



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

Philosophical Aspects of Literary Objectiveness

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ABSTRACT: Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy avoids the problem of literary objectiveness altogether. His approach witnesses the general fact that an indifference towards literary *objectiveness* in particular, leads to a peculiar neglect of par excellence *literariness* as such. It seems obvious, however, that the constitutive aspects of the crisis of literary objectiveness cannot be shown to contain the underlying intention of bringing about this situation. At this point, one can identify what could probably be the most important element in a definition of literary objectiveness. In contrast to 'natural' objectiveness and objectiveness based on various societal conventions, the legitimacy of a literary work is solely guaranteed by its elements being organized in accordance with the rules of literary objectiveness. Thus when the crisis of literary objectiveness intensifies, *literariness* will also find itself in a crisis. This crisis detaches new, quasi-literary formations from various definitions of *literariness*. When literary objectiveness ceases, however, to be understood as a system constituted by various objective formations aiming to correspond in one way or another to the 'world', scientific analysis of literary objectiveness will be rendered impossible. The crisis of literary objectiveness thus brings about the crisis of the theory of literature and the philosophy of art. Gadamer explicitly argues that the scientific approach proves to be inadequate in the analysis of artistic experience. This attitude results in the categorical rejection of a scientific orientation (and so in a complete indifference towards literary objectiveness), but he seems to overemphasize an otherwise correct thesis on the non-reflexive character of artistic experience. It is the anti-mimetic and Platonic character of Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics that determines the status of literary (artistic) objectiveness in his system of thought. What is of crucial importance, however, is to point out that this aesthetics entails a fundamental reduction of the significance of literary objectiveness. As soon as the essence of aesthetic object-constitution is taken to be *re-cognition* (plus the emanating aesthetic possibilities), the absolutely natural interest in the *original object* represented by a work of art. Undoubtedly, Gadamer's conception answers a number of questions that tend to be ignored by other theories. It is just as obvious, however, that Gadamer completes here the aesthetic devaluation of the objective domain. It is not the characteristics of the 'original' that constitute the image, but in effect the image turns the original into an original. Paraphrasing this claim one arrives at a near paradox: not

objectiveness makes a work of art possible, but a work of art lends objects their objectiveness.

First of all, the study of literary objectiveness is to distinguish its subject-matter from theoretical problems associated with philosophical objectiveness. To highlight this distinction, one has to begin by recalling the wide range of definitions of philosophical objectiveness and the different ways in which various philosophical schools and conceptions have approached the notion of the object. Everyday consciousness assumes the 'objectivity' of the existing world to be permanent. Philosophical schools 'only' differ through the philosophical concepts reflecting upon this objectivity (1).

Each philosophical school has, therefore, its own understanding of objectiveness. Thus the epistemological orientation of criticist philosophical schools has practically prevented them from developing a positive concept of the concrete aspects of objectiveness (2). The specific understanding of objectiveness adopted by universalist philosophies of history is also well-known. The most prominent representative of these, Hegel's philosophy of history. The notion of the object put forth by classical positivism can be divided into two sub-types. First, a definition of the object characterised by the tendentious scientific orientation of certain positivist philosophies (3). Second, a definition relying on the idea of 'real complexes', which is a theoretical generalization of the positivist method (4). A number of modern philosophical approaches have argued that objectiveness as such is in crisis (5).

The different object-definitions put forth by great philosophical schools may be relevant to the notion of the object in literature and literary criticism in two ways. The first will only be mentioned here in general terms. The various object-definitions of great philosophical schools may often inform the intellectual universe of both author and reader (6). Secondly, a more explicit and concrete connection is witnessed by the almost trivial fact that the various object-definitions advocated by great philosophical schools gain aesthetic concretization in aesthetics written in the vein and terminology of these systems of thought. The existence of the genre of so-called philosophical aesthetics can be seen as a proof of this argument (7).

The present crisis of literary objectiveness resembles the nature of the crisis of modernity in general. It is particularly strongly reminiscent, however, of the numerous former crises of literary objectiveness in the twentieth century. The crisis of objectiveness in literature and literary criticism does not only offer the possibility of, but even necessitates an analysis of this development in the context of a general critique of culture (Kulturkritik) (8).

Major philosophies, aesthetic systems, founded on the theoretical groundwork laid down by these philosophies, as well as established schools of literary theory all avow a different concept of the literary object. While this definition should help us to understand the phenomenon of crisis of literary objectiveness, it should also retain a general significance. In other words, it should not be possible to object that only a 'normative' conception of literature yields the hypothesis of an overall literary crisis (9).

All literary works are by definition singular and individual (10). Furthermore, definitions of literary objectiveness have always rested on a highly conventional basis. When accepting or rejecting literary works, the reading public does not evaluate according to definite and objective criteria, but taking the radical singularity of literary works into account (11). The plurality of literary objectiveness is closely related to these features (12).

Even if literary objectiveness itself is in crisis, these attributes of literary objectiveness remain intact, since they are constitutive features of literary objectiveness. If they lost validity, the specifically literary character of literary objectiveness would be fundamentally challenged. New approaches to the literary object, which manifest themselves as crisis phenomena, will be absorbed among the countless forms of objectiveness of radical conventionalism ⁽¹³⁾. Strictly speaking, there are no procedures at our disposal (that is, a set of values to serve as a potential foundation to these procedures) that would allow us to distinguish the objectiveness of 'crisis' from the essentially unlimited objectiveness of the radically conventionalist approach ⁽¹⁴⁾. I will start the discussion of the crisis of objectiveness by pointing out the following features:

(i) the decline, and in some cases, almost total disappearance of traditional literary objectiveness has been manifest since the 1970s;

(ii) this decline of traditional forms of literary objectiveness has not been accompanied by the emergence of new alternative forms of objectiveness (hence the above described deadlock of scientific logic);

(iii) in a logical sense, perhaps the most positive and most obvious feature of the crisis of literary objectiveness is that literary works of the period in question do not conquer or open up new realms of the literary object, but they define themselves instead on the basis of formerly established patterns of objectivity;

(iv) another discernible feature of the crisis of literary objectiveness is that new representations of objectiveness not only relate to and contrast themselves with former objectivenesses, but show a marked tendency to refer in an almost deictic fashion to concepts of previous literary epochs.

Consequently, the crisis of traditional objectiveness ⁽¹⁵⁾ may be described in terms of two features. First, the new literary objectiveness, evolving in the prevailing crisis, regards previous representations of objectiveness as its primary object. The first fundamental feature of the crisis of literary objectiveness is, therefore, that traditional 'worldlike'⁽¹⁶⁾ objectiveness is replaced by an objectiveness that in the main defines antecedent forms of literary objectiveness as its object. A former meta-language has thus become the object language of literature ⁽¹⁷⁾. The consequences of the second crucial feature of the crisis of literary objectiveness are no less essential: the new type of literary objectiveness is determined by a reflective process on the the value judgements and standards associated with former instances of literary objectiveness.

The crisis of literary objectiveness can be placed in a wider context of cultural criticism. The Kulturkritik may certainly have some relevance to the present area of investigation as well ⁽¹⁸⁾.

The crisis of literary objectiveness fundamentally challenges and questions the subject-matter of literary theory. It is worth noting once again the opposition of meta-language and object language, already referred above. Primary literary objectiveness supplies the object language, whereas the theory of literature provides the meta-language. One may argue that if something lacks an object, then that thing itself cannot be said to exist ⁽¹⁹⁾. Literary objectiveness is barely able to produce an adequate definition of itself ⁽²⁰⁾.

Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy (21) avoids the problem of literary objectiveness altogether. Ultimately, objectiveness in literature (art) is dissolved in the objectiveness of other fields (22). In contrast to 'natural' objectiveness and objectiveness based on various societal conventions, the legitimacy of a literary work is solely guaranteed by its elements being organized in accordance with the rules of literary objectiveness. Thus when the crisis of literary objectiveness intensifies, literariness will also find itself in a crisis. This process is also responsible for the fact that new literary formations increasingly tend to be integrated into other areas of life (e.g. religion, morals, societal practice, commercial fields etc.) (23).

When literary objectiveness ceases, however, to be understood as a system constituted by various objective formations aiming to correspond in one way or another to the 'world', scientific analysis of literary objectiveness will be rendered impossible (24). The arbitrariness of new forms of literary objectiveness, arising from a lack of objective organisation, essentially undermines the requirement of scientific verification (25). Furthermore, the impossibility of scientific verification in the wake of the crisis of objectiveness parallels the crisis of objectiveness in music, painting and other arts (26).

Although Gadamer spends little time on the topic, it can be said that his hermeneutics does not attribute particular theoretical relevance to literary objectiveness on two grounds. First, he mentions briefly the 'crisis of the picture, ... evoked by the existence of the modern industrial and administrative state.' (27). Second, Gadamer explicitly argues that the scientific approach proves to be inadequate in the analysis of artistic experience: 'We lose sight of the... actual experience of playing... if we reflect... as spectators on the concept forming the basis of the performance' (28). On the one hand, Gadamer is right in saying that the approach of the recipient is different from that of literary 'science'. This anti-reflexive attitude results in the categorical rejection of a scientific orientation, but he seems to overemphasize an otherwise correct thesis on the non-reflexive character of artistic experience. It must not be understood, however, in a literal sense. Not even in the most ecstatic reception of a work of art can be said to be entirely devoid of reflexion of any kind (29).

What is at issue is to understand the relationship of Gadamer's theory to the problem of literary objectiveness in general, and to the crisis of literary objectiveness in particular (30).

It is the anti-mimetic and Platonic character of Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics that determines the status of literary (artistic) objectiveness. The following is the most important passage illustrating this point: "The thing shown is here—this is the basic mimetic relationship... Considering all this, it may be concluded that the epistemological significance of mimesis is re-cognition... Thus we have reached the central theme of Platonism. In his doctrine on anamnesis, Plato has presented the mythical conception of re-cognition..." (31). What is of crucial importance, however, is to point out that this aesthetics entails a fundamental reduction of the significance of literary objectiveness. If all attention is directed to what is re-cognised, the thing to be re-cognised loses significance (32).

Gadamer's following thesis offers a concise and thus unavoidably superficial approach to the object-problem: "...due to the development of the scientific concept of reality, mimesis lost its (original) aesthetic validity..." (33). The question of what is shown by showing is necessarily deemed to be of secondary importance (34). Gadamer describes an objective relationship in which there is no distinction made between these three aspects of a work of art: the objective-mimetic potential of a work of art, the actuality of the act of showing, and the environment of this actuality. Gadamer explicitly states the dissolution of objectiveness

in 'showing': " A twofold lack of distinction corresponds to the distinction between poetry and substance, between poetry and performance—a unity(!) of the truth that is learned in the game of art." (35)

The seemingly inseparable unity of 'imitation' and 'showing' is sometimes deliberately upset at the expense of the mimetic idea and practice: "The mode of existence of an image ought to be defined more precisely by distinguishing the way in which representation relates to the original in an image from the relationship of reproduction, the reference of the image to the original." (36)

The instance of 'showing' (in this context, that of 'presentation') is now positively foregrounded, and the reference of the image to the original object (in this context, to the 'model') is held to be of only secondary importance. It should also be clear, however, that this approach leads to a series of problems. It reaches beyond the areas of literature, aesthetics and philosophy, and assumes a unique religious character (37). The whole ontological relationship of original (model) and image is reversed: "The ontological relationship of original and image must be radically altered or even reversed... Strictly speaking, the original object only becomes a model through the image" (38). It is not the characteristics of the 'original' that constitute the image, but in effect the image turns the original into an original. Not objectiveness makes a work of art possible, but a work of art lends objects their objectiveness (39).

Notes

(1) The reconstructible object-definitions of major philosophical schools are fundamentally different. Furthermore, many influential philosophical theories point out that the objective domain is never a given of philosophical theorising, but the product of a constitutive process.

(2) This is witnessed by the example of Kantian critical thought. Philosophical investigations concentrate here on reaching methodologically adequate judgements in accordance with the rules of Kantian transcendentalism.

(3) This includes positivist theories that adopted scientific object-notions to serve as the self-evident basis for the positivist definition of the object, although these notions had never been subjected to closer analytic inspection.

(4) This positivist alternative can be traced back to Dühring and leads on to Nietzsche and Mach. Positivist philosophy strives here to obtain an object-definition transcending that of individual scientific disciplines.

(5) Heisenberg's theory of uncertainty (Unschärferelation) presents a paradox and a trap of scientific logic. Methodological criteria in scientific research lead to interference with the original object, which in turn renders the meeting of these very criteria impossible.

(6) Sociological structuralism, reaching its highest point in the 1960s, relied on the study of these isomorphies. One ought to mention Hermann Broch's theory of the 'methodological identity' of certain scientific and aesthetic conceptions.

(7) The recent past has seen a particularly great number of attempts to apply the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger in the field of aesthetics.

(8) The greatest representatives of Kulturkritik, from Nietzsche to Karl Kraus, exhibited a unique sensitivity towards the various symptoms of the crisis of literary-artistic objectiveness.

(9) This is the first instance of the trap of scientific logic that will reappear throughout the following argumentation in various disguises. How can one make a diagnosis of this crisis that does not, whether intentionally or unintentionally, resort (or return) to the normative view of literature which it has rejected on theoretical grounds?

(10) 'Individuality' and 'singularity' have in effect become the *differentia specifica* of works of art in modern European culture. Why this is so can only be answered with the help of Kulturkritik and the philosophy of history.

(11) It is another interesting question whether the radical conventionalism of aesthetic judgements is a product of the autonomous operation of everyday consciousness, or is rather determined by the laws of sociology of literature.

(12) The par excellence scientific approach focuses on the general and 'regular,' whereas its objects, i.e. specific works, are by nature individual. These works constitute an irreducible plurality.

(13) The nature of this trap can be summarized as follows. In what ways can one adequately describe and evaluate any kind of innovation of literary objectiveness and still insist on the radical plurality and conventionality of the literary work.

(14) Although it is well known that this trap of scientific logic is present at all levels of the literary communication, there has been little attention given to this fact by theoretical analyses.

(15) Obviously, the term 'traditional' is not used here to signify a particular phase in the history of literature. It denotes all alternative forms of objectiveness that have already been accepted by the conventionalist reception of literature.

(16) The adjective 'worldlike' is used incidentally here. It may evoke Georg Lukács's use of the same term, but this is not particularly important for the present argumentation.

(17) This distinction made in Carnap's neo-positivist philosophy will prove especially useful in this paper.

(18) Cf. Endre Kiss, 'Der Tod der 'k.u.k. Weltordnung' in Wien.' Wien-Graz-Köln. 1986.

(19) The following citation is one of the formulations of Feuerbach's idea serving as the basis for the above metaphor: "Aus dem Gegenstande erkennst du den Menschen: an ihm erscheint dir dein Wesen: der Gegenstand ist sein offenbares Wesen, sein wahres, objektives Ich" ('Das Wesen des Christentums.' Leipzig. 1957. p. 62.).

(20) The social recognition of scientific research of any objective domain is a highly complicated problem of the sociology of science.

(21) Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Igazság és módszer*. [Truth and Method. Outline of Philosophical Hermeneutics.] Budapest: Gondolat. 1984.

(22) This is in effect a regular process through which individual intellectual domains are transformed and brought into a mutual relationship with one another.

(23) This process can be seen to operate with an almost uniform regularity when objective domains interact. The looser the ties become that bind the substantive contents of an objective domain to their respective centre, the more they will tend to be organised around other centres.

(24) It could be argued that a new theory of literature is to be based on these new, secondary forms of literary objectiveness.

(25) Once again, when talking about the objective organisation of a literary work of art, the term is used in its most general sense. That is to say, the point made above about the radical singularity and conventionality of a literary work are not to be lost from sight.

(26) The development of theories of music and art after these have lost their corresponding objective domains may well exemplify what is suggested here.

(27) Truth and Method. p. 108.

(28) Ibid, p. 98.

(29) When historical forms of the artistic experience are put aside, a definition of aesthetic reception as an entirely unreflected process seems utterly impossible.

(30) The fact that his hermeneutics eliminates objectiveness could even be used to develop a general critique of Gadamer's theory.

(31) Truth and Method. pp.95-96.

(32) The fundamental change indicated by this shifting of the theoretical emphasis is not always expressed in such explicit forms.

(33) Truth and Method. p. 96.

(34) It is to be emphasised that the form of objectiveness meant here is not the one that is not organised by the literary work. Objectiveness is to be understood here in the sense of Roman Ingarden's definition of 'represented objectiveness'.

(35) Truth and Method. pp. 95-96.

(36) Truth and Method. p. 109.

(37) One could analyse the specific reasons why in the particular case of Gadamer's theory the elimination of literary objectiveness leads to the identification of the literary (aesthetic) domain with the religious sphere.

(38) Truth and Method. p. 111.

(39) That the elimination of literary (represented) objectiveness leads directly to the actualisation of another objective domain is well exemplified by the following quote from

Gadamer's work: "... only in the case of the religious picture does the true existential substance of an image come to the fore...It now becomes absolutely clear that an image is not representing a represented being, but communicates with what it represents in an existential mode..." (Truth and Method. p. 122.—my italics, E.K.)