Criticism

The Normative Dimension

Three Jobs for the Critic

- ❖ The critic has effectively three jobs, corresponding to the the three dominant areas of our study this term:
  - ❖ Individuation—or 'identifying' as Gilmore prefers
  - ❖ Interpretation
  - ❖ Evaluation

Identification

- ❖ At the individual level, this is just the task of identifying something as a work of art.
  - ❖ This is usually a trivial affair. . .
    - ❖ . . . but only on the assumption that some definition of art, or of the genre, can be presupposed.
      - ❖ Fairly plainly, in much modern art and virtually all *avant garde* art offers challenges in this department.
  - ❖ This is precisely why, then, those interested in aesthetics unavoidably find themselves in metaphysical questions about the definition of art.

Interpretation

- ❖ This is effectively the question of meaning.
- ❖ Recall, though, that as we had observed, this is very often a non-trivial affair, given that artworks, like the artists who make them, often present challenges to their own interpretation:
  - ❖ They may simply be complicated
  - ❖ They may be purposely vague, suggestive, or ambiguous.
  - ❖ In some cases, as critics of a conservative bent sometimes suggest, works presented as works of art are really rather 'comments about art' or, more likely 'comments about the art world'.

Art or Statements about Art?

The Case of Duchamp's 'Ready Mades'

Duchamp, 'Fountain' (1917)

Duchamp, 'Bicycle Wheel' (1913)

Art or Statements about Art?

The Case of Tracy Emin

Emin, 'My Bed' (1998)

Emin, 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995' (1995)

First General Job of Critics: Interpretation

❖ Interpretation: <u>the case of the Readymades</u>

❖ Interpretation by the artist: <u>the case of Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995</u>

The Harder Job of Critics: Evaluation

❖ We now enter the normative zone. Recall:

  ❖ The Descriptive and the Normative—either *prescriptive* or *evaluative*

    ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.

    ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm* as a standard; they are generally prescriptive or evaluative.

      ❖ In the case of criticism, the dominant normative dimension is evaluative.

        ❖ Note, though, that an evaluation often implies a prescription: this is very good—so, you might want to experience it

Charity and Promotion

- Notice that our first critic, on the Readymades, took it as her task, in part, to promote the work, to evaluate it in such as way as to make its potential audience both informed and sympathetic.
- This tends to reflect a normative judgement—to wit, that the work is worth engaging seriously—without exactly issuing a normative judgement.
- A second task, the one that exercised Hume, for example, involves a straightforward normative appraisal either *tout court* or given its kind or objectives:
  - *Tout court*: This work is good (bad), because. . .
  - A good of its kind or good given its objectives:
    - As a work of late romanticism, Bruckner's Fourth Symphony excels because. . .
    - As a villanelle, Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night' is a masterpiece because. . .

Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Villanelle

- A villanelle comprises:
  - a nineteen-line poetic form, with
  - five tercets
  - followed by a final quatrain
  - featuring two refrains and two repeating rhymes, where the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately at the end of each subsequent stanza until the final stanza, which includes both repeated lines.

Filling in that Ellipsis:

- Because. . .
  - Here the evaluative norm must be given objectively or subjectively:
  - To recall:
    - A property Φ is subjective $=_{df}$ Φ constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
    - A property Φ is objective $=_{df}$ Φ is not subjective.

On the Objective Side of the Equation

❖ One might say that something is good or bad, as an artwork—full stop.

❖ One might say that something is good or bad, as an instance of kind *K* (poem, symphony, sculpture, opera, photograph. . .)

 ❖ This, in principle, allows us to introduce norms via functions, provided that we are thinking of the kinds in question are functional kinds.

A Functional Example: Genre-Relative Appraisal

❖ Suppose some genre *G* has a distinctive, genre-determined function (so, e.g., horror movies, mystery novels, religious paintings, political drama. . .).

❖ Then one might say of a work *a* in *G*:

 ❖ *a* is a good instance of kind *G iff* (i) the kind *G* has a readily identifiable genre-relative function *F*; and (ii) *a* realizes *F* to a high degree.

 ❖ Note, then:

  ❖ the norm will be provided by the function

  ❖ the critical evaluation will be scalar rather than binary