AESTHETIC MATTERS

Essays presented to Göran Sörbom on his 60th birthday

Edited by

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'The Sphere Seems to Float': Remarks on Art and Ethics

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Pictures are inherently and infinitely ambiguous. In his discussion of aspect-seeing in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein considers various examples. A schematic drawing of a triangle can e.g. be seen 'as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging on its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant to stand on the shorter side of the right-angle, as a half parallelogram, and as various other things'.[1] How we actually see a particular drawing depends both on our general competence in picture-seeing and on the situation at hand.[2] The remarkable thing is that sometimes we can actually *see* a triangle to be standing up in one picture or to be hanging in the air and so on. There is a difference, then, between *merely knowing* that a picture is supposed to be a representation of, say, a sphere floating in the air and *actually seeing* the sphere floating in the air in the picture.[3]

When do we call it a 'a mere case of knowing, not seeing?', Wittgenstein asks himself and answers, 'Perhaps when someone treats the picture as a working drawing, reads it like a blueprint'.[4] This places the difference between merely knowing and seeing in the beholder's mind and actions, which is certainly not completely wrong and equally certainly not the whole story. When I see for instance a ball floating in the depicted space in a drawing, there is normally something in the picture itself which invites me to do so. The picture might well be made in such a way that this is the way of looking at it which forces itself upon me. If I want to avoid seeing it in this way, I have to make an effort.[5] In such cases, my seeing has at least as much to do with the qualities of the picture and hence with the qualities of the artist as it has to do with my ways of approaching the picture.

Wittgenstein's examples are all drawn from the field of pictures, but it could be suggested that somehow something on the same lines can occur also in the field of literature. This is in fact what Frank Palmer does in his recent book *Literature and Moral Understanding*: 'What I am suggesting . . . is that while a painting must aim at getting us to see something and not merely know what is supposed to be represented, something analogous can be said about poetry and other literary art,

such that what we receive from it is capable of "living" in the imagination.'[6] And he goes on to suggest that a writer who merely tells us things is 'deficient in creative power'. If for instance the following lines were presented in all seriousness as a poem, then 'it would seem legitimate to object that the "poem" lacks artistic merit because it speaks by "telling" and consequently says nothing'.[7]

I am very unhappy
I got in debt through gambling
Then they took my house away
My wife deserted me
And took the children with her

As an example of poetry which is indeed not deficient in creative power, Dr Palmer adduces Pope's portrait of Lord Hervey in his *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*. He quotes Chesterton to support his point:

> A man writing prose in a passion of righteous indignation might perhaps say, 'one can at least get rid of such a human insect, a creature who is malodorous and poisonous at once'. But it would not have the special sort of ringing energy of a couplet to the same effect: 'Yet let me flap this bug with guilded wings,/ This painted child of dirt that stinks and stings.'[8]

'Pope's portrait exploits the inexhaustible fund of associations and resonances of speech that is denied to the visual medium', comments Palmer. 'A pictorial caricature cannot speak in rhyme, nor use assonance and onomatopoeia and other figures of speech that make language the peculiarly rich medium it is for focusing our attention on an object in a number of different ways'.[9] The first point is well made, but it is quite unnecessary to elevate literature *at the expense of* pictorial art. There are things which can be done with pictures, which cannot be done with the help of words, and the other way round. And sometimes, a combination of words and pictures is unbeatable. Think of John Heartfield's photo montage of Hitler giving a speech with a group of leading industrialists and capitalists in the background. While the man is talking, a bunch of banknotes is handed over to him from behind. The caption is: 'Millionen stehen hinter mir' (Billions stand behind me).

Similarly, it is quite unnecessary to elevate the kind of rhetorically rich literature favoured by Palmer *at the expense of* seemingly simple pieces. Compare e.g. Frank Palmer's little poem with the following piece by the Finnish author Claes Andersson:

Det finns så mycket att se fram emot.
Varje söndag är det tips och Lotto.
Onsdag, torsdag och lördag är det Bingo.
Det är bara måndagar, tisdagar och fredagar
Det inte händer någonting alls.[10]

/There is so much to look forward to.
Every Sunday there are the pools and the lottery.
On Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday there is Bingo.
It is only on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays
That nothing at all happens./

In spite of the simpleness which Andersson's poem and Palmer's example have in common, there is a crucial difference between them. They are simple in rather different ways. We may assume that Palmer's lines are to be thought of as coming from an unsophisticated person, who expresses himself clearly and succinctly with the limited verbal resources at his disposal. What the skilled Finnish author does is something rather different. Everything in his little poem is deliberately chosen to convey the old woman's or man's predicament in a graphic way. This is (I take it) one of the differences which the telling/showing-distinction is intended to take care of.

What the telling-showing distinction amounts to seems to me to be this: In our various traditions of art (in the wide sense of the word 'art'), there are funds of resources which can be used to express oneself in ways which would otherwise have been impossible. To show something, in contrast to merely telling about it, is to make deliberate use of those traditions. Similarly, to see something in contrast to merely knowing about it is to experience a poem, a picture, a piece of music, and so forth, against the background of other works of art, making good use of one's experience, training and sensibility. In the different arts, there are unique opportunities for saying things which could not be expressed in other ways. If you like, you can call the use of those opportunities ways of 'showing'.

The various traditions of art (in the wide sense of 'art') provide a peculiar kind of resonance for what you are saying. Also Palmer's 'bogus poem' will sound very differently depending upon the artistic space in which it is placed. Used by an experienced master of the craft (like Claes Andersson), such lines could be transformed into very expressive poetry.

The telling/showing-distinction has been used for different purposes in different settings. In *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Part II, Wittgenstein was explicitly concerned with aspect-seeing, but it can indeed be argued that those philosophical investigations have a moral dimension.[11] Frank Palmer's discussion takes place in a book with the title *Literature and Moral Understanding*. Literature, like other forms of art, can contribute significantly to our moral understanding precisely in virtue of its special expressive resources. Two more examples—one from literature, and one from music—will help to clarify some of the manifold connections between art and ethics.

In her report on a suspected case of sexual abuse, a police officer can provide a lot of information about the suspect and his circumstances (assuming the suspect to be a man and the police officer to be a woman). The Norwegian author Bjørg Vik also provides a lot of information about a young man who is possibly guilty of such a crime in her short story 'Kall meg Jutta' (Call me Jutta).[12] Instead of a police-woman's third-person report with its accumulation of details, the author presents us with a monologue, a first-person talk. Instead of telling that the boy is rather fat, we get this: 'Speil har jeg ikke. Ser mer enn nok når jeg går forbi butikkrutene. Den svære tjukke fyren som dasser forbi, flyter som en lekter i sjøen, det er meg det.'(I have no mirror. I see quite enough when I pass the shop windows. The big fat fellow who slouches past, floats like a pram in the sea, that's me.) Take this an illustration of one of the differences between telling and showing. Similarly, the author does not tell us in so many words that the boy had a lonely childhood without friends. Instead, we get a fragment from a conversation between his parents, as the boy remembers it: 'Let the boy get that dog, she said, he has no mates, you know. Out of question, father said. He can have two-legged comrades as everybody else.' Instead of describing the evidence there is and analysing its uncertainty, the author manages to tell the story in such a way that the reader cannot quite decide what has happened. The young man's description of his last walk with the little girl is so unclear that it is open to various interpretations.

The ability to see the world from other people's point of view is one of the main connections between art and ethics. Novels and short stories are unsurpassable when it comes to a presentation of other people's life-worlds, making us understand how they look upon the world and how the world looks to them. The boy's own world comes to life when Bjørg Vik lets him tell his own story in his own words. The boy's conceptual world is conveyed to us. In the police officer's report, this would hardly come to the fore.

Understanding other people in the sense of being able to imagine what the world looks to them is one of those features of ethics which are so fundamental that they tend to be neglected. They are too close to be seen. Palmer refers to an incident which has actually taken place in a remote corner of Central Park in Manhattan, New York. A gang of young men attacked a young woman who was out on a jogging tour. They hurt her with bricks, a metal pipe and a knife, they gang-raped her and left her unconscious in a pool of her own blood. When he was arrested, one of the perpetrators commented that 'she was nothing'. The young man obviously lacked the ability to look at the event from the victim's point of view. He obviously lacked the ability to look at himself with the victim's eyes. One could indeed speak of a lacking sense for the other person's otherness.[13]

The peculiar resonance one can get by making good use of the resources of art can be used for various purposes. Let me conclude these remarks on telling and showing with a striking example from the field of music. Beate Klarsfeld is a Jewish woman who has devoted her life to the documentation of the diabolic deeds committed by the Nazis in France during the Second World War, in particular their treatment of Jewish children. In their *Requiem* from 1982, the composer Sven-David Sandström and the poet Tobias Berggren deal with the same subject in a rather different form. In a comment on their joint work, Berggren writes that 'it is the duty of art to be morally responsible for life in all of its aspects', including insufferable pain and 'the most heinous of crimes: the murder of children'.[14] The author refers to Beate Klarsfeld's work in particular, and in a crucial passage of the work, one finds a quotation from her: 'The black core of this Death Mass consists of an account of a testimony from her book, a documented text which is read by a reporter-voice at the end of the Agnus Dei movement.' Here is the passage quoted from the journalist's work:

> From the children's compound at night could be heard the desperate cries and screams of small children who had become deranged in their difficult situation. After a few days they were made ready for the journey in packed railway cars to the camps of annihilation. Everyone was searched before the departure. This applied also to two-and-three-year old infants. Even their small bundles of belongings were inspected by the special police for Jewish questions. No toys were allowed to be taken on the long journey.

Here we have a very clear example of what *telling* might amount to in contrast to showing. The Swedish poet comments upon the inadequacy of telling in this kind of context: 'I do not believe that one can be a describer and reporter in contexts like these; one has to transform oneself into a kind of shaman, one has to imitate the wild beast, dress in its skin, dance its dances. I have tried to drape myself in the skin of death and dance the dance of child murder.' It is difficult to imagine a more striking example of what *showing* might amount in contrast to mere telling.

At this juncture, I should have liked to be able to do again what I did when I first presented my reflections on the telling-showing distinction and the moral import of art at a conference at Göran Sörbom's department of aesthetics in Uppsala a couple of years ago, viz. to play the whole Agnus Dei movement for you—fifteen intense minutes of recorded music. Since this is not possible in the medium chosen by the editors of this volume, the best thing I can do to underscore the points made about the moral import of art and the unique opportunities for *showing* that our various traditions of art open for, is to refer you to Sandström's and Berggren's *Requiem* with its amazing and moving use of the unique opportunities offered by the combination of words and music.

NOTES

1. L.Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 200[e].
2. T. Nordenstam, 'Aesthetic Competence', in L. Aagaard-Mogensen and G. Hermerén, eds., *Contemporary Aesthetics in Scandinavia* (Lund: Doxa, 1980), pp. 99ff.; T. Nordenstam, 'Convention and Creativity', in J. Emt and G. Hermerén, eds., *Understanding the Arts: Contemporary Scandinavian Aesthetics* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1992), pp. 259ff.
3. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 201[e].
4. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 204[e].
5. Cf. my comments on 'natural pictures' in 'Convention and Creativity', p. 261f.
6. F. Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding: A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 193.
7. Palmer, op.cit., p. 190.
8. op.cit., p. 193.
9. op.cit., p. 194.
10. C. Andersson, *Rumskamrater* (1974), reprinted in C. Andersson, *Det som blev ord i mig. Dikter 1962-1987* (Stockholm: Alba, 1987), p. 126.
11. B. Tilghman, 'The Moral Dimension of the *Philosophical Investigations*', *Philosophical Investigations* 10 (1987); B. Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 114-116.
12. in B. Vik, *En gjenglemt petunia. Noveller* (Oslo: J. W. Cappelens Forlag, 1985), p. 21ff.
13. Palmer, op.cit., p. 240. Palmer's source is B. Levin, 'Blind in the Mind', *The Times*, 15 May 1989. Respect for other persons is one of the key notions in Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785). But Kant's emphasis on the purely a priori aspects of ethics makes him a bad guide when it comes to moral understanding. Kant's account therefore tends to obscure the relations between art and ethics just as much as the traditional utilitarian approaches do as a result of their emphasis on norm- and value-analysis. The virtue of Palmer's book is to have put the notion of *moral understanding* in the centre for a discussion of the relations of art and ethics.
14. S - D. Sandström and T. Berggren, *Requiem*, Caprice Records, Stockholm 1982, 1992.