily about the logical nature of aesthetic and interpretive judgements, the extent to which they are like exclamations or are based on seeing and so on. Although he alludes to Wittgenstein's insistence that there is a background of life and culture lying behind our talk about art, he does not seem to understand it as something crucial, nor does he take up or develop any of the hints about the important parallels and connections between ethics and aesthetics, art and morality.

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Richard Shusterman[29] covers rather similar ground in his account of Wittgenstein's aesthetics, stressing such things as the inherent vagueness and fuzziness of conceptual boundaries in aesthetics and critical discourse, but, like Coleman, fails to find the importance in the conceptual background. Shusterman sees Wittgenstein as an analytical philosopher for he describes analytical aesthetics as a consequence of 'the analytical approach to philosophy introduced by Moore and Russell and continued by Wittgenstein'.[30]

This mistake in the reading of Wittgenstein was perhaps excusable early on when not much was widely known about Wittgenstein the man, his cultural background, his abiding personal concerns and the depth of his attachment to art. In 1949 he wrote, 'I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only *conceptual* and *aesthetic* questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not the other sort' (*CV*, p. 79). A juster estimate of the *Investigations* was going to have to wait until more of his work was published and various bits of personal correspondence and others' recollections of him had been made available. Only then could it be recognised that his roots were really in the Vienna of Mauthner, Kraus and Musil and not in the tradition of British empiricism and analytical philosophy.

A similar mistake had already been made in the logical positivists' reading of the *Tractatus*. In that work Wittgenstein makes what for him was a crucial distinction between the world as the totality of facts, what can be said, on the one hand and the mystical, what cannot be said but only shown, on the other. This distinction was also used to demarcate sense from nonsense. What can be said, of course, is what makes sense, while only nonsense results when people try to say what is by its nature unsayable. Wittgenstein's mystical comprehends both ethics and aesthetics and the positivists took him to be implying that all sentences purporting to be about those things are nonsense, only a kind of babbling, and consequently are of no concern. We should save our efforts for what in their view does make sense and that turns out to be the empirically verifiable propositions of science.

But this was to stand Wittgenstein on his head. His purpose in making these distinctions was to emphasise the importance of that area he called the mystical and to preserve it from the tyranny of the sciences, not to dismiss it. Engelmann puts the

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difference between the *Tractatus* and positivism very succinctly:

> Positivism holds – and this is its essence – that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. *Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about.*[31]

And in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker when Wittgenstein was trying to arrange for the publication of the *Tractatus* he makes his own position clear: 'my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one.'[32] In the absence of any personal background information it is not at all surprising that the business about the importance of showing what cannot be said was overlooked. Even someone as close to Wittgenstein in time and place as Carnap could never quite find his feet with him in their early discussions. The fact that he defended both religion and Schopenhauer and then sometimes read poetry to them when he and Schlick came expecting to talk logic[33] led Carnap to claim 'that there was a strong inner conflict in Wittgenstein between his emotional life and his intellectual thinking'.[34] There were doubtless conflicts aplenty within the soul of Wittgenstein, but they were not necessarily between his emotions and his intellect. I think this is shown in Russell's often repeated tale of how the young Wittgenstein came to him in an agitated condition. Russell asked him whether he was worrying about logic or about his sins and he is reported to have replied 'Both!' Carnap's comment may have quite missed the mark. For someone in Carnap's tradition it is essential to keep the emotions and the intellect distinct, but more and more the thrust of Wittgenstein's thinking was to show the vital connections between the two.

What must be kept in mind is that the focus of Wittgenstein's life and work – and in his case the life and work were inseparable – right from the beginning was ethical. Enough has been done to make clear that the *Tractatus* was an ethical document despite a great many philosophers not having been able to take that aspect of it seriously. What has not been generally recognised and remains to be made clear is that the *Philosophical Investigations* is also an ethical document, or so I firmly believe, and if it is read from that perspective it can appear in quite a fresh light.

This thesis about the *Investigations* wants arguing for and I shall

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try to do that in chapter 5. Strong hints of the moral dimension of the work are, nevertheless, found in a number of remarks from various sources. There is, for example, the sentence from Nestroy that Wittgenstein uses as the motto for the *Investigations*: 'It is in the nature of all progress that it looks much greater than it really is.' Baker and Hacker say that it is unclear what Nestroy's remark is intended to convey as a motto for the *Investigations*.[35] They do not think that it refers to a lack of philosophical advance from the *Tractatus* to the later work and suggest, instead, that it should be considered of a piece with the concluding sentence of the preface to the *Tractatus*: 'the value of this work . . . is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.' We may assume that the problems to be solved – and that Wittgenstein thought he had solved – are the ones about setting a limit to the expression of thought and these turn out to be technical ones about logic and language. It is doubtless the fact that solutions to these problems tell us nothing about what is really important, namely ethics and religion, that makes their achievement at best a little one in the eyes of the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The sentence from Nestroy occurs in the context of remarks about the lack of progress in eradicating evil and wickedness. Both the preface to the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* motto strongly suggest that Wittgenstein's mind was occupied by the thought that modern technical progress, whether in science or philosophy, has not come to grips with our moral concerns.

One of the few people to direct attention to the ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's later work was M. O'C. Drury. Drury quotes from a conversation that he had with Wittgenstein when he was working on the *Investigations* in which he expressed doubts about how his work would be received, 'It is impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant in my life. How then can I hope to be understood?' and he added, 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.'[36] Wittgenstein here makes it explicit that the religious, that is the ethical, is there in the *Investigations* determining the point of view from which its problems are seen, just as he had made it explicit that it was there in the *Tractatus*. Futhermore, he connects the religious and the ethical with music, that is the aesthetic, in the *Investigations* just as he had explicitly connected them in the *Tractatus*. Drury then went on to conclude that:

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> Of course it is obvious that Wittgenstein was interested in many aspects of philosophy: the foundations of mathematics, symbolic logic, the language of psychology, etc. I am only wishing to maintain that alongside of these specific interests there is to be found an ethical demand, if we are to understand the implications of his work to their full extent.[37]

I would be inclined to state Drury's contention a bit more strongly: the ethical demand is not just found alongside the others, but *is* the whole point of the investigation into logic and meaning, the language of psychology and the like. That, of course, needs to be shown just as it also needs to be shown precisely what the nature of that ethical demand is.

The discussion of the ethical implications of Wittgenstein's later work will be the subject of another chapter and once those implications have been made clear then we will be able to see how Wittgenstein's thinking can be adapted to illuminate the question about the importance of art. In the next chapter, however, we must review some of the history of how aestheticians and philosophers of art have thought about the relation between ethics and aesthetics, that is between art and the rest of our lives.

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