

THE LOGIC OF OUR TALK ABOUT THE ARTIST'S INTENTION

This note attempts to formulate a few critical remarks on the aesthetical problem concerning the concept of intention in art. In what follows, I shall attempt (1) a reformulation and examination of the general anti-intentionalist position; and, (2) an enquiry into the nature of "intended meaning". I wish to argue that the distinction commonly drawn between the artist's intention and artistic meaning is a spurious one. And, I shall seek to outline here a sense in which to talk of the artistic meaning is the same as to talk of the artist's intention.

I may begin by outlining the problem. Critical talk about works of art often make references to the artist's intention. E.g., in understanding a poem we may want to know the poet's intended meaning of a word(s), phrase(s), or the whole poem¹. That is, instead of discussing the *poem's* meaning we might talk about the *poet's* intended meaning. The problem arising out of such a situation has often been brought out in terms of the following general question: Are such references relevant to our appreciation, interpretation and evaluation of art works? The significance of this question, it has been claimed, may be made clear by indicating the implications that would seem to follow from such critical practices: (i) If a work of art is understood or interpreted in terms of what is not *directly* given in it, are we not guilty of shifting our attention away from the work? (ii) If a work of art is evaluated by the consideration as to whether it has successfully fulfilled the artist's intentions, are we not invoking a criterion which is extraneous to the work? The

general apprehension underlying such questions is that in our attempt to interpret or/and evaluate the work of art in terms of the artist's intention we are always going away from the work itself.

It is worthwhile to clarify here that philosophers who raise such questions insist upon a distinction being drawn between the work *itself* on the one hand and the meaning or significance of it as *intended* by the artist, on the other. The latter, it has been suggested, raises irresolvable issues, such as : (a) how do we know what is the artist's intention ? (b) Is what is stated by the artist as his intention verifiable ? (c) What is the last court of appeal in the event of doubt, disagreement etc. ? The aforesaid questions are self-explanatory. On such grounds some aestheticians, particularly of the analytic persuasion (Beardsley et al) have concluded that to interpret and evaluate a work of art with reference to "intention" is to commit a "fallacy"²

The basic premise of the anti-intentionalist position regards the artist's intention in some sense *separable* from the poem or the work of art. Wimsatt Jr. and Beardsley in their article "The Intentional Fallacy" clearly state : "Intention is design or plan in the author's mind".³ From this it is but a step only to argue about the critic's inaccessibility to knowledge of what allegedly remains buried in the author's mind. The argument takes the following form :

- (p) If x is the intention of the artist then (i) either x is given in the work or (ii) it is not.
- (q) If (i), then attribution of x to the artist's mind is irrelevant and unnecessary.
- (r) If (ii), then it is not worthwhile to make such attributions at all.

A few general comments may be in order here : Beardsley can talk in terms of a disjunction of (i) and (ii), because on their own ground it is possible to say that something is an intention in the mind of the artist and does not form part of his work. Clearly, there is a divide between the work and what the artist intended *before* making it. An obvious question here would be : What is the relation between the work and the artist ? It is acknowledged on all hands that an artistic work is not to be treated as a product of chance. Considering that some of the things the artist thought did not get into the work, some atleast *did* get into it; or else, the work would not be made. For some quality or effect found in the work praise or blame goes to the artist. Further, it remains an unquestionably valid practice for the critic to point up effect or quality in the work made *intentionally* by the artist which however might escape the viewer's attention. In such cases it is only reasonable that the critic refers the quality to the artist's intention. In the preceding argument we would disagree with the disjunctive form set out in (p), as (ii) is not under consideration at all. The critic in discussing the work is not referring to what might have been but what *is* ; and what is not separable from the artist's intention. I shall revert to this point later.

However, the argument against intentionalism needs to be examined carefully. To do so we may bring out clearly the main assumptions underlying the argument :

- (a') If x is the intention of the artist, x stands for some mental state given prior to the act of making the work;
- (a'') mental states being "private" or opaque are not open to verification by others;
- (a''') the question "what is x?" is meaningful if only a *conclusive* answer is possible / forthcoming, in principle.

Critics of anti-intentionalism have rightly argued that if intention is identified with the artist's mental state, then any reference to *prior* intentions and *statements* made about them by the artist may well be suspect. Colin Lyas clarifies the point neatly by distinguishing several anti-intentionalist thesis :

"This first thesis rules out only the need for knowledge of and reference to *statements* of prior intention. It does not establish the dispensability of knowledge of prior intentions where this knowledge is gained in ways other than by study of *explicit* statements of intention. A second, stronger, thesis might therefore be offered. According to this thesis, knowledge of intentions had by the artist prior to producing the work, however this knowledge is obtained, is unnecessary in criticism. At best such knowledge can suggest to us things we should look for in the work ... This second, stronger, thesis would, if true, show only the dispensability of knowledge and reference to *prior* intentions. It does not, as such, rule out reference to our knowledge of the fact that the work and some of its effects are *intentional*. For, as we have seen, this knowledge may not involve reference to prior intentions at all." ⁴

The point that deserves emphasis here is this. Indeed, the artist may hatch many a plan about his work, but what might finally be shaped out by him need have no definite relationship with such "preconceptions". Artistic creation would be very much a drab affair if the artist were merely to translate into his medium what he had conceived of in a cool and clinical manner. The work would be a surrogate. Equating the artist's intention with some special mental state is wrought with implications which neither accord with prevalent creative practices nor auger well with the demands of wellgrounded critical practices. The force of anti-intentionalist argument is felt to the extent (a') and (a'') are treated as comprehensive. It should be pointed out here

that the staunch critic of the intentionalist position would much rather (a') read as follows :

(a'₁) for x to qualify as the intention of the artist it must *always* stand for some mental state given prior to the making of the work.

For him, there is but only one sense of "intention" viz., some mental state which precedes the creative process. Thus, it is not difficult to see that "intention" so construed readily fuels the flames of (a'"). The question "what is x?" (where x stands for the alleged intention) at once becomes a sitting duck for the criticism that it is to raise a question in the face of what has been shown as not susceptible of a logical enquiry. In other words, because of the comprehensive nature of (a') and (a'") questions of the sort "what is x?" fall foul of a legitimate enquiry.

Colin Lyas makes an attempt to show that the anti-intentionalist argument is quite inconclusive. He argues that the talk of intention gets vitiated if we construe it to be identified with some mental state. But surely, intention can have *other* senses. For Lyas, (a'₁) is quite unwarranted as one can continue of artistic intention without implying that it is a mental state which occurred to the artist before making the work of art. One can speak of the artist's intention to the knowledge of which even the artist himself may not claim any privileged access. We may, here briefly consider the position.

Lyas begins by distinguishing the "weak" and "strong" senses of the anti-intentionalist thesis. He argues that Beardsley's position conforms to a "weak" sense of the thesis. That is, Lyas suggests, we can hold the view that *some* references to the artist's intention are "dispensable" — those that are construed in terms as (a') and (a'"). However, from this it does not follow that *all* such references are dispensable or eliminable.

“To assert the strongest form of anti-intentionalism would ... constitute a total elimination of reference to intention from critical talk about art and would have an interesting consequence. For since the only difference I can see between a work of art and natural object stem from the fact that intentional human activity is involved in the making of art, so to deny the relevance of any knowledge of intention would be to deny the relevance of knowledge that one is dealing with art.”⁵

The key point of the argument makes a massive place of the counter intuitive nature of a work of art denied to have been by someone *intentionally*. To drive home the point that a comprehensive anti-intentionalist thesis is untenable, Lyas distinguishes between two different senses of the term “intention”: (d_1) the sense in which we talk of something buried in the mind (i.e., a mental state), and (d_2) the sense in which it is possible to distinguish between objects made intentionally and those that are products of chance or accident.⁶ Further, he draws support from (d_2) and presses forward with the point that art objects being intentionally made are quite amenable to our understanding in terms of the artist’s intentions. The main thrust of his argument is that for something to be intentionally made it does not *presuppose* a prior act of intention. He goes on to defend the practice of attributing to works of art “personal qualities” such as responsible, mature, intelligent, witty, poised, simple-minded, shallow, diffuse, ‘glib etc. on the argument that such attributions are possible only if works of art are regarded as intentionally made objects. As for Lyas’s claim that the ascription of such personal qualities *presupposes* knowledge of and reference to the artist and his intention, Joseph Margolis clearly has reservations: “Certainly, this sometimes obtains – but not always. It shows the aesthetic relevance of biographical

and intentional considerations; but, sometimes, an inspection of a given work supports their *ascription* – from which, therefore, we may draw inferences regarding the artist.”⁷ It seems to me that Margolis’s point is rather well taken; it shows that the legitimacy of (d_2) does not preclude the possibility of asking questions with regard to (d_1). Something may well *seem* to be intentionally made, but whether it *really* is the case is still a sensible question. I think that the relation between (d_1) and (d_2) is rather complex. In some cases, (d_2) may provide a clue about (d_1), but at least in some cases (d_2) will have to draw support from (d_1). It is only because in some cases the *real* intention can also become evident that it makes sense to talk of what *seems* to be rather than what *really* is. In everyday context of human interaction such a distinction is drawn very commonly. Mental states are not always correctly borne out by outward features or symptoms. For example, a smiling or a long face is not a conclusive evidence as to whether the person is really happy or unhappy. In all such cases, the *seems-is* distinction is clearly understood.

However, Lyas’s attempt to rehabilitate the concept of intention in art can at best be termed as partial. The implication of his view, it seems to me, is that it is proper and relevant to ask questions of the sort, (w_1) whether some of the effects in the work were intentionally put there by the artist? and not questions of the sort, (w_2) *what* is the intention of the artist? Let us see what this really means. If w_1 is relevant to something being considered an art object, could we say the same for w_2 ? This does not seem to follow from what Lyas says: “However even if prior intentions could not be known from the work, it does not follow that knowledge that the work and some of its effects are intentional, knowledge needed for the critically relevant attribution of personal qualities to the work, cannot be had ... 5

from the work itself. Intention can be revealed in the work equally as well as in any other piece of human behaviour.”⁸

I would like to respond to Lyas thus: True, most of our actions in everyday life are not preceded by any definite *prior* intention. But it still makes sense to talk of carefully hidden or concealed intentions or discovering one's real intention. This is also true of art. *Monalisa's* smile was painted the way it looks quite intentionally by Leonardo Da Vinci. But it is quite sensible to ask what the artist intended the smile to be taken for. As in this case, no conclusive answer may be forthcoming to such question. That is to say, (w_2) is a far more specific question which is neither contained in (w_1), nor warranted by it

However, (w_2) is the critic's natural choice. In critical practice, the most crucial but divergent references to the artist's intention in respect of a work may be provoked by (w_2), notwithstanding the convergence of a common consent on (w_1). We may readily cite some references concerning the works of Jasper Johns who painted a series on some very common place subjects like the target, the American flag, numbers etc. The repeated use of such subjects in a large number of his works has evoked speculations as to the real intention of the artist. For example, it has been suggested by some of his critics that Johns chose the common place subjects for his works to make them 'disappear' altogether. The explanation goes that at the sight of a familiar and common-place object the spectator would cease to think about it. But as Steinberg points out, the same works are capable of sustaining and supporting the contrary interpretation that the subjects like the flag, the target etc., in Johns's paintings look "more visible" than they do in their familiar context. "We thus have a critical situation in which some believe that the subjects were chosen to make them more visible, others, that they were chosen to become altogether invisible. It is the sort of discrepancy that becomes

a heuristic event. It sends you back to the paintings with a more potent question: What in the work, you ask, invites contrariness? It then turns out that the work is such as to vindicate both groups of critics. For John's pictures are situations wherein the subjects are constantly found and lost, submerged and recovered."⁹

Such situations are intriguing enough, more so because nobody can claim to be the arbiter of what should count as the artist's real intention. The rival claims of the critics seem to inject a subjectivist approach in to the whole matter relating to the interpretation of the work. Yet, the work seems richer in content and perhaps would have lost something of its value if it had not been susceptible of a certain range of possibilities. For the anti-intentionalist, the inconclusive nature of such speculation regarding the artist's intention provides a chink in his armour. To steer clear of the tangle, Davies, in a recent paper, works out distinction between intention and intentionality: "Our interest in art rests on a recognition of its intentionality, but not necessarily as a result of a recognition of the artist's intentions. With the distinction between intention and intentionality in mind, the key point might be made as follows: Of course we are interested in what an artist has 'to say' in his work of art but that may be different from and more interesting than that which he is able to avow as his intention. After all, the artist is in the same position as anyone else when it comes to paraphrasing or describing the work of art."¹⁰ Let me clarify. Davies uses the terms "intention" and the artist's "avowal" of it almost interchangeably. The implication seems to be that we often get waylaid by (w_2), and therefore, one had better not be talked into it. The distinction clearly lies between what the artist has "to say" *in* his work and what he says or avows *about* his work. Obviously, the latter can always be looked upon suspiciously.

But the more important point is, how do we ensure that what is said *in* the work does not escape the viewer. Arguing in the limited context of representational painting, say a portrait, Davies maintains : "Painters frequently intend to represent individuals who actually exist or have existed. Inevitably then, an interest in that which a painting represents will sometimes involve a concern with a reference. An aesthetic interest in paintings is, it would generally be accepted, indifferent to the existence of the represented subject. Had more importance been attached to the painter's intentions, so that those intentions, so that those intentions determined the nature of aesthetic understanding and appreciation, it would have been necessary to admit that, often an aesthetic interest would concern itself with the referential use of art. However, an interest in the representational character of art pays no regard to such intentions or to a possibility of pictures' havings representational character which may be distinguished from what they represent as determined by the painters' intentions." ¹¹

I may rejoin as follows. First, Davies considers only a limited context in which a concern with the existence of the represented subject could claim to be subsumed under the wider sense of intention. Even in the case of a representational painting a more interesting question for the critic would be *why* the painter chose the subject he did. For example, the paintings of Jasper Johns we considered earlier – the target series, the flag series etc. – may well seem to be representational in character. But the point of concern, there, was *why* he made use of such commonplace subjects. Second, as in everyday life so in art the question about intention is raised only when one is not clear about it or has doubt or suspicion as to its real nature. Consider, for example, everyday life situations where we may intend to convey our feeling of anger or displeasure through disguised talk or action. Sometimes, we may even want to conceal our intentions.

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an action is done intentionally or otherwise is not so much in most cases whether an action is done intentionally or otherwise is not so much in doubt though there may not be an hard evidence to support such a conclusion As for the intention of the artist once we acknowledge that the work is an intentionally made object the responsibility for which is to be placed on the artist we cannot stall around (w_2) for long. How we answer (w_2) is crucial to the identity of the work. The work of art can be no other than what the artist intended it to be. It may seem somewhat convoluted that even though no conclusive answer is forthcoming in response to (w_2) all the various possibilities may be regarded as what may have been intended by the artist.

I suggest that a work of art may sustain – and a good work often does – a host of different interpretations. However, this also presupposes the viewer's ability and willingness to "see" various possibilities, what is experienced within an aesthetic mode is not the self-same single "object"; the range of possibilities add to the complexity and richness of experience.¹² I am saying that a work of art W_{p_1} may be seen as W_{p_1} , W_{p_2} , W_{p_3} ... W_{p_n} where $p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots, p_n$ stand for different possibilities. Obviously, this talk of possibilities is quite opposed to the dogma of the work of art *itself*. Now, in considering $p_1, p_2, p_3 \dots p_n$ some of them may be aesthetically more rewarding than others. Take, for example, Johns's work which lends itself to several interpretations. Here, to ask (w_2) is quite relevant provided that we grant *any* of the possible meaning was intended by the artist. Further, I suggest, that in the absence of a conclusive answer to (w_2), W_p may be seen as given in the mode of a tension-pattern resulting from competing possibilities – each of $p_1, p_2, p_3 \dots p_n$ being taken for the artist's possible intended meaning. Rather than demanding a conclusive answer, (w_2) keeps alive our interest in the work. That is, (w_2) is compatible with, not

inimical to, the doctrine that a successful work should evoke and sustain an abiding interest in the details of the work. The critic by referring to the artist's intention in terms of (w_2) does not legislate on the meaning and status of W_p . Nor does he necessarily take us away from the focus of aesthetic contemplation. It is more plausible to maintain that such practices may well be integrated with the aesthetic mode of viewing works of art.

Briefly then, I have argued that to ask the question "What is the artist's intention?" is to invite the perceptive attention to several possibilities the presence of all of which makes the work of art seem richer in content. It will, thus, be a wrong move to give up on this question *even if* no conclusive answer to it is forthcoming. Further, contrary possibilities with regard to the interpretation of the same work may well set up a tension-pattern which will be conducive to a heightened aesthetic experience.

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NOTES

1. Frank Cioffi refers to the heterogeneity or the contexts in which questions of interpretation arise : " Even within the same kind of context the author's intention will vary in relevance depending on the kind of question involved, whether it concerns the meaning of a word or the tone of a passage, the view to be taken of a character or a situation or the general moral of an entire work. " Cioffi in " Intention and Interpretation in Criticism " *Journal of Aristotelian Society*, 1963-64, p. 93.
2. W. K. Wimsatt Jr., and M. C. Beardsley in " The Intentional Fallacy ", in W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., " *The Verbal Icon* " (Lexington : University of Kentucky Press.)
3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
4. Colin Lyas in " Personal Qualities and the Intentional Fallacy ", *Philosophy and the Arts* (Royal Institute in Philosophy, Vol 6, 1971-72) (New York : St. Martin's Press), p. 196.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
6. This distinction was earlier suggested by R. Kuhns in " Criticism and the Problem of Intention ", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LVII No. 1, 1960.
7. Joseph Margolis, " *Art and Philosophy : Conceptual Issues in Aesthetics* ", (The Harvester Press, 1980), p. 181.
8. Colin Lyas, *Ibid.*, p. 206.
9. Leo Steinberg, " *Other Criteria : Confrontation with Twentieth-Century Art* ", (Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 25.
10. Stephen Davies in " The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions ", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Fall, 1982, p. 66.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
12. I have, here, in mind the notion of " concretion " developed by Roman Ingarden with regard to aesthetic viewing of a work of art : " The work of art then, is the product of the intentional activities of an artist ; the *concretion* of the work is not only the reconstruction thanks to the activity of an observer of what was effectively present in the work, but also a completion of the work and the actualization of its moments of potentiality. It is thus in a way the common product of artist and observer. " Roman Ingarden in " Artistic and Aesthetic Values ", in Harold Osborne (ed), *Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 40. I acknowledge my grateful thanks to the Indian Council of Philosophical Research for having received a research grant while preparing this paper.