AESTHETIC NOMINALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CLASSIFICATION IN AESTHETICS

MILIND S. MALSHE

The process of classification or categorization is pertinent to every field of human enquiry. Natural sciences, social sciences and humanistic studies -- all these fields have developed their own ways of classifying the subject-matter they deal with. Some of the more familiar examples are: the taxonomies of plants and animals (Biology); the classification of matter in three 'states', viz. gases, solids and liquids (Physics); the personality types such as 'introvert' and 'extrovert' (Psychology); the typology of social organization, e.g., 'Gemeinschaft', i.e., societies based on spontaneous, personal and organic relationships, and 'Gesellschaft', i.e., those based on formal, impersonal and bureaucratic relationships (Sociology); the lexical categories traditionally called the 'parts of speech', the sentence types and linguistic typology like 'agglutinative' etc. (Linguistics). In every case, the classificatory system is a vital part of the theoretical models in these fields, and is therfore looked upon as a valuable process in the enquiry. Classification presupposes perception of the similarities as well as the differences between individual objects, phenomena, etc., and as such, is directly related to the processes of identification, definition, abstraction and systematization.

Many theoreticians believe that the processes of abstraction and systematization are not relevant to the domain of aesthetic activity. As a result, classification has become an anathema to many aestheticians -- particularly those under the influence of Kant. The position that art-works are non-classifiable is one of the major assumptions of what Frank Kermode has called the 'Romantic-Symbolist' aesthetic.[1] This assumption has its origins in Immanuel Kant's theory of 'free beauty', and has been further developed by aestheticians such as Walter Pater, Benedetto Croce, Susanne Langer and Harold Osborne.

The Kantian position mentioned above can be aptly described as 'aesthetic nominalism', following Warren and Wellek[2], because it argues that all categories in aesthetics are nominal in nature.

This paper debates the theoretical implications of this position, first directly, by raising some objections against it, and then in a rather indirect manner, by examining two important levels of aesthetic classification, observing how they interact significantly and how our generic decisions influence our perception of the nature of the different arts.

I

Aesthetic nominalism challenges the very act of aesthetic classification on the ground that every aesthetic object is unique and non-classifiable. The argument generally offered in support of this position is based on a distinction between the cognitive and the utilitarian aspects of experience on the one hand, and the aesthetic aspect on the other. On this view, any classification is treated either as a cognitive/logical act, or as an act necessitated by pragmatic or utilitarian considerations.

Aesthetic creations are treated as 'autonomous', that is, not guided by the cognitive and utilitarian principles. Kant's assertion that the judgment of taste is necessarily 'singular' since it is not based on any concept, is the philosophical source of this position.[3]

Walter Pater's version of the Kantian position is in terms of 'sensations'. In his Preface to *The Renaissance*, he argues that the aim of aesthetics is 'to define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it. ... The aesthetic critic ... regards all the objects with which he has to do ... as powers or forces producing sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind.[4]

Unlike Kant, Croce treats beauty and art as forms of knowledge, but makes a radical distinction between two forms of knowledge, logical and intuitive, and treats all the generic categories as logical, intellectual, non-intuitive, and therefore non- aesthetic. He attacks what he calls 'intellectualism' in aesthetics, arguing that the theory of artisitc and literary kinds is 'the greatest triumph of the intellectualist error.[5]

Susanne Langer's distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbols and her characterization of the non-discursive of 'presentational' symbol similarly emphasizes the unique qualities of the aesthetic object: 'In the non-discursive mode...there is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct presentation of an individual object.[6]

More recently, Osborne has argued that in the domain of aesthetics, all systems of classification are 'pragmatic', and that 'none of them impinges on aesthetic character or quality. .... Classificatory Order stops short of aesthetic Order', the latter being immediately or directly apprehensible unlike the 'rational Order' of science.[7]

If aesthetic judgments are non-conceptual, singular, and based upon 'intuition', how do we identify, describe, characterize, interpret, compare and evaluate aesthetic objects? The nominalist position invalidates all these processes which together constitute reception of art or what is traditionally called art criticism. It must be pointed out that it is not only the critics or the receivers but also the artists who make certain basic conceptual distinctions which are embodied in their creative choices.

Let us discuss a few examples. An Indian classical musician, for example, makes at least the following distinctions quite explicitly:

(a)   what is 'musical' and what is 'non-musical',

(b)   what is 'classical' and what is 'non-classical' (– in a concert of classical music, the *rāga* and the *tāla* are usually announced);

(c)   what belongs to his/her own *gharānā* or musical style and what does not (- in Hindustani vocal music training and performance are largely governed by the stylistic ideology of the *gharānā*);

(d)   what is simply a musical 'exercise' meant to be used in training and practice and what is musical 'expression'.

(e)   what is to be performed before a large, lay audience and what is to be performed before a compact, knowledgeable audience.

These distinctions and the musician's decisions based upon them could hardly be called non-aesthetic, non-musical or 'pragmatic', unlike, say, the descision about how he/she should dress for a performance or whether or not

to consume tobacco while performing.

Literary artists too make basic conceptual distinctions which guide their aesthetic choices. At the most obvious and direct level, we may cite the example of those writers who have consciously chosen to use, modifiy, or radically challenge a particular generic category. It has been pointed out that Milton was consciously using abstract notions of the epic and tragedy, and further, he knew 'how to Christianize and Miltonize the Aeneid, and 'how to tell his personal story through a Hebrew folk tale treated as a Greek tragedy' as in Samson Agonistes.[8] Another fairly obvious example of the conscious use of the generic categories by a creative writer is Fielding's characterization of what 'kind of writing' he was attempting in Joshph Andrews: 'a comic epic poem in prose.[9]

We may now make two basic observations about the nominalist position. Firstly, in any aesthetic theorizing, the 'aesthetic' needs to be distinguished from the non-aesthetic; and it is here that the process of classification begins at its most fundamental level. Secondly, within the aesthetic domain, the different arts need to be distinguished, because the processes of creation as well as reception appear to be quite different in the various arts.

This is obvious from the fact that the ability to create and receive, say muscial works does not guarantee the same ability in, say, the visual arts. From the point of view of what in psychology is called 'nurture' at least, the creative and receptive sensibilities need to be specifically tuned to the particular mediums of the arts, and it is here that the distinct generic elements have an active role to play.

II

Apart from these rather obvious distinctions, there are two other levels of classification which can be identified with some precision. We shall first locate them with the help of a few examples and then explore them a little further to examine how they are interdependent.

The first of the two levels is the level of classification of the arts into broad clusters, according to certain aspects of their mediums: for example, music and dance, in their 'live' form, naturally form a cluster because in these arts the work of art us realized only when it is 'performed' in the presence of an

audience. The other examples of such clusters are the 'temporal' arts and the 'spatial' arts. An interesting use of the cluster can be seen in Aristotle's formulation of the criterion of the 'means of imitation'. Aristotle specifies the means as 'rhythm, language or harmony, either singly or combined', and classifies the arts into different clusters accordingly.[10] A modern classificatory scheme is to be found in T. M. Greeene's The Arts and the Art of Criticism, where the six major arts are classified into three broad cluster, viz. 'abstract' (music, dance and architecture), 'representational' (sculpture and painting), and symbolic (literature).[11]

The second level of classification is to be located within each art: for example, music has varieties scuh as 'classical', 'light', 'pop', 'folk', etc.; films can be feature films, documentaries, animated films, etc.; paintings may be classified into portraits, genre paintings, abstract paintings, and so on. To invoke Aristotle again, using the criterion of the 'manner of imitation', poetry can be classified into two major types: 'the poet may imitate by narration ... or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us. 'Further, the Aristotelian criterion of the 'object of imitation' leads to a further sub-classification of the dramatic poetry, viz. comedy and tragedy.[12]

The two broad levels of aesthetic classification mentioned above are indeed distinct. What is equally important, however, is that they are interrelated and interdependent in certain significant ways. The case of drama is worth examining in this context. Is drama a performing/theatrical art, or is it a verbal/literary art? Is it to be grouped with music and dance, or with poetry/literature? This is a question at the first level of classification - i.e., the level of the broad clustering of the arts. Our answer to it, however, directly influences the subgeneric distinctions made at the second level of classification, i.e., the classification within each art. Let us observe how this happens.

We may begin with a brief comparison between the classical Indian and Western (i.e. Greek) approaches to the nature of drama. Etymologically, the Sanskrit word *nātya* (theatre) is derived from the root *nat* (nṛt) which means 'to dance'. Conceptually too, *nātya* comprises dance and drama, for in both these arts, it is the *abhinaya*, i.e. the histrionic element, that plays a crucial role.[13] This contrasts sharply with the Aristotelian view of drama. Though an important distinction is made in the Poetics between the narrative and the dramatic forms

of poetry, drama is, for Aristotle, an essentially literary or poetic since 'plot' is its most crucial element ('soul'), while 'spectacle' is 'the least artistic' : the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.[14]

Aristotle's commitment to the essential 'poeticality' of drama is clearly reflected in the way he subcategories drama into tragedy and comedy. The criteria used are not theatre-oriented, but are literary and moral -- viz. the status of characters ('low' in comedy, 'high' in tragedy); and their actions (mean in comedy, noble in tragedy). In the *Nātyaśāstra*, on the other hand, Bharata's criteria of sub-categorizing drama into ten types of *rupa* (i.e., play) are preeminently performance-based -- e.g. the use of verbal discourse, the density and nature of conversation the number of characters, the actual presentation of certain types of scenes such as wars, etc.[15]

A similar kind of interdependence of the two levels of aesthetic classification can be discerned if we observe some of the more recent controversies over the nature of drama. The more conventional (i.e. Aristotelian) critics and theoreticians of drama, such as Allardyce Nicoll and Eric Bentley, treat drama essentially as a literary work (or, to use a more fashionable term, 'discourse'), and look upon performance as 'stage presentation' of a given script, that is, as something additional to or superimposed on the literary script. For example, Bentley asks: 'What does acting add to a play?[16]

More recently, however, critics, directors and theoreticians, such as Jerzy Grotowsky, Bernard Beckerman and Richard Schechner, have challenged the classical view. These new theorists have described drama variously, but the underlying common feature is their emphasis on performance: 'imagined act', 'happening', 'event', 'actual' (used as a noun), 'spectacle', encounter', 'process', 'transformation' have been some of the key terms in their writings. Schechner also talks about 'using theatre as a way to experience with, act out and ratify change', and about its 'ability to frame and control, to change from raw to cooked, the most problematic (violent, dangerous, sexual, taboo) items of human interaction'.[17]

Given these two opposing approaches, what happens to the subgeneric distinctions? Significantly enough, the classical subgeneric distinctions, such as

tragedy, comedy, melodrama and farce are dependent on our viewing drama as 'literary' or 'verbal' in nature. For example, Bentley's ''freudian'' attempt to distinguish tragedy from melodrama is based on the assumption that the essence of drama lies in the 'literary' nature of the script: 'Whereas in melodrama we identify ourselves ... with innocence, and live under the constant threat of other people's villainy, in tragedy we identify ourselves with guilt, and live in conflict with ... (ourselves).[18] On the other hand, if drama is seen primarily in terms jof performance, the criteria for subgeneric distinctions are very different: for example, one of the criteria is the degree of the 'improvisability' of the script or text; another is the degree of 'alienation' or 'intimacy' achieved. Schechner's distinction between 'aesthetic' drama, 'ritual' drama and 'social' drama is revealing in this context: '' ... There are at least three categories of performance: (1) aesthetic where the audience changes consciousness while the performer ''rolls over'', (2) ritual drama where the object of ceremoney is transformed while the officiating performer ''rolls over'', (3) social drama where all involved change''.[19]

It should further be noticed that Schechner uses the term drama in a very wide sense. Ritual dramas are cultural situations where, for example, a young man who is a 'bachelor', is transformed into a 'husband' through the ceremony of marriage, while social dramas comprise arguments, combats, rites of passage and political ceremonies.[20]

The concept of performance thus not only projects the subgeneric distinctions within drama in an entirely new way, but also shifts the borderlines between art and non-art too. Drama becomes an activity which at many points is continuous with other socio-cultural activities that are not necessarily viewed as 'aesthetic', such as feasting, warring, lovemaking, dreaming, etc.[21]

III

We have thus identified three distinct levels of aesthetic classification: one is the fundamental level of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic; the second is the level of the clustering of the different arts; and the third is the generic classification within each art.

It can be argued from this that the process of classification in aesthetics need not be given up either as a purely cognitive or a purely 'pragmatic' process,

implying that it is irrelevant to aesthetic creation or reception. Nor do we need to give it up as hopelessly chaotic. The processes of identification, definition, abstraction, systematization and evaluation are relevant to aesthetics as to any other field of human inquiry. Without doing violence or injustice to the complexity of aesthetic phenomena, it is theoretically insightful to posit levels of classification in aesthetic phenomena, it is theoretically insightful to posit levels of classification in aesthetics and observe how these levels interact with one another. From the point of view of the semiotics of art, the theoretical schemata of classification can be viewed as mental codes which are employed both by the practising artists as well as the receivers of art.

NOTES

1.   Frank Kermode, *The Romantic Image* (London : Collins, 1971), pp. 162-177.

2.   Austin Warren and Rene Wellek, *Theory of Literature*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), p. 235.

3.   Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (trans. by J. C. Meredith) (Oxford, 1952), pp. 41-89. For a recent critique of Kant's conditions of beauty, see Denis Dutton, ''Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty'', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 3 (July, 1994) 226-241.

4.   Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; Macmillan, London, 1935), pp. vii-ix. Emphasis added.

5.   Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, (trans. D. Ainslie) (1922; Calcutta: Indian rpt.), p.35.

6.   Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York:The New American Library, 1942), p. 78.

7.   Harold Osborne, ''Aesthetic and Other Forms of Order'', *The British Journal of Aesthetic*, vol. 22, no. 1, (Winter, 1982), pp. 3-16.

8.   Warren and Wellek, *Theory of Literature*, p. 233. Also see Richard B. Sewall's *The Visiton of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) where it is argued that the generic concepts of tragedy, comedy and epic had a vital role to play in the creative processes of writers like Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Milton.

9.   Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*. (1742. London: Dent, 1965), p. xvii.

10.   Aristotle, *Poetics* (trans. S. H. Butcher) (Dover, 1951)

11.   Theodore M. Greene, *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J.:
      Princeton University Press, 1940), pp. 29-45.

12.   *Poetics* (trans. Butcher), p. 13.

13.   See Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts* (New
      Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi), pp. 23-34. For an edition and English translation
      of the *Nātyaśāstra, see : Nātyaśāstra* (edited and translated by M. Ghosh) Test:
      Vol. I, Ch. 1-27 (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1067): Vol. II, Ch. 28- 36
      (Calcutta, 1956); Translation: Vol. I (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1967); Vol.
      II (Calcutta: Bibliotheca India, The Asiatic Society, 1961). The *vṛttis* are
      discussed in Chapter 20.

14.   *Poetics* (trans. Butcher), pp. 29-31.

15.   The major principle underlying the classification of drama into ten types is the
      vṛtti, i.e. 'the mode or manner of speech delivery for different types of action,
      theme or locale -- the graceful (*kaishiki*), the energetic (*ārabhati*), the verbal
      (*bhārati*) and the grand (*sātvati*)'. *Nātyaśāstra*, Chapters 18 and 20. Also see
      Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance*, p. 8.

16.   Eric Bentley, *The Life of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 166. Emphasis
      added. Also see Allardyce Nicoll, *The Theatre and Dramatic Theory* (London:
      George G. Harrap, 1962), pp. 33-80.

17.   Richard Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory: 1970-1976* (New York:
      Drama Book Specialists, 1977), p. 123. Also see Jerzy Grotowsky, *Towards a
      Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuter, 1968) and Bernard Beckerman,
      Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis (New York: Alfred K.
      Knorf, 1970).

18.   Bentley, *Life of Drama*, p. 261.

19.   Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory*, p. 125.

20.   *ibid*, p. 124.

21.   A similar point has been made in a more provocative way while discussing the
      term ''aesthetic'' by T. J. Diffey: '... the term ''aesthetic'' has taken on meanings
      and resonances that cannot be exhausted by identifying it with art or beauty. ...
      My idea is that we should regard the term ''aesthetic'' as a term that extends
      thought, stretches the mind, and leads us into new and uncharted territory'. ''The
      Idea of Aesthetic Experience'', in *Possibility of Aesthetic Experience* (ed.
      Michael H. Mitias) (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), pp. 10-11.

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS