“A Conversation on Intention in Art”

Frank J. Hoffman

International Buddhist Studies College

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

ABSTRACT

Intention, like time, is a word which we seem to know all about until we begin to inquire. And intention in art, like time as applied to things and events in general, has been a subject of historically significant philosophical controversy. For while few have denied the importance of intention in aiding our understanding of these respective domains, many have held that they play no role in evaluation. As aestheticians have often argued that, although there are morally good and bad intentions, these are not relevant to the aesthetic evaluation of works of art, in a parallel way, logicians have often regarded time as irrelevant for the evaluation of the truth or falsity of analytic propositions. But like time, intention is a very big concept, one which will not be surveyed in its entirety here. The present task is to discuss one of the most important issues in aesthetics: whether and if so in what sense the concept of intention is relevant in art (e.g., as applied to artist or applied to artwork), and, in what way (e.g., in understanding or in evaluation). The task will be further focused on the classic article by Wimsatt and Beardley.

Keywords*:* art, intention, Wimsatt, Beardsly, intentional fallacy, Coomaraswamy

Introduction: Arising of the Notion of “Intentional Fallacy"

Although for his part, Beardsley has modified his stance, his earlier statement co-authored with Wimsatt remains the locus classicus of the “intentional fallacy”, frequently cited by writers on the subject. (Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C., 1969) As seems appropriate, the exploration will begin here with a careful consideration of the provocative, earlier articulation.

The notion of an intentional fallacy arose as a reaction to romantic expressionism which requires an emphasis on the intention of the artist. According to this view the artistic genius experienced a feeling or emotion and expressed it in the work of art, and later a spectator came along and, understanding what the artist intended, got the same experience. This, at least, was the model for understanding successful art creation and appreciation on, say, Leo Tolstoy's view. On the Wimsatt-Beardsley position, however, the public nature of art as object rather the "inner meaning" in someone's mind is emphasized, like Bell's point that the meaning of a work is its "significant from" (which curiously is not significant of anything). Of course, Wimsatt and Beardsley are not formalists.

Basic Thesis of the Wimsatt-Beardsley View

The basic thesis of the Wimsatt-Beardsley position is that the "intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." (*Ibid*., 657) The authors then state what they take to be "axioms" of the position: a) that to hold that intention may be causally related to the outcome does not commit one to the view that intention is the criterion for judging the worth of the poet's performance; b) that it is unclear how we can discover what the poet tried to do; c) that a poem is judged, like a pudding or a machine, by whether it " works," and the poem may "work" independently of whether or not we know the artist's intention. Unlike in the case of the practical message where the intention must be known for communication to occur, intention is irrelevant to the poem, which " should not mean but be"; d) that the thoughts and attitudes expressed in a poem are those of the dramatic speaker and not necessarily those of the author; e) that the critic explores neither his own mind nor the intention of the author, but explores a public object, the poem. "Objective criticism of works of art" decides whether a work of art ought to have been undertaken at all, contra Coomaraswamy. (*Ibid*., 658-9)

The claims lettered a) through e) above are capsule paraphrases of (1) through (5) given by the authors in the place cited, and are offered as a convenient summary of main points rather than as logically equivalent and complete in detail. It is curious that the authors regard these as axioms, since e), for example, amounts to what needs to be proved. If e) is regarded as axiomatic, then its inclusion begs the question at issue. Since (5) is the largest section, though, it may be that the

authors intended only part of that to count as axiomatic, and the remainder to be prefatory to the section II following it.

Critical Analysis of the Basic Thesis

Of these, a) and d) are arguably true as they stand. However, b) requires further analysis, for it seems prima facie that we can sometimes discover what the poet tried to do quite directly, say, by investigating his journal – although that is not to say that we can discover what the poem means or aims to do in this way. Here, a close look at (2), from which b) is extracted, is in order: (*Ibid*., 658)

2. One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become evident in the poem. “Only one caveat must be born in mind,” says an eminent intentionalist in a moment when his theory repudiates itself: “the poet’s aim must be judged at the moment of the creative act, that is to say, by the art of the poem itself.”

The crucial sentences here are the last two. With respect to the second last sentence, there is a need to sort out an intentional thesis about understanding from an intentional thesis about evaluation. If one holds that the intention of the artist or poet is sometimes relevant for understanding the work of art, no problem is posed by the putative fact that if a poet, say, did not succeed, then one must go outside of the poem for extra-aesthetic evidence of the poet’s intention. On the other hand, if one holds that the intention of the artist or poet is sometimes relevant for evaluation of the work of art, it is clear that intention as an evaluative criterion will not work since in any case where a need to apply it arises, that is itself already prima facie evidence that the work of art is aesthetically poor. Thus, Wimsatt & Beardsley’s claim here only affects the intentional thesis about evaluation and not the one about understanding. And the caveat cited in the last sentence of (2), which holds that not the fruits but the roots of the poet’s intention is the basis for judging the poem, clearly applies only to the thesis about evaluation.

In the course of discussing (2) in an article entitled “The Scope of the Intentional Fallacy”, Emlio Roma criticizes Wimsatt & Beardsley for not making clear why it is inadequate to ask the artist to consult his journal, etc. in an effort to discover intention (Roma III, E., 1966, 50). Although it is true that they do not explain at (2) why this sort of alternative is to be excluded, strictly speaking, Roma’s objection is inapplicable since (2) is still an axiom according to the author’s method (even if an over-long one). And if it were developed at length, it would then be – not an axiom but – an argument.

There is, however, something questionable about (2), something essential to the Wimsatt & Beardsley position: the distinction between the “inside” and the “outside” of a work of literary art. A precondition for the claim that one should not go outside the poem for its evaluation is that a clear line of demarcation cannot be drawn between inside and outside. If there are some cases in which this distinction cannot be clearly made, then it is there not possible to know if we have gone outside the work, and hence the theory breaks down. Suppose, for example, that a poet constructs a literary allusion in a poem referring to Scott as the author of Waverly without, of course, mentioning Scott by name. In such a case it may be asked: what is the status of ‘Scott’? Is it external or internal to the poem? If it is held to be external, then such a literalistic position is adopted that the work becomes incomprehensible to the extent that allusions of this sort are made. And since ‘Scott’ does not occur in the poem, there seems to be no basis on which to call it internal. The point here is a conceptual one, not an empirical one. Even if there were no extant poem which involves this sort of allusion, the distinction is still theoretically unsound because it is possible to make a poem of this kind. It is theoretically unsound because it is offered as the basis for a general theory of literature, not as the basis for a probabilistic one or one which is supposed to work most of the time.

Although the Wimsatt-Beardsley position does not bdo this, it might be argued that a way out of the dilemma is to construe ‘internal’ in a broadly metaphorical way to include all referentially equivalent statements as internal, so that in this case ‘Scott’ become internal. But this does violence to a fundamental distinction between literature and prose, which is that equivalent phrases and words in literature, unlike those in non-literary prose, are not meant to be just cognitive and interchangeable. Except in cases of poor literature, substitution of semantically equivalent words or phrases may damage the work of art. Going on now to the next axiom, c.), it is worthwhile to consider (3) from

which c.) has been extracted since, like b.), it requires further analysis. (Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C., 1969, *op. cit*., 658)

3. Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer. “A poem should not mean but be.” A poem simply is in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant. Poetry is a feat of style by which a complex of meaning is handled all at once. Poetry succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant; what is irrelevant has been excluded, like lumps from pudding and “bugs” from machinery. In this respect poetry differs from practical messages, which are successful if we correctly infer the intention.

It seems clear that, as the first two sentences in (3) suggest, to evaluate a poem aesthetically is to evaluate it in an operational manner. Whether this is to be done formally in terms of the organization of its parts or psychologically in terms of the poem’s effect is not specified, however. But *apropos* of the last above-quoted statement at 3., it is dubious that poetry is different from practical messages in that the latter involves inferring the intention of the speaker. This is so because it is notoriously difficult to fathom intentions.

Here and for our inquiry generally it is important to distinguish two senses of ‘intention’: what anyone means and the meaning of what they say. Any model of practical communication which relies on people’s ability to infer what they mean in the sense of the “contents of someone’s mind” from what they say is bound for hard times, since that inference is inductively based on overt behavior (including speech) and is therefore always in principle capable of being incorrect. It is not even clear what could be meant by a theory of linguistic communication which refers to “mental acts.” This is so because it is not clear that communication activities like understanding and meaning must be correlated with “mental acts”. A psychologistic view of the transmission of meaning may be rejected in favor of a pragmatic view along lines suggested by the later Wittgenstein.

Axiom (e) recognizes the distinction between the kinds of intention mentioned above in stating that the critic’s job is not one of professional mind-reading but of literary analysis. Considering variant (e1), I quote verbatim from the text: (*Ibid*., 659)

5. There is a sense in which an author, by revision, may better achieve his original intention. But it is a very abstract sense. He intended to write a better work, or a better work of a certain kind, and now has done it. But it follows that this former concrete intention was not his intention.

What is meant by “his former concrete intention” here? Richard C. Kuhns, in his article entitled “Criticism and the Problem of Intention”, offers the following schema, part of which is of use in puzzling out (e 1): (Kuhns, R. C., 1996, 5-12)

I. Various uses of ‘intention’
    A. Intention of the artist
        1. that the artist aims at a certain result
        2. that the artist’s purpose is to convey a meaning
    B. Intention of the work of art
        1. the work of art has an intention i.e., is an organic whole
        2. the work of art has an intention i.e., makes certain demands on the beholder
        3. the work of art has an intention i.e., manifests supra-personal purposes

In the case of revision, an author’s former specific aim to create a certain art-work (his intention A.1.) was not the same as his intended meaning (his intention) A.2.). An author may achieve his intention A.2.) by substituting a different intention A.1), but then it follows that his former intention A.1.) is not his intention A.2.) The fact that revisions occur shows that authors do not always achieve their intentions (A.2.) in the first instance. However, it does not show that the intention of the artist is relevant for the understanding of a work of art, for the evaluation of a work of art, or for both.

Ananda Coomaraswamy’s View

The Wimsatt-Beardsley position of (e2) claims that the value of undertaking and preserving a work of art is decidable on aesthetic grounds and is not a moral issue, contra Coomaraswamy. If Wimsatt & Beardley mean that the merit of a work of art in relation to others may be determined on aesthetic grounds, the result showing whether or not the work ought to have been undertaken, then their

position is not in logical opposition to Coomaraswamy's. Although there may be such a determination made on aesthetic grounds, and although the question of the value of undertaking and preserving a work of art need not, as Wimsatt and Beardsley rightly maintain, be construed as a moral question, it may be so construed. And this is all Coomaraswamy needs, for he is concerned to argue that whether a work of art (insofar as it represents a certain kind of thing) ought to have been undertaken all is, in an important sense of 'ought', a moral question. What Coomaraswamy says suggests that the Wimsatt and Beardsley adoption of an allegedly value-free, objective criticism cannot account for judgments between works of different kinds at comparable levels. He writes: "we cannot say that one work of art, as such, is "worth" more than another, if both are perfect in their kind." (Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1946, 133)

Also included within axiom-cluster (5) from which (e) and (e1) were extracted is another important claim, which I refer to as (e2) and summarize as follows: In opposition to Coomaraswamy's position that the question of whether the artist achieved his intentions is a matter for aesthetic criticism, and the question of whether the works of art ought to have been undertaken at all and are worth preserving is a matter for moral criticism. (e2) claims that whether works of art ought to have been undertaken at all is not be decided by moral criticism. For this question may be decided by objective criticism of works of art according to whether they are artistically successful or not.

Although Coomaraswamy agrees that the intention of the artist (in the sense of purpose) is irrelevant to the work's turning out aesthetically well or poorly made, (*Ibid*., 132) he holds that it is relevant to whether, morally, the work ought to be done, and observes:

> We can, however, go behind the work of art itself, as if it were not yet extant, to enquire whether or not it "ought" ever to have been undertaken at all, and so also decide whether or not it is "worth" preserving. That may be, and I hold that it is, a very proper enquiry; but it is not literary criticism nor the criticism of any work of art qua work of art. It is a criticism of the author's intentions. (*Ibid*., 133)

But Coomaraswamy's view is being considered now only insofar as the Wimsatt-Beardsley position touches upon it, and after covering that position Coomaraswamy's rebuttal will be considered in some detail.

Development of the Classic Wimsatt-Beardley View

In section II of the Wimsatt-Beardsley article they observe that it is not so much an historical statement as a definitional one to say that the intentional fallacy is romantic. They point out that if the middle question of Goethe's three questions for constructive criticism is omitted (namely, was his plan reasonable and sensible?), then the outcome is Croce's view. The three are: What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible? And how far did he succeed in carrying it out? On Croce's romanticist view beauty is identified with the successful intuition-expression, and ugliness with its opposite. Here the intuition or private aspect of art becomes the sole aesthetic reality, and the medium or public aspect is not the subject of aesthetics at all.

In section III it is emphasized that although romantic expressionism may account for the process of artistic creation, it is of no help in judging works of art since they must be evaluated against something other than the artist's intention. And in section IV a distinction between types of evidence for the meaning of a poem is made which is worth considering in the author's own words, which are:

There is a difference between internal and external evidence for the meaning of a poem. And the paradox is only verbal and superficial that what is (1) the internal meaning of a poem is also public: it is discovered through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture; while what is (2) the external meaning of the poem is private or idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact: it consists of revelations (in journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations) about how or why the poet wrote the poem – to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother. There is (3) an intermediate kind of evidence about the character of the author or about private or semiprivate meanings attached to words or topics by an author or by a coterie of which he is a member. (Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C.,1969, *op. cit*., 663)

It has already been argued that the distinction between internal and external evidence breaks down, but what is interesting to note is that the authors themselves admit that these types of evidence “shade into one another so subtly that it is not always easy to draw a line between example”, yet do not consider it a major problem for their theory. (*Ibid*.)

Another interesting statement in section IV is the following:

> The use of biographical evidence need not involve intentionalism, because while it may be evidence of what the author intended, it may also be evidence of the meaning of his words and the dramatic character of his utterance. (*Ibid*.)

Apparently, the co-authors Wimsatt and Beardsley do not notice the inconsistency of this statement with their earlier exclusion of external evidence in determining the meaning of a poem. Further, although they had earlier maintained that intention neither available nor desirable, it here become available (even if not desirable), since biographical information is admitted as a possible source of evidence for intention. It may be replied that ‘available’ is merely a poor word choice, however, rather than being indicative of a conceptual confusion, since the Wimsatt-Beardsley position does not really concern itself with the issue of the accessibility of intentions so much as with the question of whether (assuming that some account of the accessibility of intention can be given) intention is an adequate criterion for the evaluation or for the understanding of art-works.

Conclusion of the Classic Wimsatt-Beardsley Article

Concluding in section V the authors argue that notes about poems ought to be treated like any other parts of a composition, and when looked at in this way their imaginative integration with the rest of the poem may come into question. Wimsatt and Beardsley recognize allusiveness as an important phenomenon to deal with in attacking romantic intentionalism. They distinguish two ways of treating the question as to whether a writer is alluding to another 1) the way of poetic analysis and exegesis, which asks whether it makes any sense to say that the dramatic speaker/author (e.g., “Eliot-Prufrock”) is alluding to another writer (e.g., Donne); and 2) the way of biographical or genetic inquiry, in which we ask the author what he meant. (*Ibid*., 668-9) Both alternatives are loosely phrased. While the

authors urge that the statements of the dramatic speaker are not necessarily those of the author, thus implying the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between these areas, they blur that very distinction by hyphenating (Eliot-Prufrock at 1). And at 2) since in no case do we ask the author what he meant in conducting biographical investigation, the sort of example given can never be used to instantiate the first half of the disjunct between 1) and 2). Direct asking is, of course, different from inquiring into a person's biography. At any rate, the authors conclude by pointing out that 2) is inadequate since it has nothing to do with the poem itself, while 1) is the correct strategy.

More from Ananda Coomaraswamy

In Coomaraswamy's reply to the Wimsatt-Beardsley position, entitled "Intention", he begins by setting forth his understanding of their position as stated in the following paraphrase: a. an author's success or failure in conveying his intention is indemonstrable; b. the claim that the author's aim can be detected internally in the work even where it is not realized is a self-contradiction; c. there can be no evidence, external or internal, that the author had conceived something which he did not execute; d. even if criticism could be based on the relationship of purpose to result, this would be irrelevant since the critic's main job is to evaluate the work itself (a point made in correspondence from the authors to Coomaraswamy); e. evaluation is concerned with what the work ought to be rather than with what the author intended it to be; f. there are good intentions and poor intentions, intention per se being no criterion of the worth of the poem. (Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1946, 123-4)

Coomaraswamy maintains that all of the above except f. are objectionable, that justice has not been done to the position attacked, and that 'criticism' is confused with 'evaluation', values being present "only in the end to which the work is ordered, while "criticism" is supposed to be disinterested." (*Ibid*., 124) He then states his general objective as follows:

> My "intention" is to defend the method of criticism in terms of the ratio intention / result, which I should also state as that of concept / product or forma / figure or art in the artist / artifact. If, in the following paragraphs, I cite some of the older writers, it is not so much as authorities by whom the problem is to be settled for us, as it is to make it clear in what established

sense the word “intention” has been used, and to give to the corresponding method of criticism at least its proper historical place. (*Ibid*., 124)

Coomaraswamy, Plato, and Intention

Coomaraswamy begins next to explore a traditional account of intention, that given by Plato. Coomaraswamy’s interpretation of Plato is that it covers art’s truth, beauty or perfection, as well as its efficacy or utility. The distinction of meaning from of a work of art is made neither by Plato nor by Sanskritic tradition, according to which one word, rather, denotes both meaning and use. Like Plato in one place, (Symposium 205c) Coomaraswamy maintains that all making is art (“poetry”), and all craftsmen artists (“poets”). Here Coomaraswamy reveals an important difference of scope from Wimsatt and Beardsley, who are only concerned with poetic, dramatic, and literary works. And given Coomaraswamy’s synoptic vision, rejection of the Wimsatt-Beardsley view that different principles of criticism are applicable to different kinds of art is congruent with his perspective.

As an example, Coomaraswamy takes the creation of the world qua art-work as the most general case possible of the relation to result. Urging that we not confuse art with prudence, though, Coomaraswamy argues that whether a work of art should be undertaken at all is not an aesthetic judgment. Concerning the art critic, he writes: “his business as an art critic is to decide whether or not the artist has made a good job of the work he undertook to do.” (*Ibid*., 126) Returning to example of creation as an art-work in the author’s broad sense, he dispenses with the problem of evil by claiming that the critic who poses the problem has misunderstood the artist’s situation, ignoring the medium with which he works. Such a critic does not realize, he argues, that a world without alternatives would not be a world at all. Again, the main point here is that the art-work’s success is to be judged by considering the relationship between the artist’s intention and the result.

Taking next an example of a work more ordinarily considered to be art, Coomaraswamy mentions Dante’s Commedia and what he takes to be a wrong-head criticism of it. The criticism under fire works from the form/content distinction, emphasizing the value of form alone. Coomaraswamy is perhaps most concerned here with the fact that the intention of Dante is being totally ignored, and issues the scathing reply:

> I will not pillory the author of this effusion by mentioning his name, but only point out that in making such a criticism he is not judging the artist's work at all, (his intention being to separate content from form), but only setting himself down as the artist's moral inferior. (*Ibid*., 127)

Adequate external evidence of the artist's intention is often found in the artist's writings or statements, Coomaraswamy continues, and the artist is either successful or unsuccessful in doing what he meant to do. If he succeeded, it would be obvious in the work itself, while if he failed, he would recognize it, point it out, and perhaps try again. Granted that this view puts a great deal of faith in the integrity of the artist, but Coomaraswamy would probably reply that what he means by 'craftsman', rather than the sort of artist who would let a poorly made work pass. This touches one of the perplexities of Coomaraswamy's account: is the artist just any kind of maker or is he a craftsman (a skilled maker)?

The importance of this question will become clear by considering its implications for art evaluation. On the one hand, Coomaraswamy seems committed to the position that the artist is simply a maker, and that his work is to be evaluated in terms of whether the result achieves his intention. Yet on the other hand, he seems to regard the artist as a noble, skilled maker. His examples of artists all tend to be of this sort (e.g., God, Dante, etc.), and the tone of certain remarks such as "how impertinent a moral criticism can be when we are considering the works of an artist who is admittedly a nobleman." bears this out. (*Ibid*., 126) And elsewhere he explicitly states: "there can be no good use without art: that is, no good use if things are not properly made." (Coomaraswamy, A. K., 1956, 25) The difficulty, then, is that if art is taken definitionally to be the well-made and the artist the skilled maker, thus excluding poor art and the inept artificer, the problem of how to evaluate works of art does not arise. And if the problem of evaluation does not arise, there is no need for the elaborate defense of the role of intention in art evaluation according to the formula intention / result.

Like Plato, Coomaraswamy gets into theoretical difficulty by employing both a descriptive and an evaluative sense of the same key term. Plato's puzzlement can there be a Form of Mud? arises because of Plato's acceptance of both the descriptive notion of Forms as applying [insert t] to every

kind of thing, and the evaluative notion of a hierarchy of existents where the Forms must be noble. And like Plato's treatment of 'Form', Coomaraswamy's usage of 'art' and 'artist' proves troublesome.

It may be that Coomaraswamy fares better than Plato however. For while it is difficult to see how Plato could extricate himself from the above-mentioned difficulty without a major change of thinking, the Coomaraswamy position on intention would not be radically changed if the evaluatively loaded senses 'art' and 'artist' are purged. To say, for example, that art is the successful intuition expression as some romantic expressionists have done is to confuse the task of defining art with that of accounting for what happens when it is good. If this confused romanticist residue is eliminated, Coomaraswamy's position on intention would become a viable one. But in expurgating this confused romanticist residue, Coomaraswamy would nevertheless remain basically romanticist insofar as he emphasizes the importance of the artist's intention being embodied in the work of art. In a similar vein, Tolstoy stresses the importance of sincerity in artistic creation. (Wimsatt, W. K. & Beardsley, M. C., 1969, *op. cit*., Tillman and Kahn, 383)

Coomaraswamy and Romantic Expressionism

Coomaraswamy's version of romantic expressionism affords him a position from which to attack formalism. He severely criticizes those who evaluate a work of art in terms of their perception of what it should have been, or in terms of fashionable aesthetic theories (like formalism). Individualism, novelty, and "art for art's sake" are anathema to the staunch traditionalist, who envisions a "perennial philosophy" common to all great cultures which is true by virtue of its authority and consistency. (Coomaraswamy, A. K., *op. cit*., 23) Formalism from this point of view is an elitism minus nobility, the curse of modernity where in there is no "understanding use" of an art object, but only an addiction to surfaces.

But it is important to emphasize that Coomaraswamy's version of romantic expressionism is more expressionistic than romantic. For the romantic expressionists usually regarded the expression as the personal idea, meaning or intention of the artist, whereas Coomaraswamy holds that it is not so much the individual that is expressed as the universal. His theory stresses the intention, but not the individuality, of the artist; in keeping with the "perennial philosophy" he should not wish to express

himself. And the author who writes “the anonymity of the artist belongs to a type of culture dominated by the longing to be liberated from oneself” (*Ibid*., 41) and is free from *papañca* (“grasping”) as the copyright note shows: “No rights reserved. Quotations of reasonable length may be made without written permission” (in Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought, 38).

Yet to the extent Coomaraswamy puts an evaluative twist on the word ‘artist’ he comes close to accepting the romantic “genius” notion in expressionism which he consciously rejects. (*Ibid*., 38) Thus it is appropriate to regard his view as a version of romantic expressionism, although making clear that the accent is on the latter term.

On Coomaraswamy’s view it is the relationship between intention and result, not intention by itself, that is to be considered in art evaluation. That the artist has an intention, or whether his intention is morally good or bad, is inconsequential for evaluation. On this point the positions of the author and of Wimsatt-Beardsley coalesce. Replying to their position the author writes:

> Now I fully agree with you that “intention per se” is no criterion of the worth of a poem (even if “worth” is to be taken amorally); in the same way that a good intention is not guarantee of actually good conduct; in both cases there must be, not only a will, but also the power to realise the purpose. On the other hand, an evil intention need not result in a poor work of art; if it miscarries, it can be ridiculed or ignored; if it succeeds as a work of art, the artist may still be liable to prosecution if he is for example a pornographer or a murderer. (Coomaraswamy, A. K., *op. cit*., 132)

Assessing Coomaraswamy’s Response to Wimsatt-Bearsley

We are now in position to assess Coomaraswamy’s reply to be the Wimsatt-Beardsley position. Recalling the controversial points which Coomaraswamy has noted before, the central issue is: ‘what is to be evaluated in art evaluation, the relationship between intention and result or the work itself?’

In cases where the artist’s intention is difficult to determine (or perhaps altogether absent) the Wimsatt-Beardsley position seems more adequate. However, in cases where the physicality of the piece is not the prime interest in that the artwork does not purport to be an excellent work of a certain

kind, say, because it lies outside all previous classifications and calls into question the nature of art or its genre, then in such cases Coomaraswamy's position seems more adequate. This is not, therefore, a dispute to be decided in either/or fashion. The two positions are evaluating different things and are alike mainly in that they both call their activities art evaluation. But simply because the position shares the same label it would be absurd to claim that one must deserve that label, and that one must be right and the other wrong.

There is, however, another issue of considerable importance, that of the locus of meaning. Coomaraswamy holds that the meaning of a work of art is its use, from which it follows that a work of art that is never used is meaningless. He does not claim that the meaning of the work is what the artist meant, but he does criticize the formalists for ignoring the social use of art objects and gaping at them superficially. Yet regardless of theoretical difficulties, Coomaraswamy's position here does have the merit of attempting to integrate art and life more closely, moving away from the formalist's obsession with surfaces.

Contrastingly but not contradictorily, the position worked out by Beardsley on the locus of meaning after his article co-authored with Wimsatt, places the meaning in the literary work and denies that the meaning is what the artist meant. He argues that the Identity Thesis, namely the view "that what a literary work means is identical to what its author meant in composing it", is false as follows:

The question is not whether textual meaning and authorial meaning can coincide -- i.e., be very similar. Certainly, they can. The question is not whether textual meaning is often adequate evidence of authorial meaning. Certainly, it often is. The question is whether they are one and the same thing.

The Identity Thesis can be conclusively refuted by the following three arguments.

1. Some texts that have been formed without the agency of an author, and hence without authorial meaning, and nevertheless have a meaning and can be interpreted, for example, certain kinds of verbal mistake.

2. The meaning of a text can change after its author has died. But the author cannot change his meaning after he has died. Therefore, the textual meaning is not identical to the authorial meaning.
3. A text can have meaning that its author is not aware of. Therefore, it can have meaning that its author did not intend. Therefore, textual meaning is not identical to authorial meaning. (Beardsley, M. C., 1970, 17-20)

Although it is clear enough that what a literary work says (means) is in principle and often in practice separable from what the writer meant by it, 2.) is inconsistent with Beardsley's program of locating the meaning in the text. For this program requires a distinction between what the text says and what it is interpreted to say, between a correct reading and reading into the text. And given these distinctions the first sentence in argument 2.) Would be re-stated as: our interpretation of a text (but not its meaning) can change after the author has died.

A Point of Cadence

To return now to the initial question regarding the relevancy of intention to art, it may help to clarify the issues to schematize several propositions about intention:

(x) the meaning of (at least) literary works is identical to what the artist meant by it

(y) the intention of the artist is a criterion for aesthetic evaluation of (at least) literary works of art

(z) the relationship between intention and result is the basis for aesthetic evaluation of the success or failure of (at least) literary works of art

Neither (x) nor (y) is held by Coomaraswamy, and both are attacked by Wimsatt and Beardsley. The real issue between them is (z), and as we have seen above, whether this view is adequate depends on which artwork is being considered. But what exactly is it to utilize the artist's intention as a criterion of aesthetic value? Whether something is or is not an artwork, may be determined by applying the principles appropriate to that type of art. If something is good art or not, may be determined neither

by “investigating the maker’s mental states” nor by “investigating the maker’s behavioral characteristics”, then then it is reasonable to think that the artwork itself may show its value by its own presence. One way to develop this viewpoint is through Eliot Deutsch’s idea of “aesthetic rightness.”

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