CHAPTER ONE

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The starting point of any theory of aesthetics is the recognition of a distinct aesthetic state which is of a different kind of mental and emotional activity present in what is called aesthetic experience. The exact nature of this distinction depends largely on the type of theory developed, but generally among other distinguishing characteristics it is marked by most aestheticians by a non-practical and non-cognitive aim described in such terms as "away from life", "disinterested", "impersonal", "detached" and so on. These negative attitudes do succeed in drawing attention to the basic problem, namely, the existence of a separate aesthetic mode, but they generally fail to take into account its distinctive nature.

The question is: is aesthetic mode actually and fundamentally a kind of experience which is different from others, and if so, what is it that characterizes this difference? Evidently it will not do to take refuge behind such blanket terms as Clive Bells' unique "aesthetic emotion",¹ and explain all aesthetic experiences in terms of it, nor to assign it as Kant does, to a

¹Clive Bell, Art, Chatto and Windus, 1914, p. 28.
special faculty of mind which is distinct from the practical sphere of the will, and from the intellectual sphere of the understanding, and is concerned only with the sphere of feeling. If a case must be made out for the existence of a separate aesthetic state, as indeed it must be, if aesthetics is to claim a value of its own, the exact nature of this state must positively be specified, whereby the distinction becomes substantially real and does not remain one of terminology alone.

The whole problem dissolves into whether a different set of terms such as "aesthetic emotion" or "disinterested pleasure" is in fact being applied to an experience which is substantially similar to other experiences, but which is different only in degree or in the connections between their constituents, or whether the nature of the aesthetic as against the practical and the cognitive, demands a mode of thinking, willing, and feeling, qualitatively and intrinsically different from the other states.

According to the Indian theory referred to in the introductory pages, aesthetics is not only confined to that limited branch of study which deals with the appreciation and creation of art works and the problems

arising therefrom, but is the delineation of an entire realm of enquiry within which all ordinary experiences, including those which arise from pure art activity, become aesthetic, the aesthetic state being not a specific mental faculty, emotion or attitude, but a composite state of consciousness wherein perception, feeling, and understanding gain new dimensions. In Indian thought, the aesthetic mode is an experience of the whole man and not of a part of him. Taken in this very wide sense, a mathematician can in the course of his study gain the aesthetic perspective, as also the moralist or the craftsman. The peculiarity of the aesthetic state is not consequently in terms of that which isolates it from other experiences but that which elevates it to a different level. The experience of beauty does not concern the feeling of pleasure alone, no matter how impersonal, disinterested or detached this might be, but that which, with the realisation of truth and goodness, belongs to the intuitive consciousness, a state of being which is unified, homogeneous, (ekaghana) marked by a total absence of discursive and relational elements and is thus not available to the rational mode of thinking or knowing. 3

3 Ekaghana literally means 'closely dense', 'compact', 'that which is uniform and without obstacles'. 
The aesthetic consciousness comes thus about through a complete identity of the knowing subject with the aesthetic object, giving rise thereby to a pure experience of this, here and now, filtered of all extraneous influences and ingredients. Works of art due to their emphasis on the creation of vital and essential form, are a direct means to this experience. They are, however, only one of the many ways by which it can be attained. The aesthetic state contains the experience provided by works of art, but art is not the only means of evoking it.

The above view forms the basis of medieval Indian aesthetic thought and is best understood in the background of its overall metaphysics, particularly that of the Saiva philosophy.⁴

⁴Saivism is one of the important religious systems in India, being proto-historic in origin. In its Kashmiri version it flourished around the tenth and eleventh century A.D. There are two systems of the Śaiva doctrine, the Śaiva Siddhānta and the Saivism of Kashmir. It is to the latter, of which Abhinavagupta was one of the well-known exponents, that we are referring. The central theme of this system as given in the Pratyabhijñā, one of its main texts, is that Śiva, the only reality of the universe, is infinite consciousness. He is the subject as well as the object, the experiencer as well as the experienced (spandakārīka). "As the consciousness on which all this resultant world is established, whence it issues, is free in its nature, it cannot be restricted any where. As it moves in the differentiated states of waking, sleeping, etc., identifying itself with them, it never falls from its true nature as the know[er]" (S. Radhakrishnanan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 732).
In Western idealistic thought, reason is the sole instrument of truth, and experience as a form of knowledge is valid only for the empirical order. The shortcomings of reason, as a means of uniting the individual with reality, were felt by Kant who clearly showed its limitations to penetrate the essence of Being. Noumena, unapproachable and remote, was according to him, for ever inaccessible to the knowledge and experience of man.

Indian idealist thinkers however, have never disassociated abstract speculation from a concrete realization of its metaphysical structure which they translate into living reality. This position, at once metaphysical and psychological, leads them to conceive of reality as consciousness, and everything which is around us, as resting in the last analysis on the Self. The Self is known not only through the pure light of knowledge (prakāśa) but can be contacted directly in the essence of our innermost being (vimāraṣa). In other words, reality is approached not by reflective reason alone, but also through pure experience, the two being identical.

The world is created through the power (sakti) inherent in the Supreme Consciousness and all the forms manifested thereof are due to this energy. Saivism is essentially a monistic doctrine, influenced greatly by the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.

5 Ramiro Gnoli, The Aesthetic Experience according to Abhinavagupta, Roma, 1956, p. XXIII.
in the ultimate awareness, which is in the manner of a realization (jñāna) and which has, as its very essence, the beatitude of ecstasy (ānanda).  

Aesthetic experience is a modality of this unbounded consciousness, characterised by the immersion of the subject in the aesthetic object to the exclusion of everything else. It momentarily interrupts every-day experience, presenting itself as a compact, autonomous area of consciousness, unaffected by elements of phenomenal existence.

While the aesthetic experience is akin to the religious state, it being referred to in traditional texts as the twin brother of the experience of Brahman, 

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"Admission of vimarga or self-consciousness in the Absolute by the Saiva is the point of distinction between the Saiva and the Vedantic conception of Ultimate Reality. The latter holds that the Brahman is santa, i.e. without any activity... it is self-shining and not self-conscious.... The Saiva maintains that the Absolute is not only self-shining but also self-conscious.

7Ibid.

8Ibid., p. XXII.

9The following is Viśvanātha's famous definition of the aesthetic experience given in his Sahityadarpāna. It is similar to the conception of Abhinavagupta and his predecessor Bhāṭṭa Nāyaka. "Rasa is tasted by the qualified persons. It is tasted by virtue of the
there is yet a difference between the two. The subject in the aesthetic state while transmuting the occurrences and feelings of everyday life, remains ever conscious of them whereas the mystic state marks the complete disappearance of all polarity, and the contents of everyday life are transcended. The difference here is one of degree, not one of kind. Within the horizon of the aesthetic consciousness the empirical and rational order of things (samsara) is not eliminated as it would be in the religious state, but transfigured. This transfiguration effects the mysterious conversion of pain into pleasure, of sadness into delight, of mobility and inquietude into rest and the fulfilment of desires. 10

To return to the question posed earlier, "Is the aesthetic mode actually a kind of experience different from other experiences?" It seems clear from what has just been said that there is a distinct aesthetic mode, distinct in its constitution and status, not merely in its function and method. In other words, the experience of satya. It is made up of full Intelligence, Beatitude and Self-Luminosity. It is void of contact with any other knowable thing, twin brother to the testing of Brahman. It is animated by a chamatkāra of non-ordinary nature. It is tasted as if it were our very being in indivisibility." (Gnoli, op. cit., p. 54, note 3).

10Gnoli, op. cit., p. XXIV.
provided by art works is not different from other experiences only as sharing in the morning might be said to be different from working out a mathematical equation, but in a substantial way. The aesthetic experience though composed of the same material as ordinary states, breaks away in the intuitive moment from its empirical base and becomes momentarily a new and different kind of experience.

This view as developed by the Indian theorists rests on a number of assumptions which the modern philosopher may be tempted to challenge.

The first assumption is that the aesthetic state is a thing *sui generis* different from the ordinary state of mind. It might be asked: what is implied by attributing uniqueness to the aesthetic mode? Is it not a dogmatic assumption, postulated in order to give status and value to an experience different from others only in degree?

Let us examine some of the views that are frequently put forward for the existence of a distinct aesthetic experience. Richards, for instance, advances the following arguments:

(a) It may be held that there is a kind of unique mental element which enters into aesthetic experience, an element which does not enter into other

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experiences and which is the "differentia" between them. As Clive Bell maintains, there is the existence of a unique "aesthetic emotion" as the differentia. But the presence of such an inexplicable entity as he points out has no place in modern psychology. If we take empathy as being such an entity, we find that it enters into innumerable other experiences as well as the aesthetic experience.

(b) Another view which is commonly held is that the aesthetic state is qualitatively of "the same stuff" as the others but is of a special form, the special form being described in terms of impersonality, disinterestedness, distance, subjective universality etc. This form, Richards shows however, is sometimes no more than a consequence of the incidence of experience, a condition or an effect of communication. Moreover, disinterestedness and impersonality are attitudes which are shared by the scientist, and distance can also be used as a moral principle. Hence they are not unique to the aesthetic state.

The rejection of these and similar views in favour of a distinct aesthetic state however, should not lead to the conclusion that no particular province can be assigned to the aesthetic experience, it being, as Richards concludes, closely similar to other experiences,
at best a further development, a finer organisation of
them, and not in the least a new and different kind of
thing. It only suggests that the approach to the problem
is wrong and consequently these views go against the very
case they hope to support.

When the Indian theorists held that the aesthetic
experience is different in kind from others they do not
assume the existence of an ultimate aesthetic value or
any other ingredient which, added to ordinary experience,
gives it the qualitative difference. Nor do they support
their arguments by such general statements as: "Aesthetics
is a unique activity since it is pursued without an end"
or "aesthetics is intrinsic perception" or "art is
intuition". These statements may be perfectly correct
but are beside the point, since they do not further the
case for a distinct aesthetic mode.

The aesthetic state as a thing "apart" must be
shown to be opposed fundamentally to other experiences.
The almukika state of the Indian aestheticians is unique
inasmuch as it is presented as a unitive, homogenous
experience within which the subject merges his identity.
It is characterized by a state of compactness which is
felt as beatitude. Within this state of self-sufficiency
the self does not feel the need for anything other than
itself. This type of beatitude cannot be enjoyed in
practical life where things external to the subject are always desired. These break the unity of the aesthetic experience with their presence. The point of difference between the aesthetic and other states, lies in the fact that the former is an end in itself, undisrupted by any objective factors whereas in the latter the subject always presupposes an object. The distinction of subject and object which is present in all ordinary experience is obliterated in the aesthetic experience. Such an identification is not only never achieved in everyday life but is within the cognitive framework impossible. Discursive knowledge which forms the basis of our practical and logical state, is always formulated by a subject as against an object. A unified experience consequently marks a definite break with the world; it appears in the horizon like a new entity totally unlike the states of consciousness with which we are familiar.

It might be asked: in what way is such an experience different from an emotive one? Does not the diffusion of the subject and the object take place in every emotional articulation? There is a fundamental distinction between the two apparently similar states. An emotional reaction is a sensuous organic experience within which the ego predominates, while an aesthetic response is a mental and spiritual reaction, a supersensuous experience within
which the ego is transcended. It is a manner of experiencing emotion without ego even as a priori knowledge is intuitive insight gained prior to rational categories. It is in the full realisation of the self, the self taken not as a limited narrow empirical ego but as the ultimate unbounded consciousness when there is a full participation of the subject within the aesthetic object, that the magical conversion of pain into pleasure takes place.

This extraordinary power of transmuting sadness into pleasure may be called the unique element, the differentia which belongs to the aesthetic experience, which makes it a different kind of experience from others. The sudden transformation of pain into pleasure is not a miraculous phenomena but is the result of the individual consciousness finding its identity within the larger whole of the universal consciousness. This concept is fundamental to Saiva metaphysics.¹²

¹² The intimate essence of consciousness or the 'I' according to the Saiva, is beatitude. The absence of beatitude and suffering are due to a need, privation or desire for something separated from the Self. Beatitude is the absence of this desire, the resting in oneself to the exclusion of everything else. The 'I' contains all things, everything that exists arises from its unconfined liberty. It cannot be the seat of any deprivation and can desire nothing but itself. Aesthetic experience is the tasting of one's own consciousness and, therefore, of one's own essential beatitude." Gnoli, op. cit., p. 87, note 2.
Accepting then as our basic postulate, the existence of a distinct aesthetic mode, let us now try to analyze the chief characteristics of this experience and the factors which cause it to be provoked. The point is whether there is some factor or group of factors present in the object, such as a specific combination of lines and forms, sound and movement, which causes this particular kind of experience, and no other, to be provoked, or is it due to a certain mental outlook within the subject which brings it about. Clive Bell, attributed it to an objective quality within the object itself which he called "significant form".\textsuperscript{13} For Vernon Lee the psychological condition of empathy is the chief characteristic of this experience.\textsuperscript{14} Some aestheticians identify it with an intrinsic perception,\textsuperscript{15} and others hold that it is essentially a kind of outlook, which permits us to see things from their reverse side, from the side which is not usually presented. It is an experience detached from the occurrences of daily life.

\textsuperscript{13}Clive Bell, \textit{Art}, Chatto and Windus, London, 1914, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{14}Vernon Lee, \textit{The Beautiful}, Cambridge University Press, 1913, p.


\textsuperscript{16}Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle" in \textit{British Journal of Psychology}, V, 1912, 87-98.
From the Indian standpoint, the aesthetic experience cannot be characterized in terms of any one factor, such as disinterestedness, empathy or the presence of "significant form" within the object. It can be provoked by any one of these conditions or by all of them in combination. But the experience itself, as already pointed out, must be a composite unified state of consciousness, and there is no universal law, subjective or objective, whereby it can be known positively as to how and when it arises; at best one can stipulate the conditions which make it most easily available. Chief among these conditions is the cultivation of an intrinsic perception. Such a perception is the result of *dhvâna* which is nothing more than an intense concentration upon the inherent qualities of the object, given in and for itself, without relation to any situation, event or thing beyond the object. Such an intrinsic perception is not peculiar to the aesthetic experience; it may accompany certain other activities such as the moral, scientific and religious. Its chief advantage is to

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17. *Dhvâna* is a cultivated state of contemplation wherein the mind is not allowed to wander. In normal life ideas come and go and concentration is usually brief. Through *dhvâna* the mind is deeply concentrated in an even current of thought and the full nature of the object is revealed. Religious *dhvâna* culminates in *samâdhi* (see, Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 359).
prepare the mind for the reception of a pure experience, which is generally not vouchasafed to us in the normal course of activity. Such a perception, drawing the mind away from its usual concerns, prevents it from taking interest in anything other than the object, object-field or situation which confronts it, and effects a complete detachment of the mind from its habitual patterns of thought and from the intruding demand of the individual's own self-interest. An attitude of detachment must clearly be understood to be a pre-requisite for the gaining of a pure experience and cultivated in the manner of a mental discipline only. Taken as an end in itself and sought for its own sake, detachment can lead to the passive condition of indifference, a kind of world-negating attitude which is totally the opposite of the positive and affirmative aesthetic state of mind. Detachment by itself may, one can argue, lead to an isolation of the individual from society; in the field of art it may engender a devitalization, and in the area of morality a dehumanization.

Detached from all disturbing influences and intently concentrated on the aesthetic object the perceiver experiences an intense joy that has been characterized as having almost the same quality of joy that arises out of the realization (tasting) of the Absolute (Brahman). Being essentially an experiential
state (anubhāva) its description defies verbal definition, but the absolute joy which arises from an intrinsic awareness of the object is fundamentally opposed to the hedonistic concept of pleasure. Not being the result of any materialistic cause, nor due to the assertion of the objective individual ego, it is a kind of joy, wherein the adverse and passive reactions of ordinary pleasure are not suffered. It is an intensely active process resulting in a state of heightened emotion which has its effect on the bodily processes of the perceiver effecting a kind of purgation or psycho-physical healing. The term, nearest to aesthetic in Sanskrit is rasa borrowed from the ayurvedic sastras, which among its many connotations, implies a juice or bodily fluid.

The aesthetic experience, as a state of disinterested joy, is allied to the realm of intuitive knowledge (jñāna) wherein the object is perceived, known and enjoyed in its concrete particular. Intuitive knowledge is a state of pure contemplation, characterized by a total absence of conceptual thought, wherein things are not recognized classified, distinguished, and analyzed, nor are they related to desires and purposes. One ceases for a while to consider the where, the when, the why, and what for of things and identifies one's

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18- Ayurveda is the ancient Indian science of medicine.
entire being simply and solely with the what. The state of intuition is not an absence of knowledge, but a knowledge through "being" rather than through "reasoning". The subject "knows" the object, through a process of identification, by becoming none other than the object itself.\footnote{In Indian thought intuition transcends the domain of the intellect; it is a form of spiritual insight revealing those aspects of reality which defy reason. It is direct knowledge or immediate insight. The term intuition used in the context of Indian thought is quite different from its usage in modern philosophy as it implies a different and higher level of awareness, and that man has the faculty of transcending the intellectual sphere. Substantially, however, particularly in the context of aesthetics, it signifies the full illumination of the given object to the exclusion of all else.}

According to Indian thought, the whole realm of intuitive knowledge wherein the aesthetic also partakes, belongs to the highest order of human consciousness, transcending the empirical and phenomenal states of existence. Yet it is important to emphasize that it is not an esoteric state but one which is accessible, even familiar to the common man. The aesthetic experience can and does occur at various levels and in varying degrees; it is a temporary state in which most normal persons probably enter many times even if only for brief moments. Those who do not, are nonetheless potentially able to do so. It is likely that all of us may not have
felt the impact of the experience in its intensest form, a form with which only true artists are familiar, but nevertheless it is latently not beyond one's capacities to do so.

It might further be asked, whether the aesthetic experience is a positive one, and if so, what value does it have for human life? For, indeed, if it does not contribute to the growth and development of human consciousness it becomes as meaningless as an illusion, hallucination or mere play activity.

The aesthetic experience in its transcendence of ego, intellectual categories, personal pleasure, pain, doubt, hesitation and all the other mental elements which disrupt its compact self-sufficiency, is a liberating experience. It frees the human consciousness from the limitations of mental inhibitions, passive or blind passions, and consequently, as Aristotle maintained with regard to the value of tragedy, it exercises a healing effect, leaving the individual spiritually soothed and refreshed.

The value of aesthetics is not in the area of factual knowledge for it adds nothing to our storehouse of facts, nor do we gain any propositional insight or a metaphysical truth concerning reality. An aesthetic contact leaves us no more knowledgeable than before but
definitely more illumined and elevated. It adds depth and dimension to experience, consequently its value lies in the area of intrinsic awareness; its insight is indeed a perceptual insight. This is not the case with non-aesthetic states such as dreams and hallucinations, no matter how vivid and realistic they may appear to be.

In as much as the aesthetic experience expands perception and awareness adding depth and dimension to superficial experiences, and widening the horizons of the personality, its value for human beings is equal to if not more than that of scientific knowledge. But, it might be asked: can the experience be acquired and cultivated in the same way as knowledge? Yes, it can. Contrary to the common belief that it is an inspired state of mind, arising forth uncalled and at least expected moments and taking possession of its victim in a kind of divine madness, the aesthetic is a consciously cultivated state. Indeed, if it were incapable of being acquired its value would be purely negative. The cultivation of aesthetic sensibility is the cultivation of mind, will and feeling. These faculties properly trained, directed and organised permit us to enjoy actively the very same emotion which would normally oppress, and to relish it fully without suffering the distasteful reactions which generally accompany blind, undirected ego-centric feeling.
Aesthetic experience by the enrichment of sensibility brings about a greater and more highly organized state of mind and thereby helps positively in the evolution of the human consciousness. The cultivation of sensibility, aesthetic or religious, has been systematically worked out in Indian life and thought.

No doubt, an aesthetic response as such cannot be taught and no amount of instruction can help to bring it about. The aesthetic sensibility is a matter of the intuitive and not of the ratiocinative faculty. A man who is otherwise devoid of this faculty cannot be taught how to respond aesthetically to a certain situation, but he can be taught how to cultivate it. In other words while we cannot force an actual aesthetic experience upon an otherwise unresponsive subject, the special attitude which helps to engender it can be acquired. The aesthetic attitude puts us in a peculiar relationship with the world; we are on the one hand completely disassociated from the situation, on the other we are so completely identified with it that we are able to immerse ourselves within it to the exclusion of all else. This act of simultaneous disassociation (from its existential properties) and identification (with its essential nature) is not something which comes naturally or unbidden, but is the result of a disciplined
and conscious effort. The aesthetic experience is instructive only in this sense.

Accepting as our basic postulate the existence of a distinct aesthetic mode we must now apply this solution to art theory and enquire into the nature of the relationship that exists between the art process and aesthetic experience. How does a concrete work of art such as a poem or dramatic performance, for instance, give rise to the singularly subjective aesthetic delight? Is there any principle by which a work of art can be distinguished, whereby it gives rise, invariably and necessarily, to the aesthetic emotion? This is the problem which we shall now proceed to discuss.