

The Problem of Subjectivity in Value Judgment

David K. Rod

Stated simply, the problem of subjectivity in value judgment is the problem of defending one's evaluation of a theatrical performance as being anything more than a matter of personal opinion. Evaluative assertions appear often to be statements about the objective nature of a performance; but on closer examination, they invariably turn out to be manifestations of the critic's subjective responses to the performance. As such, the validity of these assertions becomes questionable, and their status as important components of the critical process becomes highly problematic.

Critics have not always felt constrained by the problem of subjectivity. Plato, for instance, in identifying works which he judged to be unsuitable as educational materials for the guardians of his ideal republic, gave no indication that he considered his choices to be a matter of personal opinion. Instead, he pointed to passages from the works in question and used the presence of such passages as the criterion for passing judgment on each work (*Republic* 377b-383c). Similarly, Aristotle distinguished the finest kind of tragic plot from less excellent ones on the basis of formal features recognizable in such plots. He did not suggest that a different critic might be allowed a different set of preferences in regard to tragic plots (*Poetics* 1452b-1454a).

In the twentieth century, however, the issue of subjectivity has dominated the discussion about critical evaluation, and any authoritative pronouncement about the value of a particular artwork is certain to be challenged. Among the most coherent discussions of the problem of subjectivity in value judgment is the one which appears in the introduction to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye argues that evaluation has no place--or, at best, only a very limited place--in true criticism:

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Value-judgments are subjective in the sense that they can be indirectly but not directly communicated. When they are fashionable or generally accepted, they look objective, but that is all. The demonstrable value-judgment is the donkey's carrot of literary criticism, and every new critical fashion . . . has been accompanied by a belief that criticism has finally devised a definitive technique for separating the excellent from the less excellent. But this always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste. (20)

According to Frye, judgments about the comparative value of different artworks--the extent to which one work is better than another--are always based upon prevailing systems of social, moral, or intellectual values; and as these systems of value change with time, so may all comparative assessments of artistic value. Furthermore, the judgment of positive value *within* an artwork, which Frye identifies as the real concern of the evaluating critic and which he says "produces the direct value-judgment of informed good taste, the proving of art on the pulses, the disciplined response of a highly organized nervous system to the impact of poetry" (27)--such judgment is always limited by the fallibility of individual good taste, by such evaluation's being based, necessarily, on direct experience of the artwork, an experience which criticism can talk about but never reproduce, and by the fact that enjoyment of a work and critical approval of that same work are not the same thing (20-29). Terry Eagleton, in summing up Frye's argument about subjectivity in value judgment, puts it rather neatly: "When we analyze literature we are speaking of literature; when we evaluate it we are speaking of ourselves" (92).

For the critic of theatrical performance, the kinds of limitations imposed by this modern distrust of value judgments in criticism can be a serious problem. In the first place, Frye's notion that the direct experience of the artwork must somehow be a separate issue from the critical study of that artwork does not apply very well to theatre. In theatre, direct experience of the artwork, the performance, is all the critic has to work with, for the performance is ephemeral; it exists only while the critic is experiencing it. A literary critic can read a poem or novel once for pleasure and then go back and examine it thoughtfully, methodically, and critically; but the theatrical critic must find a way to combine the direct experience of performance with the critical examination of that performance--or, if the two are irreconcilably separate, then to do both separately at the same time. Under such conditions, it is difficult to see how subjective response can be kept out of theatrical criticism.

In the second place, the theatrical critic is especially likely to be

interested in examining the performance as an interaction between what happens onstage and what happens in the auditorium. That is, by contrast again to the situation in literary criticism, an audience is prominently present at a theatrical performance; and critics of theatrical performance will, therefore, be especially prone to take the audience into account in their critical considerations of performance. As Timothy J. Wiles puts it,

[I]f art exists not only in objects by which we know it but also in the experience of those who perceive it, their existential presence is also a component of art. In other words, art is not art "in general" but is made up of the particular, unrepeatable interactions between the original creator's work and each of its new recipients, a transaction which leaves neither party unchanged. Of course, art possesses an aspect as a tangible and unalterable object, like a statue, just as it possesses an aspect as a changing and change-making interaction. Perhaps theater exists to illustrate this second aspect of art; for more than any other, theatrical art depends upon living and present mediators, actors and audience, for both its meaning and its existence. (2)

Under this view, even the artwork itself is not entirely objective.

If it is the interaction between audience and staged play which is the proper focus of critical examination for the theatre critic, then value judgments must be inextricably involved in theatrical criticism, for value judgment is an inherent part of the audience's interaction with the performance. That is, an audience will continuously make judgments about what is presented on stage, those judgments determining the nature and shape of the audience's reaction to the performance. As a member of the audience, the theatre critic will find his or her own judgments to be intimately bound up in the pattern of interaction which is the artwork. Even to describe, as non-evaluatively as one can, what occurs in a performance reveals, as Eagleton would point out, a series of judgments as to what has been worthy of notice (12-13).

Furthermore, it should be noted, judging value in a performance is not a single, monolithic proposition, a saying of yea or nay to the production as a whole. There are numerous aspects of a theatrical performance which present themselves for critical evaluation, and any informed critical response to the performance must involve many different kinds of value judgments. Thus, for instance, the critic will judge the expertise of the various participants in the performance,

making some assessment of the degree of skill displayed by each of them. Also, the critic will judge the worthiness of the material being performed, assessing the extent to which the play rewards the effort expended by the performers in putting it on and the time expended by the audience in watching it. Beyond these basic kinds of judgments, the critic may also evaluate the truthfulness of the performance (i.e., the extent to which it reveals something authentic about the nature of human experience), the morality of the performance (the extent to which it affirms or violates a given set of moral standards), the beauty or expressiveness of the performance (the extent to which it exhibits any of various aesthetic qualities or stimulates any of various aesthetic responses), or simply the ability of the performance to hold interest. Obviously, these various kinds of value judgments will interact with one another, as well as operating on larger or smaller levels within the performance as a whole, creating finally a very complex process.

Evaluation, then, although admittedly subjective, is not something that can be eliminated from the audience's response to theatrical performance; and if every member of the audience is thought of as being a critic, there is no problem of subjectivity in regard to value judgments in theatre. Even if every subjective, critical evaluation of a performance is different under such circumstances, audience members can simply be allowed to disagree.

The problem of subjectivity arises, of course, when the value judgments of certain individual audience members are given prominence for one reason or another: usually either because they are published in a newspaper or other mass medium, because they have extraordinary impact on the fortunes of those involved in the performance, or because they are presented together with a claim for their definitive validity, often in some scholarly forum. In this regard, a distinction has frequently been made between evaluations offered by "reviewers" and those offered by true "critics," the former supposedly providing their personal and unavoidably subjective responses to a performance in the form of a play review whereas the latter supposedly engage in a more thoughtful, deliberate, and objective assessment which will normally be published in a scholarly journal or book. In practice, the distinction generally turns out to be a distinction between critics of performance and critics of dramatic literature, for the scholarly critic of performance has only more time to work with than does a play reviewer, not more material (since the performance is ephemeral) and not a greater potential for objectivity. At least, it is arguably not true that taking a week or a month to write one's evaluation of a performance makes that evaluation more objective than one which is written immediately after the performance occurs (see also Brockett

68).

If all evaluative responses to performance are subjective and if some, by virtue of the way the world works, must nonetheless claim a more-than-usual degree of validity, then what is needed is a reliable method of evaluating value judgments, of assessing the extent to which any individual evaluative response to performance represents a valid assessment of the quality of that performance. Although such second-level evaluation involves its own set of theoretical difficulties, the range of reasonable approaches is, at least, somewhat more limited.

Among the various possible methods for evaluating value judgments, the one least respected in scholarly circles (although perhaps most honored in practical use) is evaluation based upon contemporary popularity. The basic assumption of this approach is that, if many people hold a particular value judgment of a theatrical work, then that value judgment is likely to be valid. Thus, a work's value can be measured in terms of its box-office appeal, which has at least the distinctive merit of providing an easily measurable assessment of the relative value of different theatrical works.

In scholarly discussions, the idea of assessing a work's merit on the basis of its popularity is most often mentioned only to be discarded--as is the case here. Certainly, a serious critic would like to distinguish between audience enjoyment of a performance and critical approval of that performance, even if both must be acknowledged to be subjective responses. Experience demonstrates that one can recognize value in a performance one does not enjoy and that, conversely, one can derive pleasure or amusement from a performance one recognizes as being of inferior quality (see Frye 28). Box-office success measures only the extent to which audiences enjoy a work, not the extent to which they approve critically.

More difficult to discard offhand is evaluation based upon a play's continuing popularity over an extended period of time. The fact that the works of Shakespeare, for instance, have continued to earn high ratings from audiences over the centuries while the works of most of his contemporaries have not suggests that those high ratings have had some validity, while the more temporary popularity of playwrights like Beaumont and Fletcher represented a faulty value judgment on the part of seventeenth-century audiences. Under this view, it may be conceded that current theatrical fare is difficult or impossible to evaluate objectively and reliably but, the argument goes, a hundred years from now, critics will have a clearer view and will be able to separate what is merely fashionable from what has true and lasting value.

While there is much good sense in this line of thought, especially when it is applied to art in general, there is an inherent difficulty in

requiring theatre art to pass the test of time. Theatrical performances do not last a hundred years. Indeed, even the memory of a theatrical performance lasts only for the duration of a person's lifetime, and a hundred years from now, critics will be able only to speculate about the characteristics and value of our current theatrical art. Furthermore, whenever the evaluation of a theatrical performance matters, it always matters now and not one hundred years from now.

In sum, methods of evaluating judgments based on how widespread those value judgments are prove to be unsatisfactory. Thus, the effort among theatre scholars to establish some degree of reliability in the evaluation of theatrical performance tends to focus on one of two other methods.

Some writers on the proper approach to theatrical criticism have suggested that the way to achieve a modicum of reliability in evaluative judgments is to minimize the impact of subjectivity by providing an impersonal theoretical construct against which the value of any individual work can be measured. Kenneth M. Cameron and Patti P. Gillespie, for instance, argue that a true critic can be distinguished from a mere reviewer because the former evaluates on the basis of an established theory rather than on the basis of personal opinion:

Most of all, what [the critic] is not is someone who uses *I* a lot. Indeed, it may be said that a function of theory is the short-circuiting of *I*: it is not "my" emotions or "my" beliefs that enter into judgment, but an intelligent analysis based on an accepted theory. (426)

The theory, presumably, is a construct which can be applied by any intelligent human being, and comparing the individual art work to the theory can be accomplished without involving the critic's personal and subjective interests or tastes.

Unfortunately, Cameron and Gillespie conclude that, since no theory of performance exists at present, no true criticism of performance is possible either (427). Thus, their analysis does not really facilitate a non-subjective evaluation of performance.

Other writers have offered constructs which are less comprehensive than a complete theory but which still provide the critic with a set of guidelines against which to compare performances. For example, there is Goethe's set of three basic questions--What is the playwright trying to do? How well has he or she done it? Is it worth doing?--which has been elaborated upon by such recent writers as James H. Clay and Daniel Krempel into a rather extensive outline composed of specific questions that a critic can apply to a performance (150-151). The difficulty with such constructs is that they must

either finally restate the basic subjective question, "Is it good?"--perhaps hiding that question in the midst of a welter of specific, objective questions--or else they threaten to reduce criticism to the application of a formula, making no accommodation for unanticipated genius. In any case, no set of guidelines currently commands the kind of widespread allegiance that would set it apart as a reliable method of evaluating theatrical performances.

A second general approach to the problem of subjectivity in criticism begins by acknowledging that audience interaction with art is necessarily and inescapably a personal and subjective matter and, instead of trying to eliminate the human factor from the critic's response to the work, tries simply to identify the best personal and subjective response to the work. Under this view, not all individual, subjective responses to a performance are created equal; there are certain individuals who, by virtue of their experience or sensitivity, deserve to have their responses to the performances treated with special respect.

Susanne K. Langer puts forward this view in the course of her extensive discussion of the nature of art in *Philosophy in a New Key*:

Standards of art are set by the expectations of people whom long conversance with a certain mode--music, painting, architecture, or what not--has made both sensitive and exacting. (263)

Later, in *Feeling and Form*, she identifies the characteristic which qualifies people to understand art as "responsiveness," and she argues that responsiveness is a natural gift, not something that can be taught. Like creative talent, however, responsiveness can be developed by experience (396). Thus, it must be understood to exist in varying degrees in different people, making some people better qualified than others to appreciate art by virtue of their natural capacities for responsiveness and the extent to which those capacities have been developed.

Although this notion of the subjective views of certain critics being specially privileged may grate against the democratic sensibilities of contemporary society, it does provide a method of rating the quality of diverse value judgments offered in respect to a particular performance; one need only examine the qualifications of the various critics offering those value judgments. Furthermore, as some writers have noticed, this elitist view of criticism provides a rationale for the education of theatre critics, one that does not depend upon the creation of a critical formula that can supposedly be applied to all performances.

Stephen M. Archer, for instance, devotes a section of his discussion of the critic's role in theatre to listing what he calls "the qualities of the excellent critic." Among these, he includes love of the theatre, fairness, theatrical experience, writing skills, and concentration (251-252). George R. Kernodle, too, argues that the problem of subjectivity in theatrical criticism can be ameliorated if critics learn to take a proper attitude toward their task:

In making his evaluation, the critic places his own feelings in the wider context of his vision of the theatre and his belief in human values. Even if his primary response to the theatre, as to any real experience in art or life, is subjective, unique, and individual, it is not an isolated experience. . . . A complete evaluation may start with the critic's own spontaneous likes and dislikes, but it also involves his ideas of what kind of institution the theatre should be and of how the drama can best serve the spiritual needs and purposes of his day. (646)

Thus, Kernodle urges critics to maintain a wide view, recognizing the broad range of human needs and pleasures that theatre serves, for criticism undertaken with such an attitude will be the most worthy kind of criticism.

Of course, rating critical evaluations on the basis of characteristics possessed by the critics making those evaluations is not really a solution to the problem of subjectivity in criticism. It is more like an admission of defeat. Subjectivity is inescapable; therefore, rather than trying to avoid subjectivity, we try to identify the most suitable subject. In practical terms, the best we can do is, first, to choose carefully which critical voices we pay attention to and, second, for those of us who are educators, to bend our efforts toward raising the level of critical responsiveness in future theatre audiences.

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Drama, Metadrama, and Perception

RICHARD HORNBY

This book deals with the way in which drama relates to reality, to itself, and to culture generally. The first section is a critique of realism as a theory (rather than a practice) in drama. While realistic theory implies that all elements of drama (including those of performance) can be tested in terms of how "close to" or "far from" life they are, Hornby shows that is never about reality directly. Plays operate within a complex of cultural codes, including that of drama itself, and surrounding that, other cultural systems including those of theatre, literature, and social behavior. Drama is always about the way we *perceive* reality through culture (of which drama itself forms a part).

The middle section deals with metadrama, a topic explored by a number of critics over the past few decades, but which has not generated any systematic overview. Hornby provides one, with a philosophical discussion of each possible type of metadrama, drawing upon theories of psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and deconstructive criticism.

Broadly speaking, metadrama is drama about drama, and all plays are in a sense metadramatic. There are many varieties of metadrama, however, of varying degrees of explicitness, and the more explicit the metadrama, the more it generates a sense of estrangement in the audience, who are forced to realign their perception of the dramatic illusion.

Such estrangement is the ultimate aim of serious drama. In the final section of the book, Hornby looks at six plays from differing periods—*Oedipus the King*, *As You Like It*, *Woyzeck*, *The Father*, *The Master Builder*, *Betrayal*—in which the playwright examines the ways by which his society views reality. A recurrent motif in the plays is the conflict between scientific, objective thinking, and intuitive, subjective thinking, reflecting the "crisis" that Husserl saw in our culture.

About the Author: Richard Hornby has degrees from M. I. T. and Tulane, and has taught drama at Bowdoin College, the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, and is currently Professor of Theatre at Florida State University. Hornby is the author of numerous articles and books on various aspects of drama. He also has had considerable experience in the practical theatre as a director, playwright, and professional actor.

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