

~~DATE~~
May 2, 1991

DON
GERTAMENIAN - 1

Dear Don,

I feel terrible that it's taken me this long to respond, but the revision-process on my manuscript went on much longer than I'd anticipated (a clear case of work expanding to fill the time allotted to it). At any rate, the morning after I disengaged from Acting as Reading, I engaged with Engaged With Art.

Whenever you bring me before a particular artifact and speak to me of it, or of your engagement with it, I felt my own limited "craft of seeing" grow by leaps and bounds. A few examples of discussions that held me rapt: the Johns-Martin comparison (esp. 22-3, 28-9), the account of spatial transitions in Titian (pp. 44-48), the long meditation on buying or not buying the Berthot (pp. 130-8), the account of your response to Bizen pots (pp. 162-3). In my admittedly limited experience of art criticism, this is as good as it gets. And not just art criticism, either. Your discussion of The Solitary Reaper is the best account of that poem--and one of the best accounts of any Wordsworth poem--that I have read.

With the more general parts of the book I have more trouble, but I'm not sure what the trouble is. I agree with most of what you say and yet I am often uncomfortable with how you say it. I feel a tension in the writing that I think may reflect conflicting ambitions of yours for the book. On the one hand, I think you want the book to be some sort of theoretical treatise on aesthetics--albeit a treatise firmly rooted in personal, "phenomenological" experience. On the other hand, I think you want the book to work as a series of beautifully written, essayistic reflections--albeit reflections of some intellectual and methodological sophistication.

On p. 182 you seem to disavow theory as a refusal to engage with imaginative experience--as, indeed, a kind of defense against such engagement (cf. "trenches," "burrows"). Yet earlier in the book you were proposing to offer "first principles" (p. 27), and the earlier sections of the book are filled with careful, theoretical-sounding formulations of concepts and terms. For example:

p. 28: "I turn my experience . . . particular shape."

p. 29: "I think I may say . . . power of another."

True, both these examples make their gesture toward theorizing with some stylistic ambivalence toward the making of such gestures ("I think I may say..."). Yet they do ultimately make the gesture; and I'm not sure that the subsequent discussions conducted on this level work as theoretical or philosophical discourse. It may be that such terms and phrases as "bring into being," "fashion," "shape," "contribute to the power" are not--cannot be made--yours enough to seem to be stating a theory by you. Or it may just be that

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the explicans-language is on the same level as the explicandum-language, so that, by the time I get to the end of the definition, I feel I know what you mean--but it turns out to be pretty much what the term being defined initially led me to suppose ~~what~~ was meant. (A big exception to this tendency is your conception of a "craft of seeing," which, as you developed it, quickly ascended in this reader's mind from a startling ~~revelation~~ to a resonant paradox.)

On the other hand, the book is full of beautifully crafted sentences and paragraphs that seem to claim another kind of authority altogether, not that of the aesthete or philosopher reasoning well from first principles but that of the sensitive responder-stylist who may be trusted to be right because he has so obviously got it right. (For example: the first sentence beginning on p. 37, with its evocative allusions to Wordsworth and Eliot.)

The upshot of this conflict of styles or modes or ambitions, or whatever it is, is that the more general and abstract parts of the book strike me as, paradoxically, the most "private," not because they do not communicate, but because what they communicate is some sort of solitary wrestle of a mind striving to clear imaginative and intellectual space for itself. Whereas, when we come before a pot or picture again, I feel you back with me, speaking more to me, of what concerns us both.

What initially struck me as most puzzling about the book has emerged, on reflection, as what is most intriguing about it. I refer to the sudden "intrusion" (as it first appeared) of all the collector/collection stuff on pp. 111-138, followed by a return to the reflective mode of the earlier sections. Why, I initially wondered in Part III, was I suddenly hearing about the collector's experience--this, although I was consistently fascinated by what you had to say on this subject. And having once made the switch, why was I back in the realm of more general reflection in Part IV? A puzzle--until two widely separated passages suddenly leapt into juxtaposition for me:

p. 35: "To allow the free play . . . experience of of the picture."

p. 111: "Buying secures connection . . . live with it."

Could it be that the collector's "connection" (p. 111), achieved by purchase, enacts the viewer's "commitment" (p. 35), or is at least an attempt at such enactment? If so, then the book's implicit "action" was only now clear to me. As spectator, one moves among conflicting impulses of consciousness; as collector, one attempts a kind of "closure" (one closes the deal!), and then--surprise ending!--finds that the old conflicts continue within the new closure: "Bought the Berthot, and still puzzled by it" (p. 138). From this point of view the whole structure of the book suddenly made sense.

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It (the structure) seemed to be dramatizing the question: what difference to the unresolvable tensions of perception can an act of resolve toward what one is perceiving make? And this seemed to me a plausible theme or "superobjective" for the book because all along I had felt a conflict between the need for closure and the mistrust of closure at work in your discussion. (For example, with the passage quoted on p. 35--"pro-closure," as it were--contrast the middle paragraph on p. 34.) You are always looking for a model of resolved tension that does not merely "totalize"--and yet you are constantly acknowledging tensions, as for example between pleasure and sorrow (p. 5), the human and the formal (p. 13), change and changelessness (p. 35), etc. Acquisition/collection seems to resolve the tension, but turns out to be only a "moment" in its continuing history: even as collector you will have to "stay with an experience that seems not quite to hold together" (p. 32)--e. g., that Berthot that you are "still puzzled by."

I hope the pleasure I felt in being along with you on this inquiry comes through in what appears to me, as I reread this letter, a rather dogged attempt to account for problems and strengths. You made me want to go out and do some seeing--and in particular to try out your "method" of seeing as the successive (perpetual?) revision of earlier acts of perception by later ones. There is an exhibit of Fauve Landscapes at the Metropolitan this month. I think I'll go there and "see what I can do."

Love,

DON GENTMEMAN - 4

August 8, 1983

Dear David,

I am embarrassed that I have been so slow in writing about Gods of the Theater. Meg and I have been absorbed in finishing our remodelling project upstairs, and also in the purchase of another painting (!). Also, I have found Gods, a difficult play. The situation is puzzling to me. I can't find an appropriate relationship to assume toward the characters. I can see how the play would be a delight to actors. At first glance it might seem rather abstract and fancy, yet as the actor speaks the speeches and moves the moves, he must find that the play is very alive--written with vivid awareness of stage presentation. And then the wry reflections on the action of the theater implicit in the play would become sparkling and delightful.

I especially enjoyed the action at the end of Act II. It was exciting to imagine. Also, it brought back memories of the acting exercises you devised some years ago, and made clear how those exercises were grounded in theatrical possibility. You see, it's hard to educate even your friends. The world is a slow study.

I know the three act structure caused you grief, but it seems to me expertly realized. The shifts in focus (and implicit pauses in pace) are very clear, yet continuity and complexity of story and theme are maintained fully. Also continuity of diction and staging. In this respect Gods is different from Messages, where each new act parallels previous ones.

Maybe my problem with Gods is not so much with the situations itself, but with my inability to see a clarification of the situation at the end. I don't know where the gods go, or whether the indeterminacy of their destinations has a point. Because I don't know what really is going on when CRK gets them to move, I don't see any further into the situation that has existed up to that point. In any case, to hearken back to Messages again, I felt much more readily and intuitively what was at stake in that situations.

In Gods, as in all your work, I greatly admire the intelligence that shines throughout--in the nifty word-play no less than in the deeply wrought puzzles about the nature of the theater (puzzles whose vehicle is in part the nifty word play). I guess I will reveal again that I am a slow study by saying that I think your work is very alien from most American play-wrighting--less reflective of Ibsen and more of Cocteau and Anouilh. As such, I think your work springs from the delight you take in inquiry and in the working out of ideas--wonderful resources of your own nature, But surely the singularity of your work on the US scene makes acceptance of it more difficult.

I hope you have gathered from what I have written that I count it a great privilege to read your work and take a little share in it. Your career is the purest of ours all.

My very best to you and Sue,

With love,

D.