

HOSPERS ON THE ARTIST'S INTENTIONS

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In *Understanding the Arts*, Hospers distinguishes between "isolationism," the view that no conditions outside the experience of the work of art itself are required for the aesthetic appreciation of the work, and "contextualism," the view that artistic appreciation requires information about at least some of the following: the work's artistic heritage and traditions, the life of the artist, or the era in which the artist lived.¹ Hospers' own position generally is somewhere between the two; but on the relevance of the artist's biography, and specifically of the artist's intentions *vis a vis* a work, to the appreciation of the work, his view is isolationist. He is dubious as well about inferences from the art work to the biography of the artist.

Aesthetic appreciation is for Hospers a positive value response one which the appreciator believes he can to some extent justify by an appeal to his understanding of aesthetically relevant considerations.² Thus Hospers' isolationism amounts to a clear rejection of one common version of contextualism:

C1: A work of art is correctly judged to be a good art work just in case it fulfills the creating artist's intentions.

In fact, he considers another common contextualist thesis to be false as well:

C2: A work of art is correctly understood just in case it is understood as the artist intends it to be understood.

As Hospers' presentation shows, C2 is very naturally adduced to justify C1: We have to understand what the artist meant to achieve in a

work, understand the work on its own terms, in order to judge fairly whether it is an artistic success.

I shall not be concerned directly with Hospers' rejection of C1 and C2. C1 is false, as Virgil's instructions to burn the *Aeneid* and the case of the author who "intended to write trash"³ show; and C2 is seriously challenged, as Hospers claims, by cases of authors who seem not to know what their works express.⁴ I shall be concerned instead with some of Hospers' arguments against contextualism, ones which bear on the evidential relationship between the work of art and the artist's intentions:

We know nothing at all about the lives of most artists in antiquity; does this inhibit appreciation of their work (granted that we know something about the period)? We admire today the grace and expressiveness of figures drawn on cave walls by prehistoric men more than fifty thousand years ago; we know nothing about the artists....Are we any the worse off for this biographical ignorance?⁵

Yet of the vast majority of works of art that we possess, created from ancient times to the present, we have no record of what the artist's intentions were; we have only the work of art. We tend to conclude that he intended to do just what he did do, that every brush stroke was intentional, inasmuch as he put it there, that nothing went wrong, and that the work of art fulfilled his intentions entirely; if in some cases that is not true, we have no present way of knowing it. We judge by the product we see before us.⁶

These arguments are parallel to a point. C1 and C2 are wrong because they would instruct us to understand or evaluate art works which we obviously are able to understand and evaluate on the basis of something for which the work itself is our only evidence. In such a situation, continues the second argument, we escape a very implausible agnosticism by tacitly substituting a description of the work for a description of the artist's intention; we make judgments—which Hospers clearly considers acceptable judgments—by judging "by the product we see before us." The further conclusion is left unstated: If the proposed standard is in fact irrelevant because we can as well use the work itself instead in these cases, then we can always bypass intentions by examining the work, and information about artistic intention is never relevant to understanding and evaluating works of art. The answer Hospers intends to the rhetorical question of the first argument is, "No, we are not worse off for lacking biographical information about the artist."

There are problems with this argument strategy. For one thing, it is just as well to leave the further conclusion unstated, for the argument that if a conclusion can be reached on a certain amount or kind of evidence, then additional or other evidence is irrelevant works only if the first conclusion is every bit as sound and satisfactory as the one which the additional or different evidence would support.

Thus Hospers, for his part, is content with the general assumption that judgments of artistic intention based on the work function as satisfactorily in the context of artistic appreciation as judgments of intention which involve additional evidence as well—because he does not think that information about intentions is relevant to appreciation at all. Even if it turned out that all of Van Gogh's paintings were by someone else, he suggests, it would not affect our appreciation of them.⁷ And even if Donne in the 17th century intended a reference to "white Alp" to connote terror, we with our different attitude toward mountains, may understand the reference as connoting delight and pleasure, provided only that this reading gives rise to the "best interpretation (the interpretation that makes the passage or the work of art as a whole come off best)."⁸ But defenders of C1 and C2 are not likely to share Hospers' views; for such theorists the fact that the work itself as a source of information furnishes less evidence of intention that the work plus background knowledge makes it a less satisfactory basis for appreciation.

More importantly for our purposes, Hospers' argument depends generally on our granting that a work of art is not very determinate evidence of artistic intention; otherwise our critical turning to the work itself would not amount to tacitly abandoning intentions as a criterion. But this concession is plausible only if we are not very often faced with a case in which the work of art by itself is evidence for a creative intention which it does not fulfill, for if we are very often faced with such cases, then the cases in which we accept a work as evidence of a determinate sort for an intention which it does fulfill cease to be just obvious cases of ruling intentional evidence irrelevant.

But it is simply false in general that an action product may not be good evidence for the presence of an intention which it does not fulfill, and it is hard to see why works of art should be exceptions to this general rule. Consider the case in which mountain climbers find poor Excelsior Smith frozen solid a few feet below the peak, a look of grim determination on his frozen face, a frozen flag stretched out toward the summit; surely they are entitled to conclude that Smith intended to climb to the summit, though he apparently did not make it. Again, consider the case in which I open the kiln and find a broken pot; surely I am entitled to conclude that the maker intended to make a pot, not the left and right-hand pieces of a pot. Of course I may be wrong, just as the mountain climbers might be wrong. It might be that Smith intended to freeze solid a few feet below the summit, making himself a monument to human frailty, just as a potter maddened by his sense of the futile passion of human existence might have put a pot with a known weakness into the kiln, there to break asunder before the onslaught of the fire. The point remains that we can and often do infer unfulfilled intentions from failures and that we are perfectly justified in doing so because the unfulfilled intention we posit is a very good explanation for the data we have.

Cars parked crookedly, ketchup on the cafeteria floor, and most student papers are obvious failures which are the only evidence we have—though not perhaps the only evidence we could get—for the intentions they do not fulfill.

Do similar situations arise in our judgments of art works? Indeed they do. Art works which have suffered the ravages of time surely give evidence of intentions they no longer fulfill. Or suppose that I see without prior knowledge of the director or the production a performance of "Miss Julie" in which the heroine is played by three different actresses. Which actress speaks Miss Julie's lines depends on what state of what passes for her mind the heroine is in. Suppose further that the performance is a resounding flop, that the three-for-one arrangement is belabored and annoying and detracts from the dramatic tension of the plot. I can conclude—and my evidence is the failure before me—that what was intended was a presentation of the main character in which the disharmony of the heroine's personality was to be emphasized by the different actresses, and its instability was to be expressed by the jerky shifts from actress to actress contraposed against the continuity of the plot and the dialogue. This seems to be a perfectly good example of inferring the director's unfulfilled intention from an artistic failure. The art world is full of this sort of thing. The chorus in *Elektra* wear concentration camp rags; the intent is clearly to emphasize the universality of primal inhumanity, and the result is belabored and affected. Two characters caught in a squalid tangle of events converse in front of a lighted stained glass window as strains of organ music drift from the background; the intent is to connect their troubles with a deeper, cosmic order; but the result is unconvincingly saccharine. In such cases the work itself is evidence of intention unfulfilled.

Just as often, perhaps, we take the result of an action, say a four-way stop sign on the corner, as evidence of agent intention fulfilled, in this case of the intention to put that stop sign there. Similarly, we often take art works as evidence of intention fulfilled. The scenes of Dante's *Purgatorio* are turgid and resist the reader's progress toward the *Paradiso* palpably in a way which it seems Dante must have intended; in such a case we do conclude, as Hospers says, that the artist intended to do just what he did do. But since we need not draw a conclusion of intention fulfilled in every case in which we judge by internal evidence alone, such a conclusion, in the case in which we do draw it, has considerably more determinacy and warrant than Hospers supposes.

What differentiates the work which gives evidence of intention fulfilled from the work which wears failure on its face? We suppose that the fourth of a series of four-way stop signs on a corner corresponds to someone's intentions because, given the kind of thing it is and its situation in a whole context, such a sign is so very unlikely to have been put there inadvertently or to be part of some greater,

unfulfilled plan. Similarly, we suppose that the *Purgatorio*, given the match between its effect and the spiritual status of its characters and the whole context of a Neoplatonic literary work having to do with the parallel between personal and cosmic salvation, is also very unlikely to have come to have the effect it does by accident or by virtue of its relation to some other secret and horribly unfulfilled nexus of intention. Of course, one could be wrong in either case. The sign could be the work of a madwoman whose great goal is to see a red sign on every corner of the world. And it is rather more common to be wrong about Neoplatonic literary works than about stop signs, since the nexus between intention and result is less invariant in such cases; there are probably more different images of the secret shape of ineffable truth than there are grand designs for the disposition of stop signs. Still, in every case the kind of thing, the characteristic nexus between intention and result for this kind of thing and the context the thing is in which determine to a great extent whether the product or work is properly taken to bespeak intention fulfilled or failure.

Obviously, such conclusions are reached from the work as internal evidence *and* context, which serves as external evidence of a sort. But the usual cases cited by the isolationist, for example Shakespeare and Vermeer and the author of *Beowulf*, are cases in which we have extensive background knowledge of this kind. Hospers' concession, "granted that we know something about the period," allows what usually amounts to a rich context of knowledge—available techniques, ordinary iconography, movements and their characteristic objectives and obsessions, etc. Thus the standard proposed by C1 and C2—if we wanted to use it—is usually available; either there is idiobiographic knowledge, or the work in context is pretty conclusive evidence of artistic intention, even in the absence of such knowledge.

Again in his discussion of inferences from the art work to truths about the artist, Hospers disparages inferences from the art work as "internal evidence alone to the beliefs, attitudes, emotions or motivations of the author."⁹ He gives a number of unacceptable inferences: the conclusion that Shakespeare was sensitive to race relations from the mixed marriage in *Othello*; inferences about Fielding's views on life from the humorous essays in *Tom Jones* or Tolstoy's views on history from *War and Peace*; the conclusion that the composer of joyful musical compositions was himself joyful; concluding that Harriet Beecher Stowe was an opponent of slavery from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And:

Consider again prehistoric drawings on cave walls 30,000 years old. We know nothing about the artists or their mental states, and we shall never come across their autobiographies....What can we infer about the artists just *from* examining the drawings? Can you think of any one inference you could make with safety?¹⁰

Suppose that we have no external evidence at all about the creator of a given work. What can we infer, just from the sculpture or painting or musical composition alone?...We cannot even infer with certainty that he "believed in" what he was doing. Evidence of an artist's thoughts or feelings must, in general, be obtained from external evidence.¹¹

It is therefore surprising when Hospers goes on to say that we *can*, on the other hand, infer from works of art an artist's "sense of life", "a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, sub-consciously integrated appraisal of man and existence."¹² We are here faced with an obvious puzzle: If we cannot infer from the work of an artist such comparatively simple kinds of things as attitudes about race and temperament, then how can we draw conclusions of a depth and clarity we associate at best with our knowledge of our closest friends?

I think that we have to assume again that Hospers is supposing normal contextual knowledge and excluding only idiobiographical knowledge about the artist. He has given us *Othello*, after all, and has not asked us to suppose that we have found the text of *Othello* inscribed on a moon rock. But then the answer to the puzzle seems fairly obvious. First, we can in fact make many inferences of the kind Hospers disparages, though not infallibly; and second, inferences about the artist's sense of life, if by them we objectively attribute some psychic state disposition or property to the artist, are no more—though no less—secure than the rest.

There is probably no single simple connection between biography and work which holds for all artists. Yet it seems that Schopenhauer must have hit upon a general truth when he stressed the relationship between "genius," i.e., artistic talent, and imagination:

Imagination has rightly been recognised as an essential element of genius; it has sometimes been regarded as identical with it; but this is a mistake. As the objects of genius are the eternal Ideas, the permanent essential forms of the world and all its phenomena, and as the knowledge of the Idea is necessarily knowledge through perception, is not abstract, the knowledge of the genius would be limited to the Ideas of the objects actually present to his person, and dependent upon the chain of circumstances that brought these objects to him, if his imagination did not extend his horizon far beyond the limits of his actual personal existence, and thus enable him to construct the whole out of the little that comes into his own actual apperception....Therefore extraordinary strength of imagination accompanies, and is indeed a necessary condition of genius. But converse does not hold, for strength of imagination does not indicate genius; on the contrary, men who have no touch of genius may have much imagination.¹³

If imagination plays so vital a role in the production of art works, then the proper question to ask about Tolstoy is not, "What sort

of view of history could in the realm of logical possibility have given rise to the words of *War and Peace*?" but rather, "What sort of view of history in a 19th century Russian author is likely to have given rise to this universal vision of life, death, war and peace?" One's answer to such a question could, of course be wrong; for that matter, after reading the epilogue, Tolstoy's essays and other novels, and the reports of his family, one could *still* be wrong about his actual views about history at the point in his life when he wrote *War and Peace*. But it is not very likely that one *is* wrong about Tolstoy's views when writing *War and Peace*—or about Fielding's view of man or Shakespeare's standard Elizabethan racism.¹⁴ The same link between life and art *via* imagination obviously invalidates the inference from joyful compositions to the supposition that a composer was joyful; even supposing that it is possible to establish the affective tone of a musical composition so determinately, unhappy people are as likely to envision or imagine joy as happy ones.

Similarly, if to infer a "sense of life" is to infer from the characteristic shape of an artist's visions the general character of his orientation to reality, such inferences are generally as reliable as inferences of the sort discussed above and in the same kind of cases. It is difficult, as Hospers says, to see how this sort of claim can be based on musical works. The same is true of abstract painting, and for that matter, of architecture, unless they are supplied with a fairly elaborate iconography, as Rothko's paintings, Picasso's *Guernica*, and Bauhaus architecture are. Certainly in any case, the artist's complete works support a more determinate judgment of this sort than a work in isolation; and works over a period of time are more telling than the works of a single period of productivity, since they support judgments about the evolution of attitudes.

What, finally, about Hospers' cave-painters? Here we encounter, an almost complete lack of biographical context, not just a deficiency with respect to idiobiographic knowledge. No one doubts, I think, that we can, as Hospers says, "admire today the grace and expressiveness of figures drawn on cave walls."¹⁵ And it is not quite fair to counter this claim by pointing out that we can admire the expressiveness and grace of driftwood and mountain ranges too, for in the presence of these drawings we do find ourselves involved in what Bell called "the metaphysical hypothesis":

It seems to me possible, though by no means certain, that created form moves us so profoundly because it expresses the emotion of its creator....If this be so, it will explain that curious but undeniable fact, to which I have already referred, that what I call material beauty, (*e.g.*, the wing of a butterfly) does not move most of us in at all the same way as a work of art moves us. It is beautiful form, but not significant form.¹⁶

But in the case of our cave painters, the hypothesis is extremely tenuous. We have no evidence that these cave paintings are art, even as conceived by ancient civilizations—though surely we are applying the canons of artistic practice in those civilizations as we know them when we adopt an attitude of relative indifference to the cave-painters' individual biographies. Consequently, in these cases—and indeed, even in the case of medieval altarpieces, where our information context is much better—the critic often must content herself with the judgment that the work is a “superb example” of whatever it is. Such a judgment is at least substantially art historical: This object has a large proportion of the characteristics which we associate with objects of this kind and which we value, largely because they correspond to the characteristics which we consider valuable in other art works. Thus the critical fate of the work of the cave painter counts for, rather than against, C1 and C2.

The case of the cave painter does show, as Hospers claims, that from the work alone we can conclude almost nothing about the intentions or biography of its creator. This is perhaps more true of art works than of other artifacts, since the aesthetic context as we in the post-Renaissance world know it is one which prescind for the most part from the assumable generalities of the day to day context of means and ends. But the nearly complete absence of successful inferences in this case shows very little about inferences in the much fuller context of information which we normally can assume. In such contexts, art products, like other action products, can give a fairly determinate basis for inferences about their creators' intentions and idiobiographical characteristics, if such information is wanted. Arguments against contextualism have therefore got to find some other point from which to start.

1. John Hospers, *Understanding the Arts* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), pp. 81-82.

2. I here condense a long and intricate discussion. A crucial passage runs: “...unlike the other two [“understand,” “enjoy”] “appreciate is a *value* term: when you use it, you presuppose that there is something there that is worthy of appreciation. ...In moral contexts the use of the term presupposes that you have done something worth appreciating; and in artistic contexts it presupposes that the work of art contains something worth appreciating,” *ibid.*, p. 79. Thus the appreciator has got to believe that the work is worthy of appreciation, minimally that the work is in itself worth dealing with aesthetically; Hospers does not, I think, mean to require that work *be* objectively worth appreciating for someone legitimately to claim to appreciate it. (Claims that someone else appreciates a work which one does not oneself believe worthy of appreciation will present the usual problems and call for the usual circumlocutions, e.g., “Sam *extends appreciation to/ finds something to appreciate in* this [unworthy] work.) Whether appreciation for Hospers requires understanding and enjoyment is a more difficult question. The best answer is perhaps that Hospers does require *aesthetic* understanding of a work and *aesthetic* enjoyment for aesthetic appreciation, but enjoyment and understanding in the aesthetic context, if not *sui generis*, are under severe contextual restrictions and have unusual characteristics. The exact relationship

between fact, affect and value in aesthetic contexts is an issue with a long history of debate. Similarly, whether aesthetic appreciation or its elements *are sui generis* is one of the central questions of aesthetics. These are issues on which Hospers ultimately does not take sides. Cf. *ibid.*, ch. 8, "The Aesthetic Attitude and Aesthetic Experience"; ch. 9, "Aesthetic Qualities, Beauty, and Aesthetic Value."

3. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 90. In fact, I think a thesis related to C2 is true, but as stated, C2 leaves unspecified what is to count as an artist's "intending a work to mean something." The artist's say so? The artist's conscious intent? May an artist intend to leave aspects of his work open to the spectator's interpretations? Etc., etc.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

13. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 36. Transl. R.B. Haldane, and J.B. Kemp. Reprinted in *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics from Plato to Wittgenstein*, ed. F. Tillman and S. Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 257.

14. For a discussion of the implications of Shakespeare's treatment of Blacks, cf. Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southern* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, forthcoming).

15. Hospers, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

16. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, Ltd., 1928). Reprinted in M. Rader, *A Modern Book of Esthetics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), fifth ed., p. 295.