

What Pleasure?

Happiness is the truth.

- Pharrell Williams

Happiness is the proof.

- Oswald de Andrade

How could anyone take issue with attention to the pleasure of the text? A substantial part of our pedagogical lives is spent leading students to find pleasure where before there had been none: in a text that is too unfamiliar, too long, too slow, too allusive, too elusive, too "difficult" – a catch-all that encompasses really anything that gets between a reader and the pleasure of the text – to reward an uninitiated reader. But if we mean by "pleasure" something that has to be taught, then we are already talking about something that looks more like a skill than an affect. (If we imagine the pleasure of the text is something that does not have to be taught, then we are experiencing our class position as a natural gift. I'll say no more about that). There are profound pleasures that are not so much affects as the side-effects of a kind of mastery – maybe these are even the pleasures worth having.

Despite their apparent similarity, then, there is a gulf between the words of Pharrell Williams, that "happiness is the truth," and those of Oswald de Andrade, that "happiness is the proof." The first gives voice to the central claim of affective criticism, namely that the pre-cognitive experience of subjective qualities is a fruitful field of investigation: that is, that affects have a truth of their own. The second expresses the central claim of Kantian aesthetic judgment, namely that affects are merely pathological -- their truth is of an order that is fundamentally uninteresting -- unless they index a more

prosaic, normative judgment. That you or I find a text pleasurable, in other words, tells us something about you or me, not about the text itself, and unless you or I are very interesting on our own account, such a judgment will not be of interest to anyone else. Unless of course, it does tell us something about the text itself: but in that case my or your particular pleasure or lack of it still isn't interesting on its own account, but indexes whether or not we have understood what it is that gives us pleasure in the text itself. Pleasure is then nothing more than a subjective index of a normative judgment.

But if the Kantian category of the "agreeable" does not and should not interest us, we should forget that another category, the category of the "good" is just as surely excluded from Kant's explication of aesthetic judgment. If judgments about the agreeable are merely pathological -- maybe you like cream in your coffee, maybe you like densely descriptive language -- then judgments about the good are, as it were, "merely" universal, subject to universally valid criteria and therefore subject to closure. Attempts to produce literature as "good" in the Kantian sense, that is as good for something, are today, in a field desperate to curry favor with its paymasters (who are at my rate unlikely to repay our subservience with respect), rampant. They are most conspicuous in postcolonial criticism in attempts to show that literature is good for producing empathy with or recognition of the other. For this claim to be true would involve two universal conditions, namely that literature be a plausible means to the desired end (dubious on empirical grounds) and that the ends themselves be desirable (implausible on logical grounds). While Kant was engaged in an analytic exercise, separating out different kinds of judgment, it is

worth pointing out that judgments about the agreeable are carried out perfectly competently by individuals, whose judgments are generally made actual by purchases on the market (in other words, non-normative claims about the pleasure of the text are therefore a kind of advertising -- "try it, you'll like it"). Meanwhile, judgments about the good are carried out more or less controversially by the state and by state-like institutions like parties and churches. Judgments about works of art, on the other hand, are best based not on the subjective whims of individuals (the personally agreeable) nor on the universal ground of the state (the common good), but rather by the peculiar Kantian category of a purposiveness without purpose, a formal unity whose principle is not to be justified by an appeal to a finality that precedes it. A judgment, that is, that is normative without being subject to closure. A judgment in which pleasure plays the part of an index, indicating more or less where a competent reader ought to find pleasure or where she should be able to argue that none is called for. The judgment, that is, of literary criticism as a discipline, which is to say a judgment that pertains to literary form.

I will devote the time that remains to making a case for the formal coherence of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, and for why that coherence matters.