

“THE AFFECTIVE FALLACY” AND AFFECTIVE VALUATION: EXPLORING A NEW APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM

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Abstract

The outright rejection of the presence of the author in the aesthetic experience begs the question of the psychological effects of the reader and whether it has any relationship with the author's 'human' presence in the text. The aesthetic experience of artworks like drama would be incomplete without the process of identification and this bond is beyond the linguistic utterances present in the text. Instances of enigmatic experiences from art cannot be fully credited to the individual reader's comprehension of the text nor any magic employed in the language. The paper argues the presence of a psychological unity that forms between the author, the text and the reader which transcends linguistic and formal aspects. The author's intention, her emotional states or biographical details do not necessarily contribute to the interpretation but formulating a brand of literary criticism that denies the affective factors that influence both the reader's and the author's emotive architecture casts off that mysterious force which attracts us to the experience of the art.

Keywords: Identification, Alienation, Psychological Unity, Trotsky, Levinas

... And no matter how wise the Formalists try to be, their whole conception is simply based upon the fact that they ignore the psychological unity of the social man, who creates and who consumes what has been created. (Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* 111)

Leon Trotsky's vehement criticism of the Formalist method can be seen as an unapologetic disapproval against the excessive fixation on the 'formal' aspects of a literary work; particularly the linguistic form which became central to literary theory ever since Ferdinand de Saussure's formulation of the sign. The author's intention and emotional states are indeed immaterial in the realm of hermeneutics and the producer of the text is more or less dead when the reader forms a relationship to the text and consequently a meaning from the experience of the text. But to call the affective valuation of art a complete fallacy, as William K. Wimsatt and Munroe C. Beardsley did, is highly questionable. Although Roland Barthes' argument to disregard the author as an omniscient God, as the originator of meaning in a work, is valid and reasonable, the complete rejection of affective valuation of art is challenged through this paper. Literary criticism is incomplete without incorporating the psychological unity of the author, the text, and the reader, which stems from the identification process which occurs in every instance of an event where a reader forms a relation with the text. Only such an approach can explain the mysteries behind the aesthetic pleasure to which human nature is innately attracted to.

The process of artistic consumption is undeveloped while keeping emotions at bay. One of the artists who was inspired by Shlovksy's idea of 'estrangement' and the Formalist method is Bertolt Brecht. His development of the alienation effect is of great interest to this topic. Brecht wanted a powerful artistic experience from his audience while emotionally alienating them. He detested the idea of empathy in a work of art. His rejection of Aristotelean conventions of drama is not limited to the formal aspects of representation, but it is a very denial of the emotional involvement of the spectator in experiencing art. Brecht, being a Marxist, was more interested in the message of his plays which he wanted his audience to grasp by the use of their intellect and any emotional captivation would be a distraction. He famously rejected the notion of 'Catharsis' coined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*.

The reason to excavate classical aesthetics and its famous rejection in Brecht's alienation effect is to highlight a very pertinent observation: that the 'Verfremdungseffekt' never, in fact, worked on his audience as noted by numerous Brechtian scholars and Brecht himself. The most celebrated work of Brecht is *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The play was a direct response to Hitler's invasion of Poland. Because of his leftist leanings, Brecht had to flee Nazi Germany and seek refuge in Switzerland where the play was premiered in 1941. In such a state, he could not fully realize and produce his plays the way he wanted because of the political situation and his identity of being a refugee. *Mother Courage* is regarded as one

of the best plays written in the last century and probably the greatest anti-war play was ever written. But its greatness does not reflect the success of Brecht's Epic theatre.

In the productions of this particular play, several features that refute classical theatrical conventions were employed. Each scene was preceded by a summary of the events to follow so that the spectators know in advance what is going to happen so that they can focus on the message of the play rather than being swept away by their emotional faculties. Different parts of the play which are capable of evoking emotional responses were taken off the stage like the execution of one of the children of *Mother Courage*. The story is not held together by a traditional, linear narrative structure with a beginning, middle and an end, but consists of a series of contrasting episodes separated in time and space. Brecht wanted to emphasise the role of capitalism in the sufferings of his working-class protagonist and to highlight that her fall is not a result of an individual error. Placards were used to avoid surprises and to bring home the effect of alienation, the viewers are constantly reminded that the drama is not real life and the characters are fictional. They are not to be fooled by the spectacle nature of the play instead, Brecht urged them to concentrate on the essential condemnation of war that the play foregrounds.

What is relevant from the production of *Mother Courage* is the response of the audience to the play. Most audiences, from different parts of the world, ended up feeling a great degree of sympathy for the central character. The theatregoers cried and were shocked at the horrific experiences in the dismaying journey of the protagonist. Even the disillusioned, war-weary audience were not devoid of emotions. After the Switzerland production, Brecht continued to rewrite the play, now with more freedom and not in hiding, and he rewrote the character of *Mother Courage* to make her less sympathetic because he was irritated at the reviews he got from the critics about how emotionally charged the play is, missing the mark on the foundational goal that Brecht wanted to achieve with his Epic theatre. In 1949, when Brecht had the complete control over the production after the Second World War, Brecht's own wife Helene Weigel played the title role and his estrangement effect fell short.

This failure in effectively producing theatre of alienation did not affect the popularity of Brecht as a critic and writer. The success of the play *Mother Courage* can be attributed to the fact that how emotionally involving the plot is and how powerfully it engaged the 'empathy' of the spectators, something that Brecht tried so hard to dismiss. Professor of Philosophy at Kansas State University Angela Curran observes this idea:

Brecht's criticisms of empathy questions whether Aristotle's use of empathy with characters can be an effective way of encouraging reflection on the social causes of human misfortune. His primary concern is that the use of empathy locks the viewer into the perspective of the character and does not enable her or him to consider the action from a wider social perspective.

Brecht's ownworks show that engaging with characters can be useful for reflecting on the social causes of suffering. (Curran, "Brecht's Criticisms of Aristotle's Aesthetics of Tragedy" 181)

It will be erroneous, however, to idealize all of the Aristotelean theatrical conventions as timeless and relevant as such even in the twenty-first century. Brecht's criticism of *Poetics* does hold water since art today cannot be reduced to strict rules and patterns. Art can be more than "imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 5). The author can 'play' with the language of the text and it does not necessarily be "embellished" with "artistic ornament" (5). But the factors of empathy, the active involvement of human cognition and the catharsis of emotions are indispensable to the completion of the aesthetic experience.

Brecht's intentions were noble and some of his contributions to the theatre are invaluable. Although Brecht's theatre did not survive in the post-war era, several art forms and subsequent theatrical innovations took inspiration from the Epic theatre; the absurd theatre for example. In works like *Waiting for Godot*, though devoid of traditional narrative conventions and structure, they do lead to a cleansing of feelings and worries of the modern mind. The works embracing the absurdity of modern human condition relinquishes some of the existential angst of the reader, even if they are not strictly evoking pity and fear that Aristotle argued for.

According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the word 'catharsis' has its roots in the Greek word 'Katharos' meaning "pure" or "clean" and the stem 'Kathairein' means "to purify". Apart from the usage of the word with its medical implication of cleansing, this paper views catharsis as a purgation of emotions but they are not limited to pity and fear. Human beings require an emotional equilibrium, an organic balance gained by experiencing life actively. In the modern world where one is increasingly alienated and fraught with existential torment, art becomes all the more important to excite the reader, agitate them and their feelings and then these emotions are released. This gives pleasure, a glimpse of an active existence coupled with a heightened sense of consciousness, and the audience leaves the theatre purified, with an enhanced perception of the human condition. But the idea of catharsis is not limited to a single interpretation as noted by scholars like Christopher Shields.

He finds instead that catharsis is more of an umbrella term, which includes a wide range of possibilities; its target could be the spectators, or actors, or the plot elements; its essence could be either purification or purgation; and finally its matter could be the emotions, or the intellect, or both of them at the same time. (Elsalam, "Psychodrama and Sociodrama: Aristotelians Catharsis Revisited" 48)

Catharsis should be understood not merely from *Poetics* but from Aristotle's other works as well. Because the term appears just once in *Poetics* in the famous definition of tragedy. It is argued by the scholars that there was a second volume to *Poetics* dedicated to comedy where Aristotle was supposed to explain his concept of Catharsis in detail but such a document does not exist today. In fact, Aristotle himself mentions this greater scope of catharsis in *Poetics* when he says that the audience is to derive delight from "understanding and reasoning" (qtd in Elsalam 23), This is the part that the Brecht missed out on. Generation of pity and fear indicates identification. This is central to tragedy. Once the audience identifies themselves with the plot or the characters, it is almost impossible to alienate the spectators completely. The event of approaching a work of art on an emotional level does not fully suspend the intellect of the reader.

This invitational nature of art to involve the audience emotionally and assessing such response to analysing a work of art cannot be reasonably called a fallacy. When the affective is taken as the sole measure, it can be fallacious. Wimsatt and Beardsley thought that such an analysis would be an "obstacle to objective criticism" ("The Affective Fallacy" 31). "The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear" (31).

The example of Brecht detailed above shows that it is not possible to alienate the audience emotionally from a powerful, heart-wrenching play like *Mother Courage*. The same applies to criticism as well. To imagine an ideal critic or reader devoid of any empathy or personal identification with the work of art is to imagine the prospect of Utopian objectivism. The very idea of aesthetic pleasure appeals to our emotions. That is why we are in a state of awe after the consumption of a great work of art. Initially, the work might have invited us to engage in emotions like joy, sadness, fear, shock but they are released pleasurably towards the end. Such a work of art, which can move us, is indeed powerful. But one instance where Wimsatt and Beardsley take a successful jibe at the reader response criticism is when they argue, "But an important distinction can be made between those who have fully investigated what poetry does to others and those who have testified what it does to themselves" (41). Each individual reader's experience is unique and one cannot take such a distinct set of opinions as a measure to analyze an artwork. The essay attacks the affective theories of Plato, Aristotle and Tolstoy blatantly.

The author has a substantial role in creating a platform for aesthetic delight. The ability to create optimal conditions for a text to be pleasurable is worth appreciating. Barthes refutes this concept of a work associated with an author. In the "Death of the Author", he argues that it is the language that functions, not the author's intention or plan. The language, which already exists in the environment, allows a space for infinite meanings. There is no one particular intended meaning designed by the author. The author does not speak in the text. The birth of the reader marks the death of the author. Barthes rejects the presence of a signified or a singular meaning that Saussure laid out with the idea of the sign; a signifier having a signified. But the writer is not merely a borrower of language. Barthes' argument

that no text is original and it is the reader who paves the way for an explosion or dissemination of meaning. This can be challenged. The author completes an interesting function as he completes the text. The language used is a result of a series of choices by the author; a special arrangement which can manifest the creative ability of the writer. Shakespeare, for his famous plays, borrowed the story from chroniclers and some of the stories were very well known even to the audience. But far more than the story, the plot (Sjuzet as the Formalists call it) makes the defamiliarization and thereby his art unique. No two authors can manipulate the language the same way and the influence of the author upon the text will reflect and impact the explosion of meaning at the hands of the reader. In a way, it is a controlled explosion of meaning. Hence, the reasonable ethical argument of the need for the author to take responsibility for the text he/she produced and the numerous impacts it can have on the society.

Barthes' essay does hold water when he argues that the presence of a God-like author is unhealthy under a capitalist setup. It is a kind of taming the work and it can limit the potential of art to defy the confinement of the structure and to rise above its overpowering presence. Ideally, at least in theory, the text should be a liberating entity of its own and it should not be reduced to something like a consumer product. But where Barthes misses out is that the text is not only woven by language but it is also bound by it. Art and the experience of it are more than semantics and linguistics; it cannot be reduced to syntax and etymology. The influence of deconstruction on Barthes is evident from his other works. But what a work of art achieves is above the realm of something as limited and confusing as language. The dominion of abstract emotions and its effects cannot be contained by language and some things are better experienced than explained through language, which is precisely what art achieves. This is proved by Jacob Levi Moreno, the father of psychodrama and sociodrama.

Moreno formed a brand of psychiatry which uses drama for therapeutic ends. "He proposed that the therapist would turn into a director, who would ask the patient to act out his/her problem in front of a small group of people. The group activity evoking a common response and a similar experience is noteworthy and relevant here. If the affective theory deserves some sort of attention, one has to have confidence in the idea of species-being, human beings are connected at the level of being part of the same species. So, at the meeting of anyone other than the self, a fictional character, for instance, is also an escape from the 'I'. Levinas takes great interest in the encounter with the Other. Taking inspiration from his *Totality and Infinity*, art can be seen as a space of anti-structure. The modern utilitarian approach to life, measuring things and people in terms of benefit, is destroyed in the space of art. A fictional character does not have any direct influence on the existence of the 'I' in the real world. So, the reader approaches the text and the characters in it in a different way than one would normally approach a real person in a structured society. For Levinas, the Face of the Other becomes important in the encounter. In a drama, the reader identifies with the

character which in turn leads to the formation of an emotional connection. One cannot know the Other completely, Levinas argues, but this encounter opens up an access to the spiritual world by a glimpse to what he calls Infinity (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Such a relation gives us a phenomenological description of Being. The relation of a reader to the text can be vaguely called spiritual and humane, something that language of the text cannot explain which Barthes contests fervently, and passionately too.

In a work of art, there is no actual physical, direct contact which Levinas insists upon. Additionally, an artwork does not necessarily guarantee the possibility to grasp an idea of the Infinity. But the very ability to form a relation to the text by a reader is because it is a human who produced the text. A machine cannot produce a work of art. If a machine produces a text to which a reader can relate to, then the credit of the text would go to the programmer who designed and coded the machine. The human consciousness is at work at the production of a text. The human element in the text is inherent in it and to understand it is beyond the capacity of linguistics. So, to form a relativist approach which denies the presence of a human, very much breathing at the process of creating it, is to deny that mysterious element of art which attracts us. This defence echoes the words of Trotsky when he addresses the relation between the author, the text and the reader; “a crystallized psychology representing a certain unity” (Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* 111).

A pragmatic attitude which merits the affective valuation is not only found in classical aesthetics but in recent approaches as well:

Jesse Prinz appears committed to the view that aesthetic experience essentially involves valuing. Prinz regards this valuing as a species of affective appreciation. He does not regard this process as cognitive. For him, the appreciation is affective or no cognitive. Specifically, it is an emotional state. ... [He argues that] when aesthetically appreciating an artwork positively, we marvel at it; we find it wondrous. (Carroll, “Recent Approaches to Aesthetic Experience” 168)

The idea of a positive experience complicates the instances of having a negative experience to work of art and even more intricate is the case of having an indifferent experience with an artwork. This is one of the reasons why the relativist theory is prominent today. The formation of a relation by the reader to the text depends on a whole lot of influencing factors, which cannot be reduced to the affective elements or the formal aspects of the text. But one of the fundamental reasons to acknowledge the presence of the author, other than the spiritual connection detailed above, is the case of artistic merit. A text is not merely a manipulation or use of language which is already present but a foregrounding of what the author believes is salient. The author is not only choosing but inventing situations and highlighting which features of those events are worthy of being represented. This is

accompanied by the method of presentation or the form of defamiliarization, all of which constitutes the author's artistic creativity. The ability to write a brilliant work and to replicate that novel experience consistently on a different work takes artistic talent, something that everyone with access to language cannot achieve.

But when a work is associated with the author, as Barthes argues, it is not only a matter of limitation of meanings but it can be appropriated and reduced to the social order and hierarchy. For example, the idea of The Cockney School of poets, a term designated by the nineteenth century English critics, to poets and writers of a 'lower' birth and education whose works were severely shot down as they produced their work. They were mercilessly attacked for aspiring to be a part of the highest level of Oxbridge educated writers like Shelly and Wordsworth. The primary target and the most famous one today in the so-called Cockney School was John Keats, who was a medical practitioner by profession and never did he attend an elite college to study humanities. His poems were shot down and the association of his poems with his class background led to the attacks and eventual demise of the author due to bad health and melancholia. A young author like him should have been given encouragement and maybe if his work was anonymous with a possibility that an elite author could have written those, his odes would have been considered positively in his lifetime itself as it is considered now - the best odes in the English language. Keats was not the only victim of such unjust practices in the literary circle. This elitism is something which prevails even today.

The affective valuation that this paper defends is not a return to the author's personal intention and emotional states. Nor is it an understanding of the individual reader's emotional response to a work. And it is certainly not a rejection of understanding literature based on the textual content. The limitation of reader response theory alone for criticism is put forward eloquently by Cleanth Brooks:

However]to put meaning and valuation of a literary work at the mercy of any and every individual [reader] would reduce the study of literature to reader psychology and to the history of taste. (Brooks, "The New Criticism 598)

What makes something art is the aesthetic enjoyment that rises from the author's talent to bracket an experience. The process of the author producing the text and the reader consuming it is predominantly psychological. A belief that this psychological experience stems from the text alone would be the real fallacy. The incomprehensible force that binds the reader to the text is affective; it is an emotional state. It does not matter if the author's intention is conveyed to the reader or not but the dissemination of meaning is limited to the text in which resides a part of the author's consciousness. It is this non-linguistic presence that facilitates the possibility of forming a relation between the reader and the text. The very event of aesthetic enjoyment cannot be possible if there is no establishment of a connection at the affective level. There is no art without the artist, not just at the production level but in the phase of consumption as well. The way a text appeals to the reader psychologically should be

indeed a part of literary criticism for it is impossible to emotionally alienate two human beings after a strong sense of identification which is made possible through art. The formal and textual elements are vital in criticism as well, but these factors alone donot represent the experience of art as a whole.

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