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Description and Explanation in Art Exegesis

Motto: »Aesthetics is a reason giving activity.«¹

The topic of this paper, as implied by the title, is a question-beggar: it is assumed that there is a relation between description and explanation in art exegesis. Moreover, it is a topic that many aestheticians would be reluctant to accept as valid and necessary to their field, so one could believe from the beginning that it has a polemic mainspring. If we were to accept the traditional disparities of this century's philosophy, we could say that the theoretical status of description and explanation would not be an interesting problem in a hermeneutical or metaphysical discourse, simply because in such a perspective description is held as an elementary, self-evident operation, while the explanation of art passes for a nonsense. The conceptual pair 'description – explanation' announced by the title is obviously an analytic binomial. However, my intention is not to augment the dispute, choosing *ab initio* the analytic treatment of a problem that had a different career – namely, a *wrong* career – in the continental, outdated philosophy, but rather to enhance the benefits of pluralism, which can provide access to any series of concepts or method that indicates even the smallest clarification or progress in understanding art. The reason for designating the discussion of art by an ambiguous and eccentric term, *exegesis*, is that in my opinion both art criticism and aesthetics have to answer by specific means to two fundamental questions, more or less explicit: *why* does the work of art exist, and *how*, and both questions are directly related to description and explanation.

I said that the relation between description and explanation is a typically analytic question. However, if we consider it strictly from the historiographic perspective, its connection with art exegesis seems fallacious or artificial. From the very beginning, the leaders of analytic trend ignored or referred only indirectly to the problems of art, partly because those problems did not seem essential to the clarification of the philosophical realm and knowledge, partly because its sources did not include art among the main issues.² Even now, when it is said that we have entered 'the post-ana-

¹ William Righter, *Logic and Criticism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963, p. 22.

² Arnold Isenberg thinks that the minor attention paid by the first analytic philosophers to aesthetics and art criticism is due to the fact that »none of the leaders of the analytic movement, such as Moore and Russell, have ventured into a field – i.e.

lytic era', analytic aesthetics does not enjoy more credit: on the contrary, it is rejected as a late syndrome, some sort of childish disease which is embarrassing to experience as a grown-up. Despite this frivolous objection, I will try to show, using description and explanation as a guideline, that, on the one hand, analytic aesthetics is not at all excessive or tardy, and, on the other hand, that its general principles which took their classical form decades ago, can still be improved.

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Looking back to the beginning of the century, when the »linguistic turn« emerged from the principles of logical atomism, it becomes clear that the theoretical status of description did not become any distinct for all its vacillations between the opposite limits of the same trend. It is true that in analytic terms description has been discussed mainly in its *philosophical* sense. Its connection with art came later, and only to the extent to which art was relevant as a source of examples in a specialised, logical context. Naturally, description proved to be a questionable issue for aesthetics only after it was admitted as a general philosophical problem.

The logical starting point in the analysis of description had a strong influence on this concept's career, including its aesthetic implications. In his celebrated Theory of Descriptions, Russell stressed that description is the background for a distinct type of knowledge (*knowledge by description*), as distinct from *knowledge by acquaintance*, the latter being logically independent from the knowledge of truths. Knowledge by description, although apparently based on sensations, depends on the knowledge of particular truths that make the connection between the object described and sensory data. Despite the common impression that sensory data result from direct experience, in fact objects and other people's minds cannot be known by acquaintance, but only by description. Therefore, description is an essential sequence in the knowledge of things, and, virtually, it becomes a prerequisite to any discourse that records this knowledge (be it philosophical, scientific or artistic).

In his theory of descriptions, Russell was led to the conclusion that most of the nouns and proper names are, in fact, descriptions. More often than not we have the impression of talking about things we know contiguously,

aesthetics – that was not shunned by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke or Kant.« See Arnold Isenberg, »Analytic Philosophy and the Study of Art«, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46 (1988), pp. 125-36. Other authors, and among them Richard Shusterman, who particularly insists on this idea, count Moore as »a prototype of analytic aesthetics.« See Richard Shusterman, »Introduction: Analysing Analytic Aesthetics«, in Shusterman (ed.), *Analytic Aesthetics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 4.

but in fact our knowledge emerges from prior, implicit descriptions that we are not aware of. The leading part of description in the process of knowledge comes from the fact that it allows us to transcend the limits of individual experience and to communicate it to others by a meaningful language, restored by logic. In order to be accepted as part of this language, descriptions must be reduced to those elements that we know immediately, and take the form of a non-ambiguous, definite description. An object is known by description when we know that »there is one *and only one* object that has a certain property.«³ The main thing about this definition is that this univocal relation works as a truth condition: if there is no real object which has the property mentioned by description, *or there is more than one*, that statement is false. As for the descriptions of imaginary objects (non-entities), they must be transformed into existential statements, whose truth condition – the correspondence with a real object – can eventually be verified by a non-mediated experience.

The philosophical implications of the theory of description have been considered so influential that Russell's perspective was at first greeted as »a paradigm of philosophy«.⁴ If we were to accept this enthusiastic perception entirely, the consequences for aesthetics and art exegesis would be devastating: one can hardly imagine a situation in art where an aesthetic quality corresponds to a single object, in order to have definite descriptions for every work of art and to transform the language of art exegesis into a »meaningful language«. Subsequently, the critics rightfully stressed that Russell's demands against philosophical language are exaggerated, that he did not explain how the description works in common language, and mainly that the univocity condition can be satisfied only in a logical, artificial frame. In most of the cases, the way in which we can refer to a particular object cannot be established except by particular circumstances: we leave it to the context to show which specific object we are referring to. Despite the restrictive character that makes it unrealistic, among the advantages of this theory is that it shows the importance of the distinction between the grammatical form of a sentence and the logical form behind it, and that these two forms cannot be made to coincide, although the perfect overlap would be ideal. But what I think is an essential fact about Russell's theory, even if apparently it indicates nothing to art or aesthetics, is the accent on the idea of implicit de-

³ By this rule of denotation, Russell restores the principle expressed by Occam a few centuries ago, known as Occam's razor, which confines the philosophical entities to those which have a correspondent in the real world.

⁴ As an illustration of this enthusiasm, see F. P. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 263.

scription underlying proper names, and especially on the binding correspondence between description and object, namely, between description and reality.

A completely different view has Ludwig Wittgenstein, the other founder of the analytic trend, this time with an explicit reference to aesthetics and artistic objects.⁵ Again, the premises are not favourable to art exegesis, but for different reasons and by different arguments. Wittgenstein found the traditional course of aesthetics ridiculous, and also its official justification, unchanged since the debut of this discipline: to define what is beautiful is as ridiculous as it is to define a tasteful coffee, so absurd that it cannot be put into words.⁶ Wittgenstein was convinced that art criticism and aesthetics are meant »to express a reaction«, usually emotional, but it can be a sensory one as well. For this reason, aesthetic experience does not have too many chances to transcend the status of a strictly individual affair, whose verbal transcription is so inconclusive that it becomes useless, a mere *flatus voci*. A gesture, a simple exclamation or, even better, its reiteration would suffice in order to share such an experience. If we try to describe God's expression in Michelangelo's *Adam* we will see that it cannot be formulated and that »we should paint it again«. It is easier to justify a negative evaluation of an artistic object, because it is easier to find reasons to motivate dissatisfaction, than content. It is so difficult to share the impressions you have in front of an art object, that the chances to be approved or understood are real only if your collocutor accidentally has the same reaction.

In his essay *Philosophy of Art after Analysis and Romanticism*,⁷ Nicholas Wolterstoffs highlights the idea that, although analytic philosophy emerged mainly as a reaction against romantic essentialism and »expressionism«, analytic aesthetics did not succeed to get rid of all the obsessions of romanticism and maintained some of its delusions, such as »the uniqueness«, »the gratuitousness« and »the autonomy« of the work of art. I would add to this list another prejudice, which I consider to be more discordant and inconsistent with the analytic ideal: the emotionalistic view, which bears both on

⁵ I am talking, of course, about the later Wittgenstein and his controversial text *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966). Here I would like to prevent the usual objection, which I take to be shallow and artificial, that these lectures are a doubtful record of Wittgenstein's sayings, so their credibility should be lesser. If we were to apply this rigour consistently, Wittgenstein's single work would be the *Tractatus*, because it is the only book he published during his lifetime.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*, II, 2.

⁷ Nicholas Wolterstoffs, »Philosophy of Art after Analysis and Romanticism«, in Shusterman (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 32-58.

the art making and on the art criticism. It assumes that emotions are the main source of creation and the only background of criticism, and that it is not the work of art with its real features, but the *reactions* of the perceiver that gives the topic of art exegesis. Unfortunately, this residual romanticism persists even in Wittgenstein's opinion about aesthetics. According to Wittgenstein, the problems of aesthetics and the problems of the effects art has upon us are the same thing. In a footnote to *Lectures*, the subject of aesthetics is even more clearly restricted to the emotionalistic outlook: the problems of aesthetics, which are due to the influence art has upon us, do not concern the way these things are produced.⁸ The reason why the work of art cannot be described is that our personal feelings cannot be expressed, but only suggested by words, or ideally, by gestures. This substitution between the object and the emotional reaction to it is the core of Wittgenstein's view about description, and, eventually, about aesthetics.

Wittgenstein also rejects the possibility of a psychology of art, given the fact that he rejects psychology in principle. Nothing about art would change as a result of this science's progress (even though there were many hopes set on it at that time), since it is doubtful we can talk about laws of mind which we can discover in the long run. The idea of aesthetics being a branch of psychology, as well as that of a happy time, when all the mysteries of Art (written with capital letters) will have been solved thanks to psychological experiments, seems to him totally idiotic.⁹ Under these circumstances, which obliterate the chances of both metaphysical and scientific approaches of art, the reach of art exegesis cannot be otherwise but insignificant to knowledge.

If we confront Russell's and Wittgenstein's views on description, we can notice that analytic aesthetics obviously inherited from its forebearers nothing else but a dilemma, perfectly summarised by Shusterman as »descriptive accuracy *versus* prescriptive clarity«,¹⁰ and illustrated with a short, imaginative fragment from *Philosophical Investigations*: »won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? /.../ And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics.«¹¹ But the analytic survey of description cannot stop to these two extreme options, because subsequently they produced compound versions, more sophisticated, but more ambiguous as well. Between Russell's view, which ascribes description a major role in the process of knowledge and compels it to adequacy with the reality of the object,

⁸ Wittgenstein, *op.cit.*, IV, 1.

⁹ Wittgenstein, *op.cit.*, II, 35.

¹⁰ Shusterman, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 77.

and Wittgenstein's contemptuous notes, which forbid any relevance to aesthetics and even the possibility of being verbally expressed, there are many other readings of the problem. The new elements involved are the connection between description, evaluation and interpretation, and, for a less conformistic approach, its openness to *explanation*.

A frequent assessment in art theory and criticism, as well as in the theory of argumentation and even in epistemology, is that description cannot be separated from evaluation (very much as observation is theory-laden). The reason for this overlapping is the usual vocabulary of descriptions, which is almost identical with common language. Faced with a logical examination, art descriptions show a serious handicap, which I would call *the adjectival handicap*. Adjectives are not neutral, and more often than not to choose an attribute implies a positive or negative valorisation; when one describes a work of art, one implicitly states a value judgement. Moreover, the basic concepts of aesthetics themselves seem to be mere adjectives, abusively invested with a conceptual rank. Because of this adjectival source, some set all their hopes on analytic aesthetics, while others abandoned this field in favour of art theory,¹² which is still regarded – probably by virtue of the natural philosophical elitism – as a »second order« discipline. Under these circumstances, the question is: given its adjectival nature, what is the role of description in analytic aesthetics? Is it compatible with its anti-subjectivist, anti-romantic ideal and with the search for clarity?

I think the answer to this question is favourable to description. It also pleads for the philosophical pluralism I mentioned at the beginning of this text, and it contradicts the simplistic opinion that analytic aesthetics is an attempt to sterilise art exegesis. Even if description seems to depend on common language, it does not disturb the analytic ambitions at all: there is no need to adopt an extreme position and to design a fictitious limit case, in which description is neutral and evaluation is absent, as Northrop Frye suggested in his famous book of the late 1950s, where he calls evaluation »meaningless criticism« and «leisure-class gossip».¹³ Objections to description and evaluation are due to the same confusion underlying Wittgenstein's *Lectures*, which reduces artistic effects to emotional reactions. If we follow this line of argument, we will be forced to adopt a paradoxical position and to assert that, because of its adjectival handicap, any attempt to justify a state-

¹² A good example of this attitude is Ernst Gombrich, who explicitly made his choice for art theory, even if his work has a sufficient philosophical amplitude to lay claims as aesthetics.

¹³ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: New York, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 18.

ment in art exegesis is pointless, and every criticism is a private, first-person affair which mysteriously tends to become public.

However, a further substitution emerged lateley, which dominates art criticism and especially literary criticism, and combines *description* and *interpretation*. If description is inevitably subjective and evaluation is implicit, the concept of interpretation covers both meanings and gives them a new semantic amplitude. But it necessarily adds *reasons* or *motivations* to descriptions and evaluations, sometimes in a confusing assortment (for instance, Morris Weitz makes a strange distinction between *descriptive interpretations* and *evaluative interpretations*).¹⁴ Interpretation has been abundantly debated in writing, especially in the theory of literature, without a clear guideline toward a unique model. But the main thing about interpretation is that, be it in analytic or hermeneutical paradigm, it relies on arguments, irrespective of their nature.¹⁵ Therefore, by interpretation, which stands as its counterpart, any description becomes a presentation of *reasons*. I hope this will make using of the word *explanation* sound more natural in a discussion about art.

Again, if we were to follow the initial analytic direction and credit Wittgenstein's view on aesthetic reasons, the whole theoretical assessment of them would be restricted to the observation that they »are of the nature of further descriptions«, that they equals »the description of defects«, and that their relation to evaluation is »neither an empirically causal relation, nor a logical necessary relation.«¹⁶ It seems an aleatoric relation, based on subjective experience; moreover, aesthetic justification by reasons can start from a mere insatisfaction, very much as description does. If this is true, there can be no progress as concerns the theoretical status of art exegesis, and justification becomes useless, as a mere rationalisation of personal impressions.

Suppose that Wittgenstein and other analytic philosophers are right, and description is hopelessly subjective, because of its dependence on common language and because of the adjectival handicap. Still, this basic subjectivism, which also extends on justification, does not change the need and the constraint of reasons at all. It is precisely because description cannot

¹⁴ Morris Weitz, »Interpretation and the Visual Arts«, in *Theoria*, 39 (1973), pp. 101-112.

¹⁵ Despite the common dependence on arguments, it must be said that there is a major difference between these two types of argumentation: the hermeneutical discourse starts from an initial intuition and selects as reasons only the elements which confirm it (the procedure being known as *hermeneutical circle*), while the analytic one is grounded on a critical attitude which consists in confronting the pro and the counter arguments.

¹⁶ H. Morris-Jones, »The Logic of Criticism«, in *The Monist*, 50 (1966), p. 219.

stand by itself as a background of evaluation that reasons and motivations have been introduced in the analytic assessment of the language of art criticism. The emotionalistic perspective I mentioned before – which might be a fair evaluation of the discourse about art, of course, from a logical point of view – is a false impediment for analytic aesthetics to be entirely consistent and credible: it will always be a compulsory relation between the object (in our case, the artistic object) and the word that describes, evaluates, or simply designates it. The object of art is *a real* object, and any linguistic or verbal approach of it must face at least the minimal conditions of truth and assertability. But the work of art is more than a real object, it is a *public object*, and I would like to enhance this fact in order to prevent the facile objection that the reality of the object cannot be a sufficient condition because there are artistic objects whose existence is not material, but symbolic. If there is any difficulty in understanding Russell's idea about reality and existential statements, is quite sufficient to admit that works of art are »public and observable objects«. As Alan Tormey says, »one does not introspect, notice, observe, feel or detect that he judges that *q*. Critical judgements are *formed*, not found, and though the process of forming a critical judgment may be private, the target of the judgment – the art work, the object judged – is not.«¹⁷ Here, as elsewhere, if consistently stressed, subjectivism leads to the relativistic paradox, and a logical paradox is unacceptable in any theoretical or at least non-fictional discourse.¹⁸

Therefore, reasons, as well as descriptions, cannot be entirely first-person affairs. If they were, art exegesis would be unintelligible and maybe even untransmissible. Probably, not even the polemics, which make the glory and the relish of art criticism would not be possible, for there would be no object to quarrel about. The absolute subjectivity cannot be expressed: if it is, it means it surely hides intersubjective elements. To summarize, there are two things that become obvious from the analysis of description. They might sound as mere truisms, but they surely have the quality of the simple truths which restores the path to knowledge from time to time.

First, we know that in common language description cannot be otherwise but adjectival. We also know that it never stands by itself and always needs a further argument, which implies the use of *reasons*. Second, the adjectival handicap proved to be more like an advantage, because all the reasons, including aesthetic reasons, are *tested*. Two of the most common tests are the empirical test – the confrontation of the critical statement with the real object

¹⁷ Alan Tormey, »Critical Judgements«, in *Theoria*, 39 (1973), p. 41.

¹⁸ For an excellent discussion on relativism and its internal limits, on fundamental philosophical topics, see Thomas Nagel's book *The Last Word*, 1997.

– and the corroboration test, namely the test of the professional community, which always stands behind the word *tradition*.

If it is true that we can test and justify our claims about art with no need to get outside the common language and to reject aesthetics or art exegesis as irrelevant to knowledge or futile, why would it be necessary to introduce the concept of *explanation*? Apparently, the analytic tradition itself seems to make this operation pointless, since it credits description as a perfect substitute for explanation. For instance, in *The Problem of Knowledge*, Ayer shows that in philosophy description works as explanation, since philosophical problems cannot be settled by experiment. This position coincides with Wittgenstein's view that art cannot be »explained« otherwise than by the use of reasons (while science can use the explanation by causes or by laws). It is largely considered that justification by reasons is the only possible explanation in art, as it is seen as an instance of »human affairs« (as well as psychology, history, politics and so on).

And why wouldn't the presence of reasons be enough for analytic aesthetics? I think the answer to this question implies different types of arguments. First, there is a methodological argument: we still don't have a minimal model of critical judgement and its justification, and we still miss a typology of aesthetic reasons, not to mention a model of accurate description. Maybe the use of this external model – namely the scientific model – would help, even if it is rightfully considered too »strong« to be uncritically transferred to art exegesis. There are two major arguments against this transfer. First, explanation in science is symmetrical to prediction. Obviously, prediction in art is impossible, because each work of art is unique and its subjective background is beyond any doubt. We can hardly talk about an accurate retrodiction in art exegesis (assuming that description and critical evaluation can stand for retrodiction).¹⁹

However, it must be said that the comparison with science is contested only because more often than not the image of science is naive and abridged. The doubtful character of the symmetry between explanation and prediction is a common place in epistemology, and in order to illustrate this I would like to quote Patrick Suppes's prophecy that »we shall never be able to move from good explanations to good predictions«. ²⁰ In science, it is a common situation to face events that »are not predictable, yet in one sense explainable«, ²¹ and here Suppes is not talking about the sciences of man or »hu-

¹⁹ Michael Scriven, »The Objectivity of Aesthetic Evaluation«, in *The Monist*, 50 (1966), pp. 159-87.

²⁰ Patrick Suppes, »Explaining the Unpredictable«, in Suppes, *Models and Methods in the Philosophy of Science: Selected Essays*, Dordrecht/Boston: Kluwer, 1993, p. 119.

²¹ Suppes, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

man affairs«. I would suggest that three of the types of explanations Suppes recommends as most plausible in science pose no problem to art exegesis: *ex post facto* explanation by reasons, teleological explanation, and explanation by randomness. (For instance, although I never saw an example of this last one, I think it could be very interesting to exercise it with regard to contemporary aleamorphic art, and not only.) Another interesting proposal comes from Von Wright, who, in order to elude the problems of methodological monism in the sciences of man concedes to a form of practical syllogism which could eventually explain most of the human actions.

There are many other arguments to support the need of explanation in art exegesis that I can mention here. Personally, I take the search for »an aesthetic counterpart of science«²² – which probably is a typically analytical syndrome – as perfectly legitimate, as long as Russell's observations about language and things are valid. After all, the work of art is a real object, it is a part of reality as much as a natural event, and all the statements about it must face the criterion of truth and adequacy. However, the major argument that I would like to bring in favour of explanation in art exegesis brings me back to the *why-questions* I have mentioned before.

Despite their inherent problems, there is probably no reason why description and interpretation cannot be accepted as an appropriate answer to the *how-question* about art. Still, this cannot replace the other major question which I think is unavoidable, here as much as elsewhere, because it is an essential element of the human mind. Description is not enough, and we will always need and look for explanations, even if this search is not always explicitly assumed. Personally, I take any aesthetics to be mostly an attempt to answer the implicit *why-question* of art. To answer this question, all we have to do is to return constantly to our fundamental concepts and problems, and to keep the critical spirit awake.

²² Shusterman, *op.cit.*, p. 7.