

FICTIONAL EMOTION, QUASI-DESIRE AND BACKGROUND BELIEF

I

In *Art and Imagination*¹ Roger Scruton offers an analysis of aesthetic emotions as an 'imagined counterpart' of real-life emotions. The key to this analysis is his theory of imagination, according to which imagination is a species of 'unasserted' thought essentially contrasted with belief. While belief is at the heart of real-life emotions, aesthetic emotions are founded on imagination. Despite this difference in the structure of these two emotions, our response to works of art is said to be similar to our response to real life. As Scruton writes : 'to find a work of art sad is to respond to it in the way I respond to a man when I am 'touched' by his sadness' (p. 72).

In this paper my aim is to critically discuss Scruton's account of aesthetic emotion *vis-a-vis*, on the one hand, the contrast between imagination and belief and, on the other hand, the analysis of real-life emotions in terms of belief and desire. I shall try to show how his treatment of the problem is inadequate, and what can be done to make up for this deficiency. I shall end with a general note on the possibility of our response to fiction.

II

Scruton explains real-life emotions as 'a complex of belief and desire, united in a causal relation' (p. 128). Anger, for example, involves the belief that someone has done injustice, and

this belief gives rise to the desire to punish the unjust person. Fear embodies the belief in something dangerous and the desire to avoid the dangerous object. Thus, in each case, the belief attributes some property to an actual object, and from the belief issues a desire to act or behave in an appropriate way. In contrast, aesthetic emotions, being directed towards situations and characters depicted in works of art, do not involve beliefs that attribute properties to actual objects. For their objects are merely imagined to exist. Since no belief is involved, no desire is included in such emotions. The question therefore arises as to how there can be an element of feeling in the so-called aesthetic emotions, when they are altogether devoid of belief and desire.

Since aesthetic experience is founded on unasserted thought, 'is the expression of aesthetic experience,' questions Scruton, 'the expression of anything more than a thought' (p. 130)? Surely, if aesthetic response is to count as *emotional* response to works of art, there must be some affective content to aesthetic experience. To solve this problem Scruton takes recourse to his theory of imagination. People and events depicted in works of art are, as it were, fictional analogues of real-life people and their situations. It is the fictionalising attitude of imagination which establishes an intentional nexus with fictional characters and their fate. Imagination accounts both for the intentionality and the causation of our response to works of art, analogous to the way belief explains, intentionally and causally, our response to real-life. In Scruton's theory, imagination is recognised as causally efficacious substitute for belief. We are moved by fiction not because of belief or willing suspension of disbelief, but because of imagination.

In what does our being moved by fiction consist? The answer to this question is to be drawn from a careful examination of the

structure of real-life emotions. Scruton wants us to take the belief-desire analysis of emotions as the paradigm for explicating the notion of aesthetic emotion. We shall therefore look for the fictional analogues of belief and desire in the constitution of aesthetic emotion. While the analogue of belief is an unasserted thought, what is the analogue of desire which is supposed to arise from the thought entertained unasserted?

The question is rather difficult, and it seems to me that more needs to be said to answer it than Scruton's scanty account. He suggests that there can also be an 'entertained' version of desire, just as there are thoughts entertained unasserted. If we can entertain unasserted just those thoughts that in a real-life context would amount to beliefs, we can also entertain, together with these unasserted thoughts, the desires that would issue from their asserted counterpart in real-life. Scruton stresses:

Why do we not say that I also entertain, along with these (thoughts), the desires that would also, in the normal circumstance (of real-life), arise out of them? Why can I not 'entertain' desires? ... In other words, just as I may recreate in my imagination the thoughts that I would have, so can I recreate the feelings which these thoughts give rise to (p. 129).

The implication of this passage is that the 'entertained' desires are a causal concomitant of imagination in much the same way real desires are a causal consequence of belief. It is also implied that to entertain a desire is to have a certain kind of feeling which resembles the experience of having a real desire. I shall describe the former experience as a quasi-desire. Rephrasing the distinction, we may now say that just as desires stand to belief in the constitution of real-life emotions, so do quasi-desires stand to imagination or unasserted thought in emotional response

to fiction. And it is the occurrence of quasi-desires, as Scruton would say, that lends the element of feeling to aesthetic emotions.

Difficulties begin to emerge at this point. The contrast between belief and imagination is drawn in respect of the attitude of propositional assent. While belief involves assenting to the truth of a proposition, imagination consists in entertaining a proposition without the attitude of assent. Thus imagination can also be characterised as a state of 'unbelief' in that it presupposes the withdrawal of that attitude to a proposition which is a prerequisite of belief. Corresponding to this clear contrast, it is quite unclear, on Scruton's account, what is withdrawn in entertaining a desire, i.e. in having a quasi-desire. We are left wondering in *what* respect a quasi-desire differs from a desire analogous to the way imagination differs from belief with respect to the attitude of propositional assent.

We may be misled into searching for a fictional analogue of desire independently of belief; for what remains to be brought to light is the important conceptual point that a quasi-desire is to be distinguished from a desire by reference to belief itself. The relation of quasi-desire to desire cannot be construed apart from the belief that generates the desire, which means that the parallelism between belief versus imagination on the one hand and desire versus quasi-desire on the other does not hold. This follows from the conceptual dependency of desire upon belief.

III

A desire not only stems from a particular belief, but depends on the belief for its identity. It is in terms of the (asserted) thought underlying belief that a desire can be identified and classified as a particular desire. Basically, a desire consists of a thought together with an affectively charged reactive tendency. The thought is a belief and it determines the object towards

which the reactive tendency or felt inclination is directed. For example, if Sally desires to take Harry to task for an irresponsible conduct on his part, her desire can be identified by reference to her belief that he should be reprimanded for his irresponsible behaviour. Without the belief her conative urge cannot be specified as the desire to reprove him.

If Sally's mental state is transformed from belief to 'unbelief' — that is to say, if the thought underlying her belief is, as it were, rendered unasserted — the affective state of her mind would naturally be expected to undergo some kind of modification. The most drastic form of modification would be the extinction of the desire, if she realised, for instance, that her belief was mistaken. (Indeed, she might feel the desire to apologise.) This, however, is not relevant to Scruton's purpose. What is pertinent to the issue is the possibility of Sally's having the quasi-desire — or her being in an affective state resembling desire — to take Harry to task even when she merely imagines him having done the irresponsible act. But what is it like to experience a quasi-desire in a fictional way? I think this question calls for a discussion of the connection of desire to action in relation to emotion.

In real life, emotions are also motives to action. As motives they give rise to specific desires, which in turn occasion appropriate actions or behaviour. Jealousy elicits the desire to change the situation which appears adverse to the wishes and interests of the jealous person. And this desire may actually engage the person on a course of action to bring about the desired end. Similarly, anger embodies the desire to punish the unjust person, and this desire normally causes the angry person to do something which results in the punishment being meted out. There is thus a practical end, an action-strategy, to real-life emotions inasmuch as desire is a component of such emotions.

Devoid of belief and desire, aesthetic emotions do not encourage the adoption of any action-strategy that directly bears upon their objections. As products of artistic fiction, or creations of imagination, the objects of aesthetic emotions are, indeed, meant not to be the targets of actions. Aesthetic responses are sustained by unasserted thoughts about fictionally depicted objects. However, such responses can also, on Scruton's view, be infused with reactive tendencies or felt urges towards their objects somewhat in the way emotional responses to real life are characterised by conative urges actually to engage in action. This is why it seems right to use the expression 'quasi-desire' to describe the reactive tendencies felt toward fiction. Born of imagination and confined to the imaginary, quasi-desires are not intentional causes of action.

Yet the question remains as to why imagination succeeds in moving us in the above-indicated way. If, for example, Sally imagines Harry (a fictional character depicted in a work of fiction) being negligent to important duties, she comes to feel the quasi-desire to take 'him' to task. And her emotional response to the character resembles her normal affective response to an analogous real-life person. How is it that an aesthetic response bred in imagination is laden with a felt inclination which is similar to an inclination alive in an analogous real-life response? The answer, not disclosed in Scruton's account, is that it is the same *disposition* to react resentfully towards an actual agent of irresponsible conduct which is activated, through imagination, in Sally's mind by her unasserted thought of the fictional agent, namely Harry. And it is intrinsic to the intentionality of her quasi-desire that its object or target is in the domain of art, which is why the felt urge remains held back within 'a non-practical' aesthetic frame of mind.

It would be quite wrong however, to conclude from the non-practical nature of aesthetic responses that they are virtually impractical. For such responses may find proper practical expression in our subsequent behaviour in real-life situations. Indeed, Sally would be at odds with herself if, after having responded resentfully towards a fictional character, she failed to resent the actions of an actual person in a similar situation. In real life, her normal reaction would, following the occurrence of resentment, be expressed in an act of rebuking the irresponsible person. None the less, the non-practicality of aesthetic response marks the conceptual autonomy of the aesthetic attitude — the attitude to art as such — from the 'natural,' non-aesthetic attitude involved in emotional response to real life. It does not follow from this, however, that aesthetic responses are practically inefficacious. Their practical bearing on subsequent experiences of real life may be indirect and not clearly discernible. On this Scruton's remarks seem apposite :

There is a non-contingent connection... between imagined emotion and the behaviour that, in other circumstances (i.e. in real-life), counts as an expression of the corresponding 'real' emotion. What I feel in the presence of works of art may find its ultimate expression in my behaviour towards my fellows. My 'imagined' feelings can show their effect in the expression of their 'real' counterparts (p. 131).

IV

It is, perhaps, an interesting truth about our mental life that we can experience genuine resentment (among other emotions) at *imagined* misconduct of characters much as we resent *believed* misconduct of our fellow beings. Our response to art crystallises

the significance of this truth. Scruton would say that the basis of this truth is to be found in his theory of imagination. His theory will explain, with regard to the above example, that imagining someone being the agent of some misconduct contains the same thought-content which is contained in believing someone to be the agent of such a misconduct.² And the recurrence of the same thought in imagination occasions the occurrence of an imagined counterpart of resentment. Is this a sufficient explanation of emotional response to fiction? It seems to me that Scruton's theory leaves out a deeper truth.

What it leaves out is the apparently shadowy truth that, as we 'enter into' the fictional world of works of art, we carry with us the same repertoire of beliefs and their cognate attitudes, which are characteristically involved in our emotional response to real-life. Though participation with characters and events of fiction is a kind of make-believe enactment of ourselves as denizens of an imaginary realm, we remain bound to the repertoire even when we are in confrontation with fictional objects. We are determined by this repertoire in the way we appreciate and respond to fiction. These beliefs exert causal influence in shaping the nature of our appreciation and response. Thus it is the same network of beliefs, forming an active background of our emotional appreciation of the fate of our fellow beings, which operates in the generation of our emotive reactions or quasi-desires towards *dramatis personae*,

If this is right, it follows that there is more to the thought-content of aesthetic responses than the content of mere imagination. For the 'imaginative' thought-process is pregnant with background beliefs. This fact in turn implies that there is an undercurrent of 'asserted' thoughts beneath the surface of thoughts entertained be unasserted. Thus, some beliefs form part

of the 'deep structure' of aesthetic emotions. Without the infiltration of these 'seminal' beliefs, imagination stands to emotion in much the same way as an unfertilised ovum stands to a possible individual.

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NOTES

1. Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen & Co, 1974), Part II, Chapters 6 - 10. All subsequent page references are to this work.
2. Cf. 'Thus when we imagine something, or tell a story, while being indifferent to its truth, the content of our thought is the content of a belief; but the thought process itself is independent of this belief' (p. 89)

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