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**History of Aesthetics**

**Lecture Notes**

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## 1. Introduction: Dos Art Still Matter?

### 1

Some time ago the New York Times mourned in an editorial the tragedy that just now, when the arts are flourishing in America they are yet “seriously threatened by a shortage of funds and support.” It is a lament that tends to return whenever either economic conditions or government policy has caused public support for the arts to dry up. The editorial went on to claim that “the arts are clearly one of this country's major strengths and sources of vitality.” Predictably it concluded with an appeal for public support of the arts.

I would like to agree with the sentiments expressed in that editorial. Yet they do not seem to me at all obvious. Nor are they easily defended. Are the arts really flourishing today? The art market would seem to suggest a positive answer: Hardly a month passes without news of an artwork fetching a new record sum at some auction. Is this a sign of artistic vitality? Today’s most discussed artists, say a Jeff Koons or a Damien Hirst, hardly seem in need of government support.

And there is that other question: Do we really need art? How can one justify spending time and money on art as long as there are more pressing needs? Should millions be spent on one painting as long as the money could be spent to alleviate human suffering or to help make this world a better place? How can there be a justification of such expenditures? How can one defend government support of the arts, as long as disease, hunger, and lacking educational opportunities remain a problem.

And finally, is it in fact clear that the arts are “one of this country's major strengths and sources of vitality”? Once more I invite you to think of the art of Jeff Koons? Does his art really matter? To whom? And why? To the general public? Just what are we thinking of when we claim that art is desperately in need of public support?

And if there is indeed a sense in which art is very much in need of public support, does this not suggest, that despite all the rhetoric, such art is not very much in demand. That is to say, the need for support in that case would not be based on public demand. Art that for whatever reason is in demand would seem to support itself today quite well.

The market sees to that. That is as true of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst as it was of Thomas Kinkade, who practiced a very different art.

But this is presumably not the kind of art that the editorial was thinking of. But what kind of art was it thinking of? Presupposed, at any rate, seems to be a distinction between commercially successful, popular art and art in some other, perhaps higher sense that is in need of public support — perhaps we should speak here of ART. But in what if any sense can this ART be said to be one of this country's major strengths? What examples could one give? Who cares about it? What does art matter?

## 2

What was asserted in that editorial should be compared with Tom Wolfe's now dated, but still illuminating book *The Painted Word*, which offered a sketch of what was when he wrote it, in 1975, the contemporary art scene. Much of what Wolfe then wrote still rings true. Art and the general public, Wolfe suggested, are linked today mostly by mutual indifference; while the general public is not paying much attention to what is going on in the ART WORLD, the world in which Koons and Hirst today are leading figures, that world is unconcerned about the general public. Let me read a few lines from *The Painted Word*:

Public? The public plays no part in this process whatsoever. The public is not invited (it gets a printed announcement later). The notion that the public accepts or rejects anything in Modern Art, the notion that the public scorns, ignores, fails to comprehend, allows to wither, crushes the spirit of, or commits any other crime against Art or the individual artist is merely a romantic fiction, a bittersweet Trilby sentiment. The game is completed and the trophies distributed long before the public knows what has happened... The public is presented with a *fait accompli* and receives the aforementioned printed announcement, usually in the form of a story or a spread of color pictures in the back of *Time*. An announcement, I say. Not even the most powerful organs of the press, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*, can discover a new artist or certify his work and make it stick. They can only bring you the news, tell you what artists the *beau hamlet*, Cultureburg, has discovered and certified.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Harper's Magazine*, April 1975

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism. With Other Essays*, tr. J. F. Scanlan (New

Small wonder then that the public should show little concern whether such art thrives or not.

Tom Wolfe's sketch of the art scene, including the artists and a small well to do elite, restricted to eight cities in five countries, distorts. Modern art is not quite as removed from the public as Tom Wolfe's caricature suggests. Still, like any good caricature, the distortion has its point. We cannot overlook the distance that separates the modern art world from the general public, the split between popular art and the art that matters to the art world. For the general public the latter holds little interest.

### 3

It would be a mistake to think that this is how things have always been, that there has always been a small wealthy elite interested in what was then taken to be serious art, and a mostly indifferent public, which had its popular art; that today's cultureburg had its predecessors in the courts of Baroque Europe and the art-obsessed merchant elite of the Renaissance. We only have to consider the culture of the Baroque to realize that as late as the eighteenth century art had a public importance that we no longer grant it. For most of us art has no more than a peripheral significance. What truly matters lies elsewhere. The distance that separates ART from the general public is just one sign of this. Another is the widespread tendency to connect ART with the past. When asked to think of the great artists, whom do you think of? Rembrandt and Van Gogh, Bach and Beethoven, Homer and Shakespeare. Faced with the art of our own time we quickly become unsure. Everything important seems to have been done, the vocabulary of art exhausted, attempts to develop new vocabularies more interesting than convincing. Think once more of Jeff Koons.

This is not at all a new feeling. More than a hundred and fifty years ago Hegel lectured that *from the side of its highest vocation art is for us something past*. Today this assumption seems anything but farfetched.

But do such dire pronouncements not do violence to the lively artistic scene that surrounds us? And isn't it always more difficult to do justice to the artistic life of the present than to what has already been created and has come to be taken for granted? And hasn't Hegel's gloomy pronouncement been defeated by the explosive development of the

arts since his day, that is to say by the whole development of modern art. Think of all that has happened in the world of art since Hegel lectured on the death of art in the 1820's! Van Gogh, Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol.

Yet before we can decide whether this development refutes Hegel, we have to try to understand what is being asserted: Hegel never meant to assert that in the future there would no longer be art, artists, and people passionately interested in art. What he argued for was rather that the shape of our modern, reflective culture can no longer grant art that role and importance that it had for the Greeks, or for the Middle Ages, or, in many parts of Europe, still for the Eighteenth Century. Today art has come to seem somehow beside the point, mere entertainment, perhaps highly refined entertainment, entertainment of the highest sort, but entertainment nonetheless. We no longer turn to art to tell us who we are and what we are to do. Art would seem to have lost its former ethical function.

#### 4.

At stake here is not just one philosopher's, namely Hegel's, understanding of art and its place in the modern world, but our own understanding, not just of art, but in the end of our own place.

To see this, we have to recognize the extent to which Hegel's pronouncement is supported by our common sense. We, too, I would suggest, tend to connect art in its highest sense with the past. Characteristic of that view is the association of art and museum. Great art is the sort of thing that has its proper place in a museum. — In passing I would like to suggest that this attitude seems to extend far beyond art; to religion, for example; and to nature. Look at the great churches of the past: how many of them today have become museums? Or consider the significance of setting aside a part of nature as national park or monument. Monuments serve to commemorate, most often the dead. What then do natural monuments commemorate? Does nature need commemorating? Is there a sense in which nature so understood, too, belongs already to the past and lies behind us? Will future generations know nature only in the form of natural monuments, nature preserves, and the like? We do indeed live in an age that increasingly forces us to question in what sense nature still has a place in the modern world, whether nature as romantic poets celebrate it, has not become a relic from the past.

By trying to preserve nature in especially created parks or monuments, we show that this loss, too, although perhaps inevitable, is nevertheless felt to be serious. It deserves to be protected, is in need of government support.

In similar fashion most of us approach ART as a collection of cultural monuments. Like "nature," "culture" leads us to a past threatened by the present. How many would place Jeff Koons besides Rembrandt or Leonardo da Vinci? Stepping into a museum or a concert hall we enter an aesthetic church, a sublime and rather chilly necropolis, where Bach and Beethoven, Rembrandt and Leonardo join frozen hands, where one is silent or speaks in hushed voices. Part of this attitude are an almost religious reverence and respect, but also, for many of us, a certain indifference. We sense that what truly matters lies elsewhere. What needs preserving does so precisely because while still highly valued, is in danger of losing its place in our world and therefore need to be protected, must be given a special place, often at great expense.

I have suggested that Hegel's thesis about the future of art receives considerable support from our own attitude to art. But if this claim is to be more than a superficial suggestion, it must be possible to show that both rest on similar considerations.

## 5

Let me mention three such considerations or assumptions about art— I shall return to them later in the course.

1. **Genuine art eludes our conceptual grasp.** Art surpasses reason. There is something mysterious about all genuine art. **The elusiveness of art** has been generally taken for granted. Of the philosophers we shall be studying, Kant is its foremost exponent. It finds expression in the claim that a work of art cannot finally be explained; or that we cannot give a recipe that will assure the production of masterpieces. The elusiveness of art is taken for granted by those who insist that art requires inspiration or genius.

2. **Genuine art gives us insight into reality.** There is, on this view, a sense in which works of art can legitimately be said to be true or false. Beauty and truth cannot finally be disentangled.

This is a far more questionable claim than the first. Of the philosophers we shall be studying, Kant most explicitly questions it. And you may well want to agree with him on this point. Do we still tie beauty to truth? I shall term a conception of art that insists that the point of art is not to reveal reality, but to provide for a special kind of pleasurable experience an **aesthetic conception of art**. On that conception, what matters about art is not whether it is true or false, but whether it succeeds in giving us aesthetic pleasure, however that is understood. The aesthetic view of art tends to make art into entertainment, where we should not be too quick to insist that this leaves out something essential. What is wrong with a view of art as a species of entertainment?

Many of us, however, and especially many artists, expect more from art than just entertainment. We expect somehow to be edified or enlightened. Why do you read a novel or go to the movies? Just to be entertained? And what works do you consider most significant? I suspect that many of you would pick works that you felt somehow edified or enlightened you. The traditional association of the architecture of museums, theaters, concert halls with that of temples reflects something of such expectations. Measured by them, modern art is found all too often disappointingly empty, at best fun, often annoying or boring. The most popular painters still tend to be those whom we find edifying, like Andrew Wyeth or Norman Rockwell, or more recently and on a much lower level Thomas Kinkade, although for some time now attempts at such edifying art have tended to produce Kitsch, where "Kitsch" refers to art that we experience as in some sense false or dishonest. But the very usefulness of the term "Kitsch" presupposes that we are dissatisfied with the aesthetic approach to art, that we continue to look for something like truth in art. I shall call a view that insists that art should reveal reality, should uncover somehow what matters most profoundly an **ontological view**. Hegel, as we shall see, has such an understanding of art and precisely because he does, he has to argue that art in its highest sense belongs to the past. For, if Hegel is right, there is something about the shape of the modern world that tends to reduce art to a form of entertainment. The meaning of Hegel's assertion thus becomes clearer: When he speaks of the highest vocation of art, he understands art ontologically as a revelation of reality. He never meant to deny that there would still be aesthetic art, art as entertainment.



But what is it about the modern world that on Hegel's view denies to art an ontological function? This brings me to my third presupposition.

3. This presupposition concerns not art, but truth. The pursuit of truth, Hegel insists, demands that our understanding be **clear and distinct**. Only what can be so understood is real. The modern world, if Hegel is right, presupposes this understanding of reality. Truth is linked to conceptual transparency. This understanding of reality and truth found its classical expression in Cartesian method, which triumphed in modern science and technology.

## 6

I have given you a simple model. I shall return to it when we consider Hegel. But consider once more our three presuppositions:

1. All genuine art eludes our conceptual grasp.
2. Art reveals reality.
3. Only what can be expressed in clear and distinct thoughts or propositions is real.

It should be evident that we can hold on to any two, but not to all three presuppositions. Hegel does so only by claiming that truth has itself undergone a development and has come into its own only in the modern period. We may indeed want to understand modernity as the age shaped by this coming into its own of truth, to be more specific, of the Enlightenment and its faith in reason. On this view it is nothing other than the progress of the human spirit that has to leave art behind, at least as long as art is understood ontologically, as revealing reality.

Central is the problem of the relationship between art and truth, between aesthetic experience and knowledge. That relationship shall occupy us throughout this course. We shall focus on just five thinkers, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, although I shall touch on some others, such as Plotinus, Augustine, Baumgarten, Hume, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. Plato and Heidegger, i.e. the beginning and the end of this course, stand in a curiously inverse relationship: Plato's commitment to philosophy and its truth forces him to become a critic of art and especially of poetry. His attack on the poets helps mark the beginning of philosophical speculation about art and this is no

accident. In its beginning philosophy had to see art as a rival whose claims to serve the truth had to be challenged. Thus the poet has no real place in Plato's *Republic*. This expulsion of the poet from the ideal state is of a piece with the privileging of philosophy. Both rest on a particular understanding of the requirements of truth. Aristotle's *Poetics* may be read as a defense of poetry against Plato's charges, although we should ask ourselves whether this defense succeeds only because Aristotle no longer takes the ontological function of art and poetry quite as seriously as Plato did and therefore could no longer see art as a serious rival to philosophy. Following Plato's lead, but questioning Plato's critique of the artist, Plotinus will once again give an ontological significance to art and a generally ontological approach remains decisive for the Middle Ages. That view is undercut by the Cartesian insistence on clarity and distinctness as a presupposition of genuine understanding. That insistence leaves art only an aesthetic function.

It is therefore no accident that when the philosophy of art emerges in the eighteenth century, i.e. in the Age of Reason, as one of the main branches of philosophy, it does so in the form of **aesthetics**. The term "aesthetics" dates from this time. It was coined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in his dissertation of 1735. Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, on which we shall spend quite a bit of time, is the central document of modern aesthetics. Hegel may be said to have returned to an ontological conception, but precisely because he recognizes the traditional association of art and truth, which placed art in one circle with philosophy and religion, he has to insist that there is a fundamental break in the history of art, that modern art is essentially unlike the great art of the past. We can speak of a shift from an ontological to an aesthetic conception of art. Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* provide what I would consider the most challenging interpretation of the situation of art in the modern world that we have.

Heidegger, the last philosopher we shall be studying in some detail, is in some ways quite close to Hegel. Indeed, he concludes his essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art," with the question whether Hegel is not perhaps right when he argues that art in its highest sense lies behind us. He grants Hegel that this thesis is supported by the entire history of western culture, more specifically by that understanding of truth and reality that first announces itself in Greek philosophy and culminates in our science and

technology. If art in its highest sense is still to have a future, Heidegger suggests, we shall have to invite the poets to return to the Republic, take a step back from philosophy to poetry, although the phrase "step back" is misleading, for the "step back," as Heidegger understands it, would also be a genuine step forward, a step beyond modernity. And that we take such a step, Heidegger suggests, is necessary for our spiritual health. In this sense Heidegger may be considered a postmodern thinker.

But to understand more clearly what is at issue here we must turn first to Plato and thus to the beginning of philosophical speculation concerning the essence of art.

## 2. Beauty as the Object of Love

### 1

In my first lecture I introduced you to the topic of the course and gave you an overview. Today I would like to turn to Plato. But before I do, I would like to take a small detour. In *Art and Scholasticism* the philosopher Jacques Maritain, who is here following Thomas Aquinas, offers us the following definition of the fine arts:

Art in general tends to make a work. But certain arts tend to make a work of beauty and thereby differ essentially from all the rest.<sup>2</sup>

Like all **art**, **fine art** tends to make a work, but not just any work, say a bicycle, but a beautiful work. This of course tells us rather little as long as we do not know how **beauty** is to be understood. And today we may well wonder whether our art is still all that concerned with beauty. Quite a few artists today would think calling their work “beautiful” a criticism. They are after something quite different. We shall have to return to this shift in the understanding of art.

But let me return to Maritain, who in his understanding of art and beauty follows a well-established tradition, in his case given voice by Thomas Aquinas. The beautiful, he tells us, is “what gives pleasure on sight, *id quod visum placet*.”<sup>3</sup> The beautiful pleases just in being seen, although this definition is a bit misleading in emphasizing only the eye. What pleases just in being heard is of course also beautiful. According to this definition the beautiful is addressed to the senses. Its appeal is not just cerebral. But to suggest that the beautiful pleases **just** in being seen is to suggest also that our appreciation of the beautiful is content just to look or just to hear. And what about the other senses: taste, smell and touch? But even when expanded along these lines, the beautiful is understood here as not having an instrumental value: it pleases because it is what it is.

But even with this modification the definition remains quite empty. The beautiful is said to please by its simple presence, not because it promises future pleasure. But what does **pleases** mean?

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism. With Other Essays*, tr. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Scribner's, 1954), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

I would like to suggest that human beings find things pleasing because they feel that in some sense these things let them to be more fully themselves. Whatever human beings find pleasing has its foundation in their attempt to be more fully themselves. Following Jean-Paul Sartre we may want to speak in this connection of our "**fundamental project**."<sup>4</sup> To understand the meaning of something is to understand its place in this fundamental project, which is nothing other than the human being's project to be him- or herself.

But again the notion of such a project remains quite empty. Different thinkers and different times have given it very different interpretations. Plato thus gives it a very different interpretation than St. Augustine, who in turn has a very different understanding of this project than Sartre, to name just three thinkers. Such different interpretations of the fundamental project have to lead to different interpretations of what we find pleasing, and thus to different interpretations of beauty and thus of art. One can thus understand a particular conception of beauty and art as a function of a particular understanding of the fundamental project. What a philosopher like Plato has to say about beauty and art can thus not be separated from and has its foundation in his interpretation of what Sartre came to call the fundamental project, of what human beings most fundamentally want to be.

## 2

In the *Symposium* Plato suggests that this project be understood in terms of **eros**. **Beauty** is defined by him **as the object of eros**. What does Plato mean when he ascribes to human beings an erotic nature? For a first answer to this question let me turn to Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*, unfortunately not included in the excerpts found in your reader, a good reason to read the entire dialogue.<sup>5</sup> In humorous terms, as befits a comic poet, Aristophanes begins by describing an original state of mankind:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Banes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956 ), pp. 557-75. See also Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the *Symposium* see the lecture notes for Art, Love, and Beauty on my website <http://karstenharries.commons.yale.edu/>

...the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number: there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence but is now lost, and the word 'androgynous' is only preserved as a term of reproach. In the second place, the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike;...<sup>6</sup>

The spherical shape here suggests the self-contained plenitude of these original human beings. And yet they must not have been altogether complete, for if they had not felt something to be lacking they would not have turned against the gods and dared to scale heaven, as Aristophanes tells us they did. To punish this act of hubris Zeus decides to split these original human beings, Aristophanes calls them terrible in their might and strength, in two. Here is how Zeus explained his decision:

"Methinks I have a plan which will humble their pride and improve their manners; men shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two and then they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers; this will have the advantage of making them more profitable to us. They shall walk upright on two legs, and if they continue insolent and will not be quiet, I will split them again and they shall hop about on a single leg." He spoke and cut men in two, like a sorb apple which is halved for pickling...<sup>7</sup>

Note the resemblance to the Biblical account of the fall. Before the fall Adam and Eve are supposed to have been at one with themselves, well provided for in paradise. But this original state of perfection must have been flawed in some way; otherwise they could not have fallen. And in Adam, too, said to have been created by God in His image, this lack of perfection manifests itself as **pride**. The devil had found its way into paradise and tempted Adam with the promise of godlike perfection.

Both Aristophanes and *Genesis* make pride the source of the fall. The similarities between the two accounts make it hardly surprising that they should have been joined. One thinker who joined them is the 9th century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena. In *The Division of Nature* he suggests that if the first human being had not sinned, man

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, tr. Benjamin Jowett, 190a.

<sup>7</sup> *Symposium* 190a - 191a.

would not have been subjected to death and thus been rendered transitory, would not have been isolated, and would not have known the division of human being into two sexes. In Jesus Christ he suggests, this division began to be overcome, for Eriugena a parable of the resurrection to come when once again human beings will not be male or female but just human.<sup>8</sup> Note the pervasive dialectic: the old, according to Eriugena androgynous, Adam fell and was split into two sexes. Thus he became incomplete, lacking, although once again there must have been some imperfection present from the very beginning, otherwise there would have been no possibility of sin. This lack, manifest in us human beings as we now are, is tied by Eriugena first of all (1) to our **transitoriness**. Simply as temporal, human being is lacking. We know that someday all that we are and can accomplish will be past, setting us to dream of a present that could not be overtaken by time. This "ill will against time," as Nietzsche was to call it, is at the very center of the Platonic tradition and more specifically of its conception of eros. To consciously live in time is to experience oneself as incomplete. Our understanding of time brings with it a desire for completeness. The ill will against time is constitutive of Plato's **eros**.

Eriugena emphasizes next (2) the **isolation** of the individual. This isolation, too, can be linked to the theme of time. Precisely when the individual faces his own death, he is forced to recognize his individuality. No one can take the necessity that you will die away from you. Mortality and individuality seem inseparably related.

And finally (3) Eriugena emphasizes the division of the sexes. Like all desire, sexual desire shows us human beings to be lacking, to be ourselves we need an other, while at the same time it forces us to recognize the way our bodies tie us into time. As Eriugena understands it, **the fall is fundamentally a fall into time, into mortality**. In this he follows Plato: our temporality denies to us human beings completeness and satisfaction.

But let me return to Plato's Aristophanes. The Aristophanic conception of eros, too, is similarly inseparable from a recognition of what I want to call **the burden character of time**. Equally well we could speak with Nietzsche of the **ill will against time**. In this ill will Plato's philosophy and more especially his understanding of beauty

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<sup>8</sup> John Scotus Eriugena, *The Division of Nature*, Book IV, 7-9

have their beginning. And following Plato, again and again the beautiful has been said to lift, if only for a time, this burden character of time. Beauty has been thought against time.

## 3

I shall have to return to this point, but let me turn now to the speech of Socrates, which is at the heart of the *Symposium*. The speech begins with a brief introduction in which Socrates ascribes what he is going to say to a wise woman, Diotima of Mantinea, who is said to have instructed him in the art of love.

"What then is love" I asked; "is he mortal?" "No." "What then?" "As in the former instance [as with those who desire divine perfection], he is neither mortal nor immortal, but in a mean between the two." "What is he, Diotima?" "He is a great spirit (daimon), and like all spirits he is intermediate between the divine and the mortal." (69)<sup>9</sup>

This explanation places love into a relationship to time. Love belongs to time. But love also belongs to eternity. **Love mediates between time and eternity, between the human and the divine.** Love thus helps to define our human being, which, caught up in time, yet reaches up to and measures itself by eternity. This twofold character of love is brought out more clearly by Diotima's account of the birth of love.

"And who," I said, "was his father, and who his mother?" "The tale," she said, "will take time; nevertheless I will tell you. On the birthday of Aphrodite there was a feast of the gods, at which the god Poros or Plenty, who is the son of Metis or discretion, was one of the guests. When the feast was over, Penia or Poverty, as the manner is on such occasions, came about the doors to beg. Now Plenty, who was the worse for nectar (there was no wine in those day), went into the garden of Zeus and fell into a heavy sleep; and Poverty considering her straitened circumstances, plotted to have a child by him, and accordingly she lay down at his side and conceived Love, who partly because he is naturally a lover of the beautiful, and because Aphrodite is herself beautiful, and also because he was born on her birthday, is her follower and attendant. (69)<sup>10</sup>

Poverty is said to be the mother of love. By poverty Plato here means that lack which pervades human existence in so far as it is temporal. But incomplete as we are, we carry

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<sup>9</sup> *Symposium* 202d, trans. Benjamin Jowett. Numbers following quotes refer to *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> *Symposium* 203a-c.



within ourselves a desire for completeness. Thus plenty is said to be the father of love. Like Aristophanes, Socrates thus ties **love** to **a desire for completeness**. **Beauty** is then defined as **the object of love**.

"Such, my Dear Socrates, is the nature of the spirit Love. The error in your conception of him was very natural, and as I imagine from what you say, has arisen out of a confusion of love and the beloved, which made you think that love was all beautiful. For the beloved is the truly beautiful, and delicate, and perfect, and blessed; but the principle of love is of another nature, and is such as I have described." (70)<sup>11</sup>

Love is not itself beautiful as young Socrates had thought. On this view, to see something beautiful in time is to have an experience that seems to deliver us from time, if only for a time, and thus seems like a foretaste of that escape from time, that paradise, that alone could allow for genuine completeness.

Much in the account given by Diotima reminds us of Aristophanes. There is, however, a decisive difference. The Aristophanic account understands the goal of love as **unification in time**. **Beauty** is understood as the **object of sexual desire**. No attempt is made by Aristophanes to understand **love in a way that has to lead us beyond time**.

Socrates goes on to specifically address the Aristophanic account:

"... and you here people say that lovers are seeking for their other half ; but I say that they are seeking neither for the half of themselves, nor for the whole, unless the half or the whole be also a good." (71)<sup>12</sup>

Love is a desire for the good.

"For you may say generally that all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love;" (71)<sup>13</sup>

Love in its narrower and more usual sense, where it is tied to sexual desire, is said to have usurped the name of the whole.

But love is said to be not just a desire for the possession of the good, but for the perpetual possession of the good. Given that beauty was defined as the object of eros, the beautiful and the good are thus intimately tied together. And to say that love desires perpetual possession of the good is to say that love would escape the rule of time. Love is tied to being rather than to becoming. It demands eternity. **The search for beauty in**

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<sup>11</sup> *Symposium* 204b.

<sup>12</sup> *Symposium* 205d.

<sup>13</sup> *Symposium* 205d.

**time is a search for being in becoming.** But there is inevitably something unsatisfactory about beauty so understood. Eros longs for a beauty that transcends time.

Diotima thus sees in sexual desire the lowest form of eros. Here loves desire immortality within time.

"Then, if this be the nature of love, can you tell me further," she said, "what is the manner of the pursuit? what are they doing who show all this eagerness and heat which is called love? and what is the object which they have in view? Answer me." "Nay, Diotima," I replied, "if I had known, I should not have wondered at your wisdom, neither should I have come to learn from you about this very matter." " Well, " she said, "I will teach you: —The object which they have in view is birth in beauty, whether of body or soul." (72)<sup>14</sup>

Diotima goes on to establish a hierarchy of attempts to achieve immortality in time. At the most basic, but also lowest level is the desire to make love so that a child may be born. In our children we seek to live beyond our own death. Artists and poets, too, seek to give birth to something that will transcend their ephemeral being. And the same is true of the statesmen who found a political order. Who, Diotima asks, would not rather have the children of Homer and Hesiod, of Lycurgus and Solon, than his own. But all these attempts to defeat our mortality in time are said by Diotima to constitute only the **lower mysteries** of love.

Let me now pass on to the **higher mysteries**. How are we to gain access to them?

"For he who would proceed aright in this matter should begin in youth to visit beautiful forms; and first, if he be guided by his instructor aright, to love one such form only — out of that he should create fair thoughts; and soon he will of himself perceive that the beauty of one form is akin to the beauty of another; and then, if beauty of form in general is his pursuit, how foolish would he be not to recognize that the beauty in every form is one and the same! And when he perceives this he will abate his violent love of the one, which he will despise and deem a small thing, and will become a lover of all beautiful forms; in the next stage he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form. So that if a virtuous soul have but a little comeliness, he will be content to love and tend him, and will search out and bring to the birth thoughts which may improve the young, until he is compelled to contemplate the beauty of institutions and laws, and to understand that the beauty of them all is of one family.(75)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Symposium* 206b

<sup>15</sup> *Symposium*, 210a-c

Having been led this far, the student will finally be ready for the *science of beauty everywhere*:

"He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our toils) — a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or at another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others,... but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things."(76)<sup>16</sup>

The experience of absolute beauty is given here a description that would seem to apply equally well to mystical experience. At this point it should have become clear why Plato's metaphysics of beauty had to lead him to an attack on the arts. By taking art too seriously one would remain stuck in the sensible and short-circuit the demanded ascent. The work of art gives us only a semblance of being in becoming, it does not give us true being. But is it not true being that is demanded by love? Love, as Plato understands it, would seem to demand that we leave art behind. Love is in the end better served by the philosopher than by the poet.

"But what if man had eyes to see the true beauty — the divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life — thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of the God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?" (77)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Symposium*, 210e-211b

<sup>17</sup> *Symposium*, 212a

Note that Diotima is not praising here the life of someone lost in contemplation of true beauty, but someone, who puts this vision to work by giving birth to something beautiful. The gods may find satisfaction in pure contemplation. The lot of mortals is a different one. We humans have to place a **procreative eros**, albeit in a highly sublimated form, above the **contemplative eros**.

### 3. Art as a Gift

#### 1

In the *Symposium* Plato understands **beauty** as the **object of love**. Love is understood as a desire for completeness, a completeness that is denied to us human beings by our fleeting, ephemeral existence. The lover is called by being, a call bidding him to transcend becoming. Being calls the lover in the beautiful. On Plato's account **sensible beauty is an epiphany of being in time**. Such an epiphany breaks into the everyday. Another student of Socrates, Xenophon has described the kind of experience Plato has in mind for us in his own *Symposium*, written a few years after Plato's.

A person who took note of the course of events would have come at once to the conclusion that beauty is in its essence something **regal**, especially when, as in the present case of Autolycus, its possessor joins with it modesty and sobriety. For in the first place, just **as the sudden glow of a light at night** draws all eyes to itself, so now the beauty of Autolycus compelled every one to look at him. And again, there was not one of the onlookers who did not feel his **soul strangely stirred** by the boy; some of them grew quieter than before, others even assumed some kind of pose. Now it is true that all who are under the influence of any of the gods seem well worth gazing at; but whereas those who are possessed of the other gods have a tendency to be sterner of countenance, more terrifying of voice, and more vehement, those who are inspired by chaste love have a more tender look, subdue their voices to more gentle tones, and assume a supremely noble bearing. Such was the demeanor of Callias at this time under the influence of Love; and therefore he was an object well worth the gaze of those initiated into the worship of this god.<sup>18</sup>

Xenophon's account gives us a first account of the beautiful. Note these key features:

1. The beautiful is something regal. It stands out as a figure on the ground of the ordinary. The beautiful bids us look again. It **re-presents itself**. There is a sense in which every beautiful object can be said to frame itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Xenophon, *Symposium*, I, 8 - 10, tr. O. J. Todd, in *Xenophon*, vol. IV, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1923), pp. 537 - 538. See Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike*. (DuMont Dokumente. Reihe I: Kunstgeschichte. Deutung, Dokumente, 1962). Grassi invites us to understand this passage as perhaps the first phenomenological description of beauty.

2. Xenophon likens the beautiful to the sudden glow of a light at night, which draws all eyes to itself. This simile of light invites questioning. In what sense is beauty like a light? Is Xenophon here just repeating the first point? Light illuminates. It renders visible. Is there a sense in which **the beautiful renders visible**? Think of a person of striking beauty.

3. The beautiful strangely stirs us. To insist on the strangeness of what stirs us is to suggest that it originates somewhere beyond the familiar and expected. **Something extraordinary seizes us.**

4. Xenophon goes on to suggest that what touches us is a god. Beauty is understood as **an epiphany of the divine in the mundane.**

5. But what touches us is not just any god, but **Love**, and Love, unlike other deities, which tend to put us in a state of frenzy, makes us more gentle and moves us to silence.

Xenophon's understanding of beauty is not so very different from a description Plato gives us in the *Phaedrus*.

But he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world, is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god (62).<sup>19</sup>

Plato suggests that beauty effects “a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention” (265). This is a suggestion that we shall meet with again and again. The encounter with the beautiful puts the everyday with its concerns and interests at a distance. Our usual involvement in the world is bracketed. The beautiful possesses thus a liberating power. And in being a liberation from the everyday it is also a liberation from that time experience which is inseparable from our everyday involvement in the world. For the time of the aesthetic experience the burden of time appears to have been lightened.

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<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a tr. Benjamin Jowett.

We should remember here that sensible beauty is only one of the lower forms of beauty. True beauty, so Plato tells us, must transcend becoming altogether. There is thus a tension between true beauty and sensible beauty. The latter is only the temporal shadow or figure of the former. It is precisely this inadequacy that prevents us from being finally content with sensible beauty. Sensible beauty does not so much satisfy desire, as it awakens a deeper desire or love, a love that demands eternity. All joy, Nietzsche was to write in his *Zarathustra*, wills eternity. The experience of the beautiful thus makes us want to do something. It is for this reason that Plato ties love to a desire to give birth, be it to a child, be it to a work of art or to the state. In all these cases the individual wants to overcome his own ephemeral being, create something that will resist time, establish being within becoming. But all such creation must leave us finally dissatisfied. All sensible beauty therefore calls us to an ecstatic flight beyond this world and its time, calls us to the higher mysteries of the *Symposium*.

I have spoken of two aspects of beauty.

1. It dislocates us. We can perhaps call this its **negative** aspect.
2. But beauty has also a **positive** aspect: in the aesthetic experience something calls us. A higher power, perhaps a god, seizes us.

**Dislocation and seizure are thus inseparable from both the creation of and our encounter with the beautiful.**

### 3

The second point is addressed in Plato's *Ion*. In this dialogue Socrates shows the rhapsode Ion that his success does not rest on a knowledge that he possesses, for which he can take credit, and can transmit to another, but is a **divine gift**.

The gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, as I was just saying, but an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that of the stone which Euripides calls a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain: and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself: and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems

not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and meter they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind. (54-55)<sup>20</sup>

Two themes are announced here that will return again and again in aesthetic speculation:

1. The poet is unable to say why he does what he does. His doing is not governed by rules. In an important sense he is not acting at all, but **a higher power is acting through him**. He is inspired.
2. To become thus the channel through which a higher power can manifest itself, the poet must be besides himself. The poet is thus not in his right mind. He is a **madman**.

Plato develops this understanding in the often-cited metaphor of the bee:

for they tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower. And this is true. For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he is inspired and is out of his senses (55).<sup>21</sup>

The metaphor of wings is to suggest the power of the poet is not bound by the here and now. His mind is elsewhere. His imagination transports him into very different realms. It lifts him up to a higher place, that place where the gods dwell. Poetry is thus tied to **ecstasy**, which should be understood quite literally as a standing outside oneself.

In the *Ion* Plato suggests that the poet cannot lift himself up on his own strength. He has to be claimed by a god. Poetry is a **gift**.

God takes away the minds of the poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses diviners and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us. (55).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Ion*, 533d – 534a.

<sup>21</sup> *Ion*, 534a.

<sup>22</sup> *Ion*, 534c-d.



Returning to the metaphor of the magnet, Plato extends what he has just said about the poets to their interpreters, the rhapsodes, and to those listening to their performances. The magnet is here a metaphor for being, understood as the goal of human desire. **It is precisely because we feel the attracting power of being that we are governed by eros.**

The theme of madness, which is only touched on in the *Ion*, is developed in the *Phaedrus*. In the beginning of that dialogue we find Phaedrus reading to Socrates a rather remarkable speech by Lysias, which argues that the non-lover should be preferred to the lover. The reasoning makes a certain amount of sense. Lysias accepts the tie of love to madness and insists that just because of this we cannot hold the lover responsible. He is not in control of himself. His love is therefore likely to fade; he will be compulsive, unable to leave the beloved his freedom and therefore likely to enslave him. Just because the non-lover needs the beloved less than the lover, he is free to be open to the other and to let the beloved be himself.

## 4

Socrates delivers a similar speech, competing with Lysias. But after that he accuses both himself and Lysias of impiety. Love demands atonement and Socrates atones by giving a second speech, this time in defense of love. The tie between love and madness is accepted, but Socrates now draws a **distinction between two kinds of madness.**

but there is also madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men. For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona when out of their mind have conferred great benefits on Hellas, both in public and in private life, but when in their senses few or none.<sup>23</sup>

Poetry, prophecy, and love are linked as different forms of madness. As is already hinted in the *Ion*, this madness is tied to an ecstatic flight to another world that is our true home. Plato develops this in a myth. He likens the soul to a charioteer on a chariot drawn by two winged horses, one noble, the other ignoble. The tripartite image corresponds to the three parts of the soul of which we learn in the *Republic*, reason, spirit, and appetite.

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<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a-b.

Implicit in this image is the tension between up and down. Gravity drags the chariot downward: the wings of the horses counteract this pull of gravity. As Socrates explains:

The wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine, and which by nature tends to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downwards into the upper region, which is the habitation of the gods. The divine is beauty, wisdom, and goodness, and the like; and by these the wing of the soul is nourished, and grows apace; but when fed upon evil and foulness and the opposite of good, wastes and falls away. (58).<sup>24</sup>

The wings of the soul are nourished by its love of being. By their bodies, human beings are located in time. Yet there is something in them that does not permit them to make their peace with their temporality, that longs for a higher reality. In the *Phaedrus*, too, Plato ties this longing to the idea of **recollection**. In this world we carry within us memories of another world.

For, as has already been said, every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true being; this was the condition of her passing into the form of man. But all souls do not easily recall the things of the other world; they may have seen them for a short time only, or they may have been unfortunate in their earthly lot, and, having their hearts turned to unrighteousness through some corrupting influence, they may have lost the memory of the holy things which once they saw. Few only retain an adequate remembrance of them; and they, when they behold here any image of that other world, are rapt in amazement; but they are ignorant of what this rapture means, because they do not clearly perceive. (61)<sup>25</sup>

Not the details are important here, but the basic view of human being to which the myth gives expression. To be a human being is to be located in the here and now, but also to transcend that location. The faculty that allows for such transcendence is reason. Reason demands an understanding and a vision free from the limitations imposed by the here and now.

But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily. It is such as I will describe; for I must dare speak the truth, when truth is my theme. There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul. (58)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Phaedrus*, 246d-247a.

<sup>25</sup> *Phaedrus*, 249e-250a.

<sup>26</sup> *Phaedrus*, 247c.

It is evident that the heaven Socrates describes could not be seen with our eyes or any other sense. The forms are grasped only by reason. But beauty is not first of all an object of knowledge. What makes beauty unique among the forms is that this form is most readily apprehended by sight.

But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense. For sight is the most piercing of our bodily senses; though not by that is wisdom seen; her loveliness would have been transporting if there had been a visible image of her, and the other ideas, if they had visible counterparts, would be equally lovely. But this is the privilege of beauty, that being the loveliest, she is also most palpable to sight. (61)<sup>27</sup>

It should be remembered that in the *Phaedrus* Plato is not so much interested in art as in love and in its tie to madness. The highest manifestation of this love is said to be philosophy, which is thus placed ahead of art.

For a man must have intelligence of universals, and be able to proceed from the many particulars of sense to one conception of reason; — this is the recollection of those things which our soul once saw while following God — when regardless of that which we now call being she raised her head up towards the true being. And therefore the mind of the philosopher alone has wings; and this is just, for he is always, according to the measure of his abilities, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which He what he is. And he who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and alone becomes truly perfect. But, as he forgets earthly interests and is rapt in the divine, the vulgar deem him mad, and rebuke him; they do not see that he is inspired. (60)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Phaedrus*, 250b-c.

<sup>28</sup> *Phaedrus*, 249b-c.

This madness is an expression of the fact that the lover of wisdom is a citizen of another world. He knows what lies beyond the cave. This commitment to the beyond makes him unlike the many. His knowledge and vision of the higher make him unwilling to accept what is usually taken for granted. Such love is necessarily abnormal. But such abnormality has its foundation in the lover's commitment to a higher reality.

#### 4. Beauty and Truth

##### 1

As I have tried to show in the last two lectures, Plato understands beauty as the object of love. Love again is understood in terms of the way the human being has always already fallen into time, as a longing for a completeness that is denied to us mortals. Our desiring, vulnerable, aging body reveals that fall to us and seeks to return to timeless being. It denies us the completeness or unity we seek.

**Eros** can thus be described as the desire for unity, for completeness, for true being. Christianity offers us a similar account. To say that God created the human being in his own image is to suggest also that the human being has his measure in God. When Sartre describes man's fundamental project as the project to become God, despite the fact that he considers God a contradiction and the project therefore vain, he follows that tradition.

If eros is a desire for true being and, and at the same time eros is said to have beauty for its object, it is only to be expected that Plato should understand **beauty** as the **epiphany of true being**. Plato thus holds what I called earlier an **ontological conception of the beautiful**. Such a conception, I proposed, understands beauty as a revelation of true being.

To call beauty an epiphany of true being is still to say rather little as long as no more is said about how we are to understand the “true being.” Plato gives us an answer with his doctrine of the forms. What truly is, Plato tells us, are the forms. Beauty can therefore be understood as the epiphany of the forms. This is captured by the Scholastic definition of the beautiful as **splendor formae**.

But what are the forms? Different thinkers have given different answers to this question and accordingly their understanding of the beautiful has changed. A good part of the history of the beautiful could be written using the changes in the understanding of the forms as a guiding thread. Take for example a view of the form as a universal essence as opposed to another that would understand every individual as governed by its own form.

Let me narrow the question and ask: how does Plato understand the forms. In the *Phaedrus* Plato answers this question with a myth that assigns the forms to that heaven which the soul reaches in an ecstatic flight:

But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when truth is my theme. There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul. The divine intelligence, being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it, rejoices at beholding reality, and once more gazing upon truth, is replenished and made glad, until the revolution of the world brings her round again to the same place. In the revolution she beholds justice, and temperance, and knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but knowledge absolute in existence absolute; and beholding the other true existence in like manner, and feasting upon them, she passes down into the interior of the heavens and returns home; and there the charioteer putting up his horses at the stall gives them ambrosia to eat and nectar to drink (58 – 59).<sup>29</sup>

The forms are said here to transcend the here and now of space and time. They can be neither seen nor touched. Only the mind's eye can see them. This description alone should make us wonder whether art could ever provide works that would reveal this dimension. Plato therefore asks: “But of the heaven which is above the heavens, what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily?” How should we compare Socrates to these earthly poets? The answer is presumably that the latter are so tied to time and the body, to particular points of view, as to render them incapable of doing justice to the forms. The philosopher has freed himself from these bonds. And yet note that Plato, in the *Phaedrus* at least, seems reluctant to dismiss the artist altogether as someone who can do little justice to true being. For we read there that

the soul which has seen most of truth shall come to the birth as a **philosopher, or artist, or some musical or loving nature**: that which has seen truth in the second degree shall be some righteous king or warrior chief; the soul which is of the third class shall be a politician, or economist, or trader; the fourth shall be a lover of gymnastic toils, or a physician; the fifth shall lead the life of a prophet or hierophant; to the **sixth** the character of a **poet or some other imitative artist** will be assigned; to the seventh the

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<sup>29</sup> *Phaedrus*, 247c-e.

life of an artist or husbandman; to the eighth that of a sophist or demagogue; to the ninth that of a tyrant. (59, my emphases)<sup>30</sup>

Note that the artist appears twice on this list: he appears in the top circle together with the philosopher. But Plato also assigns poets and other imitative artists to the sixth rank, behind prophets and just ahead of artisans. Plato thus would seem to distinguish two kinds of art: one of rather low status, an art of representation, concerned with furnishing imitations of appearance, while the other would seem to have a more immediate access to reality, revealing the forms in a more direct manner. How could the artist do so.

Presumably by turning away from the ideal of representation in art or by so representing reality that the form is made visible. Consider in this connection Plotinus' (ca. 204/5–270 CE) defense of art:

Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects: for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, and furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight. (152).<sup>31</sup>

The beauty of the artwork is like the beauty of the appearing god. Art is not a copy of nature, but transforms it into something higher. Compare this passage with one in Plato's *Philebus* where he almost seems to be thinking of the abstract art of a painter like Mondrian.

The beauty of figures which I am now trying to indicate is not what most people would understand as such, not the beauty of a living creature or a picture; what I mean, what the arguments points to, is something straight, or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter's rule and square, produces from the straight and the round. I wonder if you understand. Things like that, I maintain, are beautiful not, like most things, in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their very nature; and they carry pleasures peculiar to themselves which are quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colors too which have this characteristic.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Phaedrus*, 248c-e

<sup>31</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* 5, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Philebus*, 51c, tr. R. Hackforth.

We can speak perhaps of a **perennial Platonism** in the history of art, whose turn to abstraction should be contrasted with the pursuit of lifelike illusion.

## 2

If there are signs of Plato's critical attitude to art, especially of an art of imitation in the texts we have considered, these become explicit in the *Republic*. In the *Republic* Plato is concerned, among other things, with outlining a program of education. The question that he poses in this context is the role that the artist, more especially the poet, should have in such a program. Plato is quite clear about the need for  **censorship**. The following passage is typical:

Such then, I said, are our principles of theology — some tales are to be told, and others are not to be told to our disciples from their youth upwards, if we mean them to honor the gods and their parents, and to value friendship with one another.

Yes, and I think the principles are right, he said.

But if they are to be courageous, must they not learn other lessons besides these, and lessons of such a kind as will take away the fear of death? Can any man be courageous who has the fear of death in him?<sup>33</sup> (14 –15)

To live a good life, Socrates suggests, we have to take away the fear of death.

Socrates objects to quite a few passages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The poets lie, and moreover, they tell pernicious lies, especially in their portrayals of gods and heroes, who are depicted as all too fallible human beings, who cheat, lie, deceive, rape, and, what Socrates appears to find especially objectionable, even laugh. “Persons of worth, he insists, even if only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter, and still less must such a representation of the gods be allowed.”(16)<sup>34</sup> Lies are allowed in literature by Plato, but only when they are supervised and controlled by the state.

Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the state should be the persons; and they, in their dealings with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good. But nobody else should meddle with anything of the kind (17).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Republic*, 386a-b.

<sup>34</sup> *Republic*, 388e.

<sup>35</sup> *Republic*, 389b.



Art is reduced here to propaganda. It has to subordinate itself to the official, state-sanctioned morality.

## 3

But Plato is not just suspicious of what he takes to be misrepresentations or of representations that are likely to corrupt; he is suspicious of imitation as such:

We must come to an understanding of mimetic art, —whether the poets, in narrating their stories, are to be allowed by us to imitate, and if so, whether in whole or in parts; or should all imitation be prohibited?

You mean, I suspect, to ask whether tragedy and comedy shall be admitted into our State?

Yes, I said; but there may be more than this in question. (19).<sup>36</sup>

By imitating other persons we explore possibilities that lie beyond our everyday life. Mimetic art possesses thus a liberating power. But is it in the interest of the state to liberate its subjects in this way, a liberation that may well make them restless, unwilling to accept the established and accepted? The *Republic* is pervaded by a fear of freedom.

The attack on poetry is reaffirmed in Book X. The very first lines reveal how much importance Plato attaches to this matter. Now it seems to be extended to all poetical imitations.

Of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our state, there is none which upon reflection pleases me better than the rule about poetry.

To what do you refer?

To the rejection of imitative poetry, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imaginative tribe — but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them. (30)<sup>37</sup>

All imitation is now condemned. Socrates begins his defense of this condemnation with a general discussion of the nature of imitation, which brings us to the very heart of his metaphysics. What is it that lets us call different things, e.g. beds or chairs, by a common name. They look alike, they possess a certain family resemblance. Plato would say they are governed by the same **idea** or **form**. The makers of beds or tables make these in

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<sup>36</sup> *Republic*, 394d.

<sup>37</sup> *Republic X*, 595a-b.

accord with the idea, but they do not make the idea. The idea functions not only as a universal, but as a **measure** or **norm**, which allows us to tell whether a particular bed is a good or a bad bed.

Plato contrasts these artisans with another workman, whom he calls the creator of all things.

And there is another artist, — I should like to know what you would say of him?

Who is he?

One who is the maker of all the works of the other workmen.

What an extraordinary man!

Wait a little, and there shall be more reason for your saying so. For this is he who is able to make not only vessels of every kind, but plants and animals, himself and all other things — the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth; he makes the gods also.

He must be a wizard and make no mistake.

Oh, you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself?

What way?

An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round — you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror. (31)<sup>38</sup>

The imitative artist is like someone, who, by turning a mirror in his hands, recreates the world. There is a sense in which the artist so understood may be understood as a second god, for like that of god, his power extends to the whole world. The renaissance was to embrace this conception of the artist as the godlike imitator of appearances. But what he creates is, of course, only appearance. As such he is three times removed from the truth: Plato thus distinguishes:

1. God, the maker of the true bed (form of the bed).
2. The artisan who makes a copy of that ideal bed: the real bed.
3. The imitative artist, who makes a copy of the real bed, a fictional bed.

In this bed you cannot sleep.

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<sup>38</sup> *Republic X*, 596e-597e

Among these artists, the artist holds the lowest rank.

The problem becomes more serious when we shift from the imitation of beds to the imitation of virtue. Here we have to remember that **the poets** were then generally believed to be **the educators of Greece**, above all Homer. Just this belief Plato is concerned to question:

and so, when we hear persons saying that the tragedians, and Homer, who is at their head, know all the arts and all things human, virtue as well as vice, and divine things too, [and] that the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet, we ought to consider whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across some imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities? Or, after all, they may be in the right, and poets do really know the things about which they seem to the many to speak so well.<sup>39</sup>

But Plato is of course convinced that the poets do not really know what they are describing. Homer's descriptions of battles do not make him an experienced warrior, his descriptions of illness and health do not make him a doctor. What state was ever governed better by Homer's help? Lawgivers like Solon and Lycurgus deserve to be placed far ahead of Homer.

Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colors and figures. **(36)**.<sup>40</sup>

To what does the art of imitation appeal? To the body and to the senses. It addresses itself to what Plato considers the **weakness** of the human mind. Plato here compares the fine arts unfavorably to the **arts of measuring, numbering, and weighing**.

And the arts of measuring and numbering and weighing come to the rescue of the human understanding — there is the beauty of them — and the apparent greater or less, or more

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<sup>39</sup> *Republic X*, 598d-599a.

<sup>40</sup> *Republic X*, 600e- 601a.

or heavier, no longer have the mastery over us, but give way before calculation and measure and weight. (38) <sup>41</sup>

This recalls a point I was making in my first lecture: the concern for truth lets us place the quantifying descriptions of science above the qualitative descriptions provided by representational art:

This was the conclusion at which I was seeking to arrive when I said that painting or drawing, and imitation in general, when doing their own proper work, are far removed from the truth, and the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no true or healthy aim. (39) <sup>42</sup>

The case is made worse by the fact that the imitative arts like to portray scenes of vice rather than virtue. Vice is more interesting than virtue. Think of our popular literature. Things were no different in Plato's day.

And does not the latter — I mean the rebellious principle — furnish a great variety of materials for imitation? Whereas the wise and calm temperament, being always nearly equable, is not easy to imitate or to appreciate when imitated, especially at a public festival when a promiscuous crowd is assembled in a theater. For the feeling represented is one to which they are strangers. (41) <sup>43</sup>

Plato goes on to suggest that even the good man is corrupted by poetry. We are seduced into applauding what we know to be bad.

Therefore, Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the best educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, we may love and honor those who say these things — they are excellent people, as far as their lights extend; and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State. <sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Republic X*, 602d.

<sup>42</sup> *Republic X*, 604e

<sup>43</sup> *Republic X*, 605c-d.

<sup>44</sup> *Republic X*, 606e-607a.

Those watching over the safety of cities are warned not to succumb to the seductions of poetry.

## 4

The problem Plato raises is not easily dismissed. How can poetry, as Plato here understands it, be justified? Poetry gives us a kind of pseudo-knowledge. The poet allows us to entertain thoughts and actions which real life denies us. And these thoughts and actions lead us to empathize with bad human beings. Just the bad has its attractions and Plato knows about the tendency of the soul to droop its wings and fall to the earth. And just because the attractions of poetry are so real, the state may not be indifferent to them. Just because Plato takes poetry so seriously, it is impossible for him to give her the role the tradition had claimed for her. The pleasures she offers are not so innocent.

Most seriously, she prevents the individual from resting content with the place he has been assigned. In this context it is interesting to note how **totalitarian governments** have reacted to art. When an established order is to be attacked there is a ready alliance between the artist and the beginning revolution. Once the revolution has been secured and has become the new establishment, this alliance ceases. Art comes to be tolerated only to the extent that it becomes completely subservient to the ideals defended by the state. The social realism of Soviet Russia provides a good example, as does the corresponding National Socialist art produced by Hitler's Germany. The affinities between Plato's attack on the poets and similar attacks launched by totalitarian governments are more than accidental. The *Republic* does indeed offer us the vision of a totalitarian state that leaves little room for individual freedom. Plato's conception of art fits in with this understanding of the ideal state.

But we should not overlook that despite his attack on poetry, Plato is himself a poetic philosopher, who at times seems not so much to attack poetry as such, but rather to present his new philosophical poetry as an alternative to that of Homer. The educator Homer should be replaced with the educator Plato. Plato will offer us our true measure; not just imitations of virtue, born of ignorance about the nature of true virtue, but an image of virtue, born of knowledge. To Homer's Achilles Plato opposes his own Socrates.

And we should not forget that in the *Republic* we do find hints of another kind of art, one that is not imitative, but first of all an epiphany of reason and order. To an art that gives priority to representation we can oppose another that gives priority to form. That art will have greater proximity to mathematics than to photography. In Book Three Plato had thus extolled the Beauty of Style, Harmony, and Grace. Music is particularly well suited to teach us such harmony, able to lead the beholder to a higher love.

## 5. Socrates' Critique of the Poets

### 1

In the *Republic* Socrates points out “that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry; of which there are many proofs,…” I have touched on this quarrel throughout these early lectures. I pointed to several different aspects of poetry that let Socrates question it, for example to its liberating and its seductive power. But let us consider once more the question: why must Socrates become the rival and the antagonist of the poets? The answer should by now have become quite clear: at bottom it is his commitment to truth that forces him beyond poetry and indeed beyond what we have come to consider art. If, as Plato points out, what truly is reveals itself only to a vision that is no longer limited by the body and the senses, that is to say, only to the vision of the mind, then poetry, and more generally art, cannot finally be a proper vehicle for the pursuit of truth. The claim of poetry to serve the truth must then be questioned and where the poet continues to claim to educate and improve human beings, his claim must be subjected to the authority of reason. From this point of view Socrates appears, if not quite as the destroyer of the arts, yet as someone who seeks to put the arts in their proper place.

It is as the destroyer of art that **Nietzsche** describes Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The book is actually misnamed: at least as much as an inquiry into the birth of tragedy it is an inquiry into its death and possible rebirth, where Nietzsche thinks such a rebirth necessary for a full self-affirmation and that is to say for spiritual health. The death of tragedy is blamed by Nietzsche on Socrates, more precisely on Socrates and the tragic poet Euripides, the last of the three great tragic poets. Nietzsche understands Euripides as closely linked to Socrates.

How does Nietzsche understand Socrates? Key here is the Socratic commitment to reason.

The most decisive word, however, for this new and unprecedented value set upon knowledge and insight was spoken by Socrates when he found that he was the only one who acknowledged to himself that he *knew nothing*; for in his critical peregrinations through Athens, he called on the greatest statesmen, orators, poets, and artists, and everywhere he discovered the conceit of knowledge. To his astonishment he perceived

that all these celebrities were without a proper and sure insight, even with regard to their own professions, and that they practiced them only by instinct. "Only by instinct": with this phrase we touch upon the heart and core of the Socratic tendency. With it Socratism condemns existing art as well as existing ethics. Wherever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees lack of insight, it sees the force of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and objectionableness of existing conditions. From this point onwards, Socrates conceives it as his duty to correct existence; and, with an air of irreverence and superiority, as the precursor of an altogether different culture, art, and morality, he enters single-handed into a world, to touch whose hem would give us the greatest happiness (545).<sup>45</sup>

## 2

I pointed out that Nietzsche links Socrates to Euripides. In Greek tragedy Euripides is thought by Nietzsche to represent the invasion of the Socratic spirit:

That Socrates was closely related to the tendency of Euripides did not escape the notice of contemporary antiquity. The most eloquent expression of this felicitous insight was the story current in Athens that Socrates used to help Euripides in poetizing. Whenever an occasion arose to enumerate the popular agitators of the day, the adherents of the "good old times" would mention both names in the same breath. (544)<sup>46</sup>

Of special interest are Nietzsche's comments on Euripides' *Bacchae*, which he understands as a calling into question by Euripides of his own poetic work.

On the evening of his life Euripides composed a myth in which he urgently propounded to his contemporaries the question as to the value and significance of this tendency. Is the Dionysian entitled to exist at all? Should it not be forcibly uprooted from Hellenic soil? Certainly, the poet tells us, if it were only possible: but the god Dionysus is too powerful; his most intelligent adversary — like Pentheus in the *Bacchae* — is unwittingly enchanted by him, and in this enchantment runs to meet his fate. The judgment of the two old poets, Cadmus and Tiresias, seems also to be the judgment of the aged poet: that the reflection of the wisest individuals does not overthrow old popular traditions, nor the perpetually self-propagating worship of Dionysus. (540).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 13, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman.

<sup>46</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12.



But the *Bacchae*, Nietzsche suggests, came too late. Socrates had already won and in winning initiated an anti-Dionysian culture that, so Nietzsche thought, had to do violence to the whole human being. We are the inheritors of that culture.

This tragedy — the *Bacchae* — is a protest against the practicability of his own tendency; but alas, it has already been put into practice! The surprising thing had happened: when the poet recanted, his tendency had already conquered. Dionysus had already been scared by a demonic power speaking through Euripides. For even Euripides was, in a sense only a mask: the deity that spoke through him was neither Dionysus nor Apollo. It was an altogether new-born demon. And it was called Socrates. Thus we have a new antithesis — the Dionysian and the Socratic; and on that antithesis the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked. (540)<sup>48</sup>

### 3

You will remember that Plato himself includes poets and prophets among the followers of Dionysus; consider once more this passage from the *Ion*:

For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantic revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and meter they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus, but not when they are in their right mind. (54)<sup>49</sup>

To this kind of activity, where the artist does not know what he is doing and therefore cannot claim credit for his own creations, Socrates would seem to oppose another: to **inspiration** he opposes **deliberate doing based on sound reasoning**.

Nietzsche thus understands Socrates as the destroyer of tragedy precisely because he understands him as the originator of a culture based on reason. Reality is given its measure in what we are able to comprehend. In Socrates Nietzsche discovers the **archetype of the theoretical man**, a kind of proto-Descartes. This theoretical person has to be opposed to Dionysus, has to be opposed to art that relies on inspiration.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ion*, 534.

Nietzsche describes the theoretical person as someone who wants to possess, who wants to comprehend whatever is. Think of Descartes' promise that his method would render us the **masters and possessors of nature**. But we can comprehend only what abides. All that is fleeting and ephemeral eludes our comprehension. Given its measure in our ability to comprehend, being is inevitably associated with what is timeless rather than with becoming. Only timeless being promises permanent possession. The question we have to raise is this: if metaphysics thus came to think being against time, is this association of timelessness with true being one which is read off reality or is it rather born of what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge, which in his *Zarathustra* he defines as the ill will against time, that is to say, of an unwillingness to open oneself to reality? Is the Platonic realm of forms perhaps itself only an artistic construction, an illusion born of the spirit of revenge? In that case Socrates, too, would be a kind of poet trafficking in illusions, with that difference that he would be unwilling to admit this, admit that he had removed himself from reality. Quite to the contrary, he claims to have privileged access to true reality.

With the Greeks, and especially with Plato, we have the beginning of that theme which has dominated western metaphysics: **being is thought against time**. But could it be that being is essentially temporal? That being and time may not be separated? Then being would be essentially elusive, would essentially elude our grasp. If we should be convinced of this link between being and time, then we should want to insist also that we come closest to opening ourselves to reality when we recognize the impotence of our conceptual schemes to master reality. Art can then be seen as a recovery of the Dionysian sphere; following Nietzsche, Heidegger will say: of the **earth**.

## 4

I began with Plato's thesis that there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. The quarrel is presented by Socrates in terms of the claims of both to reveal reality. Given what I called an ontological conception of art, and more especially of poetry, poetry is found to be deficient. What I want to underscore here is that the meaning of reality, more especially its tie to being rather than becoming, tends to be

taken for granted by Plato. What truly transcends time. But should this be taken for granted?

Has Nietzsche really done justice to the Platonic Socrates? Is Socrates really a Greek Descartes? I would like to suggest that Nietzsche has given us a caricature — an illuminating caricature, but a caricature nevertheless. In this connection I would like to call your attention to the moving scene in Plato's *Phaedo*, also noted by Nietzsche, where Socrates is asked by Cebes whether the rumors one has been hearing are in fact true: whether Socrates, who never wrote a line of poetry, and now that he is in prison, facing death, has in the most literal sense little time left, is turning Aesop's fables into verse and also composing a hymn to Apollo. The first especially is difficult to reconcile with the critique of the poets found in the *Republic*.

So what is Socrates' answer?

Tell him, Cebes, he replied, what is the truth — I wanted to see whether I could purge away a scruple which I felt about the meaning of certain dreams. In the course of my life I have often had intimations in dreams 'that I should compose music.' The same dream came sometimes to me in one form, and sometimes in another, but always saying the same or nearly the same words: 'Cultivate and make music,' said the dream. And hitherto I had imagined that this was only intended to exhort and encourage me in the study of philosophy, which has been the pursuit of my life and is the noblest and best of music. The dream was bidding me to do what I was already doing, in the same way that the competitor in a race is bidden by the spectators to run when he is already running. But I was not certain of this; for the dream might have meant music in the popular sense of the word, and being under the sentence of death, and the festival giving me a respite, I thought it would be safer for me to satisfy the scruple, and in obedience to the dream, to compose a few verses before I departed. And first I made a hymn in honor of the god of the festival, and then, considering that a poet, if he is really a poet, should not only put together words, but should invent stories, and that I have no invention, I took some fables of Aesop, which I had ready at hand and which I knew — they were the first I came upon — and turned them into verse.<sup>50</sup>

The parallel between Socrates philosophizing and music making is a recurrent theme in Plato's dialogues, especially in the *Symposium*. Philosophical conversation is there said to be to drinking as Socrates is to the flute girls. Alcibiades links Socrates explicitly to

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<sup>50</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60d-61b, trans. Benjamin Jowett,

the flute girls, to Silenus, and to the flute-playing satyr Marsyas. And remember the fate of Marsyas, who dared challenge Apollo to a musical contest, and was punished by being flayed alive. Does Alcibiades' comparison imply a warning?

But in the passage I have just read you Socrates is no longer content with this interpretation of philosophical conversation as a higher kind of music making. Did the dreams perhaps suggest that Socrates should also have made music in the popular sense of the word? The dreams are bidding him to compose music. And it is his own confrontation with death that forces him to take these dreams seriously: **Is the life of the philosopher perhaps an incomplete life? And is music necessary to make up for that incompleteness?** Socrates, at any rate goes on to compose a hymn in honor of Apollo, whose festivals the Athenians were then celebrating and takes some fables of Aesop and sets them to verse, because, as he tells us, he is lacking in poetic invention. The sacred ship from Delos had been delayed. Socrates experiences the extra time this gives him as a gift from the God Apollo, as whose servant Plato so often describes him. But who is Apollo? The God of **light**, of clear conceptual form; but he is also the god of **dreams**. Are Socrates thoughts then perhaps just dreams? Mere poetry? And the poets lie too much, Nietzsche would have added. And do we perhaps need another, a Dionysian poetry?

## 5

The question we must ask ourselves is whether Plato with this description of the music-making Socrates suggests a need for a reevaluation of poetry. This thesis receives support from other passages in Plato's dialogues. Isn't the entire theory of inspiration in a certain tension with that image of the theoretical Socrates that Nietzsche paints for us? Does Plato not include the philosopher among those who are divinely inspired? Does the philosopher, too, not attempt to articulate a vision that is not fully in his control? Is he not in this respect rather like the poet? Remember that in the *Phaedrus* the artist appears twice on Socrates' list: he appears first in the top circle together with the philosopher. But Plato also assigns poets and other imitative artists to the sixth rank, behind prophets and just ahead of artisans. Plato, I suggested, seems to distinguish two kinds of art: one

close to philosophy, the other of much lower status, an art of representation, concerned with furnishing imitations of appearance.

That this is indeed the case is suggested by the central place given to **myth** in so many Platonic dialogues, especially in such middle dialogues as the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*. Plato's Socrates is much closer to art and to poetry than the theoretical Socrates of Nietzsche. Plato himself invites us to distinguish between two kinds of poetry:

1. the poetry of inspiration
2. the poetry of imitation.

Socratic poetry, like prophecy, can perhaps be viewed as a species of the former. And yet, the suspicion of the dying Socrates, that there is something deficient about such poetry remains. Its inspiring divinity is an abstract, disembodied divinity, a divinity that has totally withdrawn from the body, from time — if you want an Apollinian divinity. What has been shortchanged by Socrates is the Dionysian element, and in the *Ion* or the *Phaedrus* Plato recognizes quite clearly that there is **Dionysian inspiration** as well. Just this side of Socrates's being is underdeveloped, and the nagging feeling on the part of the dying Socrates, that he should be making music, suggests to me that Plato recognizes this to be a lack. The full life must join spirit and body, philosophy and music, Apollo and Dionysus. As Nietzsche suggests, the old Euripides, writing the *Bacchae* and the old Socrates, writing his hymn to Apollo and setting Aesop's fables to music belong together. But this also suggests that Plato, to whom we owe this account of the death of Socrates, is not quite as diametrically opposed to Nietzsche, as the latter believed, who liked to present his own thinking as an inversion of Plato's.

## 6. Art as the Work of Man

### 1

In the last few lectures, I placed a great deal of emphasis on those passages in Plato where he sees poetic creation not so much as the work for which the creator can take credit, but as the product of some higher power, acting through the individual. Some divinity makes the individual its mouthpiece. Plato thus tends to oppose art and inspiration. The artist knows why he is doing what he is doing. He possesses a skill that he can teach others. He can give reasons why he is doing what he is doing. The person who is inspired cannot. What he creates is like a gift from some higher power.

As we turn from Plato to Aristotle, we find greater emphasis on the art character of the work of art. Consider this statement from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Now since architecture is an **art** and is essentially a **reasoned state of capacity to make**, and there is neither any art that is not such a state nor any such state that is not an art, art is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning.... Art, then, as has been said, is a state concerned with making, **involving a true course of reasoning**, and lack of art on the contrary is a state concerned with making, involving a false course of reasoning; (83).<sup>51</sup>

Aristotle, to be sure, is here not particularly concerned with fine art; what he has to say applies rather better to mechanical production, say to bicycle making. What Aristotle does point out is that we cannot speak of art where there is no previous understanding of the kind of work to be done. This is the **final cause** of the work to be done. Aristotle compares the architect and the physician: both are artists in his sense. One forms with his mind an image of the kind of building he wants to erect, the other has an understanding of what constitutes health. They then proceed to realize that end. To understand any work of art as a work of art is to understand it as the product of an attempt to realize a certain end. With reference to this end we can judge the work of the artist a success or a failure. You can for example try to sketch a likeness of your friend. There is a quite obvious sense in which you can fail in your attempt. What this suggests is that **no work of art is adequately understood as a work of art when it is understood simply as the product of inspiration**. That includes works of fine art. There are theories of artistic production

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<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a 7-11; 20-23.

that lose sight of this. In discussions of expressionist art inspiration theories were especially common. Herbert Read, for example, called the artist is a mere medium, a channel for forces which are impersonal, where, following Freud and Jung, he tied these to an impersonal subconscious, not to a Platonic realm of timeless forms or to the gods. Note that the unconscious, Plato's forms, or the gods can occupy the same place in inspiration theories. They represent attempts to name what is experienced as a transcendent reality that acts through us, using us as its medium. Consider, e.g., the painter Paul Klee's famous metaphor of the tree:

May I use a simile, the simile of the tree? The artist has studied this world in all its variety and has, we may suppose, unobtrusively found his way in it. His sense of direction in nature and life, this branching and spreading array, I shall compare with the root of the tree.

From the root the sap flows to the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye.

Thus he stands as the trunk of the tree. ... standing at his appointed place, the trunk of the tree, he does nothing other than gather and pass on what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules — he transmits.

His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own. He is merely a channel.<sup>52</sup>

In a similar vein the painter Max Ernst credits surrealism with having destroyed once and for all the fairy tale of the creative power of the artist. The artist's role, he, too, insists, is purely passive. All deliberation, all intentions, on this view, stand in the way of inspiration. The artist here becomes his own spectator, watching a happening of which he is not the author.

But this cannot be quite right. Were it the whole story, how would it be possible to distinguish a work of art from a product of accident or a natural event. Against the exaggerated inspiration theory and with Aristotle, we have to insist that **to some extent every work of art is the product of a deliberate doing**. This is to say, looking at any work of art **I see it as the realization of an intention**. Not that it is adequately understood in this way. Anyone who has ever tried to paint or write a poem will be aware of the gifts of impersonal accident or inspiration. A few lines put down more or less at random may suddenly coalesce into a work of art. Or we may try to realize a fixed

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Klee, "On Modern Art," (1924), *Modern Artists On Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 76 - 77.

plan and be forced by what appears on the canvas to modify it. Every artist has to acknowledge the stubborn independence of his creation; also that there is something about his own doing over which he has only very incomplete control, i.e. his dependence on what we can call inspiration. But granting all this, nevertheless the work of art remains **his creation**. He chose to make it and make it in a certain manner. This is important to hold on to, especially in light of so many attempts to get away from deliberation and intention. Some years ago there was a great deal of talk about the so-called **intentional fallacy**. Such talk suggests that it is a mistake to inquire into what the artist intended; we should focus on the work of art. But I would insist that to experience something as a work of art, as opposed, say, to a mere thing, is to experience it as a realization of an intention. This is part of its **meaning**. To be sure, there have been, and continue to be, in art many attempts to have the work of art be no more than the product of accident (e.g. Arp), of a spontaneous happening (Masson's automatic drawing) or a mere, ideally meaningless visual presence (Malevich, Judd, Stella). But in all these cases we look at the art-work as a work of art, i.e. we refer it back to the intention of the artist. The in the sixties so fashionable **rhetoric of presence** should not deceive us. The very attempt to create art works **that should not mean, but be**, (this of course is what is asserted by MacLeish's famous epigram about the poem), refers us back to the artist's intention. It becomes part of the meaning of the work of art, which while intended to have no meaning, inevitably means something after all.

## 2

To view the work of art in this manner as a realization of an idea which the artist has before he begins to work brings with it a certain danger: it tends to bifurcate the creation of the work of art into two quite distinct activities: the thinking and imagining that leads to the idea, and the realization of the idea, its translation into sensible form. Aristotle's own words suggest such an analysis. Consider these passages from Book VII of the *Metaphysics*: Aristotle speaks first about the way nature produces, of the way plants or animals grow and reproduce. Human making is very different from such production:



Thus, then, are natural products produced; all other productions are called 'makings'. And all makings produce either from art or from a faculty or from thought. ... from art proceed the things of which the form is in the soul of the artist. ... Of the productions or processes one part is called thinking and the other making — that which proceeds from the starting-point and the form is thinking, and that which proceeds from the final step of the thinking is making (91).<sup>53</sup>

This suggests that it should be possible to distinguish in the case of every work of art between what the artist is trying to do, which is a product of **thinking**, and the realization of what has been thought up, the actual **making**. This does indeed fit the art of medicine, an example Aristotle is especially fond of. The doctor knows what health is. In accordance with that knowledge he comes to an understanding of the steps to be taken to restore the sick person to health. And then he puts what he has arrived at into practice. And we could understand the art of building, say of a bridge or a house, in the same manner. First comes the analysis of the needs to be met. Then we consider how these needs are best met. Think of Le Corbusier's famous definition of the house as a machine for living. But can we extend this picture to the fine arts?

Such an attempt has indeed been made, most insistently perhaps by the theorists of the neo-classicism that flourished in the eighteenth century. In the circle around Winckelmann a distinction was often drawn between the **mechanical** and the **philosophical** part of art. The painter Anton Raphael Mengs, one of the central figures in neo-classicist art and theory, thus understands art as the **sensible representation of the ideal**, where the ideal is understood very much as something to be thought. The ideal presents itself to the artist on this view first of all as a **concept in the mind**. The ideal part is said to require great talent, while the mechanical does not, being precisely only mechanical. On such a view, the artist is first of all a philosopher, and secondarily a craftsman. And since the ideal part is said to be what really matters, such an understanding of art threatens to make art superfluous.

If a pure inspiration theory does not do justice to the work of art, this is equally true of a theory that would reduce the work of art to a mere acting out or presenting of a plan arrived at by thinking alone. Such a view of art tends to make it superfluous. Thus we find many theorists of neo-classicism almost embarrassed by the sensuous quality of

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<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VII, 1032a 27-1032b 18.

so much art. We meet with a tendency away from oil painting towards the line. The work of art becomes little more than an occasion for us to recover the great thoughts of the artists. There is a sense in which we can speak here already, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, about **concept-art**. That term of course is commonly associated with far more recent art. Take some of Marcel Duchamp's productions. Here is how Duchamp described what he was up to:

Futurism was an impressionism of the mechanical world. It was strictly a continuation of the Impressionist movement. I was not interested in that. I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purposes, and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was interested in ideas — not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind.<sup>54</sup>

Think of the many works of modern art that offer little more than occasions for thought. Take Duchamp's notorious snow-shovel. Or Claes Oldenburg's three-way plug. Or a Warhol soup-can. How important is the particular object?

### 3

I have suggested that both, a one-sided emphasis on inspiration and a one-sided emphasis on art in the Aristotelian sense fail to do justice to artistic creation. Consider once more the actual creation of a work of art. Suppose you want to paint a picture. Usually there will be some idea you want to realize. You will know, e.g., that you want to paint a picture. You will have decided on the medium. And presumably you will know what kind of painting it is likely to be, e.g. abstract or representational, if abstract, using a geometric or a more organic vocabulary, if representational you are likely to have some understanding not only of what it is you want to represent, but also of the style of representation you are likely to employ. All this is just to say that you will have some understanding of what you are going to do. This understanding will not have sufficient content to determine what you are going to create in all relevant respects, not even in the

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<sup>54</sup> Marcel Duchamp, "Painting ... at the service of the mind," 1946, *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969 ), pp. 393 - 394.

most important respects. In all likelihood, you will not be able to point to a conception adequate to what you are really doing. Secondly, there will be in most cases a constant reinterpretation of what you are up to in light on what you have already done. It is thus not altogether wrong to think that there is first a process of thinking, which, when completed, yields the idea which is then to be realized. But that matters are not quite so simple is suggested by a consideration such as the following: to what extent can the artist distinguish successfully between what is a contribution of reason and what a contribution of the hand. Consider yourself **doodling**. The lines you have set down on the paper before you will influence the next lines you will draw. In our doodles we tend to hit on a vocabulary and remain with it. Creative vision will always suggest possibilities that are suggested by what you have put down on paper. That goes also for painting: I have painted a yellow rectangular form which demands to be answered by a blue staff. I proceed to put down the blue. You ask me, why did you put the blue there? I point to the yellow. Perhaps you will understand. But if you understand, your understanding will not be a matter of disengaged reflection. It will be a **creative seeing** on your part. You will see why I had to do what I did.

Is such creative seeing a form of reasoning? Or does it belong to inspiration? I would say that it mediates between both. The actual production of the work of art is precisely how I get hold of the vague idea that floated before me. That idea was not antecedently given. What was given was at best the ghost, or the trace of that idea, not the idea itself.

And perhaps it is just this integration of reflection and the work of the hand, of the spirit and of the body, which is part of the satisfaction of making and appreciating works of art. The work of art heals us, it binds what is usually split, together, makes us whole, and with this suggestion that art possesses a healing, integrative power we return to the *Symposium*, and to its understanding of eros as a desire for the whole. Think back to the mythical account of the origin of love given by Aristophanes.

## 4

In his analysis of art, Aristotle refers us repeatedly to his doctrine of the **four causes**, which is indeed readily derived from his understanding of art. Most frequently

Aristotle speaks of the **final cause**. I have touched on it when I spoke of the idea, the intention, that governs the coming into being of a particular work of art. This coming into being depends of course on particular actions that the individual decides on. They can be considered its **efficient cause**. These actions involve the imposition of a form on a material. To the final and efficient cause we thus have to add the **formal and material causes**. Different ways of looking at the work of art correspond to the four causes. We can understand it:

1. As the realization of an intention.
2. As the product or trace of an action.
3. As the revelation of a form.
4. As a revelation of some specific material.

These aspects may stand in each other's way. A particular form, e.g., may not be realizable because of the material chosen. Consider, e.g. the way particular building materials rule out certain forms. If this is true, it is of course also the case that particular materials invite certain forms. Dürer spoke of **the form sleeping in the matter**. There is a sense in which matter is pregnant with form and the great artist will be sensitive to what his material suggests to him. Consider in this connection the evolution of Gothic architecture in the light of the different materials available, say sandstone, limestone, and brick. In a successful work of art the form cannot finally be separated from the material.

Similarly, there can be discrepancy between the artist's ability and his intention. An artist may be trying to do too much. As a consequence I see the work of art as the product of an action that was unable to meet what the intention required. Say I want to draw a picture of my grandfather. It turns out to be a poor likeness. What I produced proved inadequate to what I intended. In a successful work of art what I am actually doing should also be what I want to be doing. **In the successful work of art the tensions between intention and execution, form and matter are reconciled.**

## 7. The Mimetic Character of Art

### 1

Last time I discussed the work of art as a human product, governed by a particular intention. But what kind of a work is the work of art. What is its point? What purpose does it serve?

Like Plato, Aristotle thinks of what we would call art first of all in terms of representation. Art and poetry are fundamentally **mimetic**, but unlike Plato, Aristotle is not therefore led to condemn them. On the contrary, this mimetic art is said by Aristotle to have an important place in any well thought out program of education. The crucial text here is not the *Poetics*, but the *Politics*. It is here that Aristotle gives his answer to Plato's condemnation of mimetic art in the *Republic* and tackles the Platonic attack on the arts. Only Parts of Book VIII are reprinted in our reader. I urge you to read that book in its entirety.

Aristotle begins with a remark on the customary branches of education, four in number: *they are — reading and writing, gymnastic exercises, and music, to which is sometimes added drawing.*<sup>55</sup> Aristotle can take the value of the first three for granted, but what is the value of the fourth: what is the value of music? Aristotle's answer is interesting:

Concerning music a doubt may be raised — in our own day most men cultivate it for the sake of pleasure, but originally it was included in education, because nature herself, as has often been said, requires that we should be able, not only to work well, but to use leisure well; for, as I must repeat once again, the first principle of all action is leisure. Both are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end; and therefore the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure.<sup>56</sup>

We sense the deep difference between Plato and Aristotle: Aristotle appears to seek the end of life in life itself, not beyond life, in some Platonic heaven. The this-worldliness of Aristotle's philosophy mirrors itself in his philosophy of art. The best moments of life are those when we are not occupied with some task, but when we are at leisure and therefore free to be truly ourselves.

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII, 3, 1337b 23 - 25, tr. Benjamin Jowett.

<sup>56</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 3, 1337b 27-35.

But leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life, which are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure. For he who is occupied has in view some end which he has not attained; but happiness is an end, since all men deem it to be accompanied with pleasure and not with pain.<sup>57</sup>

Aristotle draws a distinction between merely being amused and being truly at leisure.

**Amusement** is a break in the work routine. Essentially a negation of work, it is tied into that routine. **Leisure** stands in no such negative relationship to work.

Here is what Aristotle has to say about amusement:

Amusement is for the sake of relaxation, and relaxation is of necessity sweet, for it is the remedy of pain caused by toil: and intellectual enjoyment is universally acknowledged to contain an element not only of the noble, but of the pleasant, for happiness is made up of both. All men agree that music is one of the pleasantest things, whether with or without song; as Musaeus says, '**Song is to mortals of all things the sweetest**' Hence and with good reason it is introduced into social gatherings and entertainments, because it makes the hearts of men glad: so that on this ground alone we may assume that the young ought to be trained in it. For innocent pleasures are not only in harmony with the perfect end of life, but they also provide relaxation. And whereas men rarely attain the end, but often rest by the way and amuse themselves, not only with a view to a further end, but also for the pleasure's sake, it may be well to let them find refreshment in music. (132-133).<sup>58</sup>

Aristotle is quite happy to admit this entertainment function of music. It is indeed an important part of the good life:

And therefore our fathers admitted music into education, not on the ground either of its necessity or utility, for it is not necessary, nor indeed useful in the same manner as reading and writing, which are useful in money-making, in the management of a household, in the acquisition of knowledge and in political life, not like drawing, useful for a more correct judgment of the work of artists, nor again like gymnastic, which gives health and strength; for neither of these is to be gained from music. There remains then, the use of music for intellectual enjoyment in leisure, which is in fact evidently the reason for its introduction, this being one of the ways in which it is thought that a freeman should pass his leisure.<sup>59</sup>

Leisure, according to Aristotle, is first of all intellectual enjoyment. A good education should prepare us for such a life.

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<sup>57</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 3, 1338a 1-6

<sup>58</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 5, 1339b 15-31

<sup>59</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 3, 1338a 13-24.

## 2

But amusement is not the only, indeed not the noblest function of music.

But music is pursued not only as an alleviation of past toil, but also as providing recreation. And who can say whether, having this use, it may not also have a nobler one? In addition to this common pleasure, felt and shared in by all (for the pleasure given by music is natural, and therefore adapted to all ages and characters), may it not have also some influence over the character and the soul. It must have such an influence if characters are affected by it. And that they are so affected is proved in many ways, and not least by the power which the songs of Olympus exercise; for beyond question, they inspire enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is an emotion of the ethical part of the soul. (133).<sup>60</sup>

Music, according to Aristotle, is one of the ways in which a freeman ought to spend his hours of leisure. A well thought out program of education will prepare him to do so well. Aristotle therefore goes on to insist that while there are some things that we should teach our children because they are **useful** and **necessary**, others should be taught because they are **liberal** and **noble**.

Aristotle here is making an important point: Much of our life is lived instrumentally. We do certain things because they should help us to live the good life, to make money, e.g., which supposedly will then enable us to live the kind of life we would really like to live. But all too often these instrumental activities come to take up the whole of life. The fullness of life thus escapes us. There should be activities that are **autotelic**, that have their end within themselves. What separates Aristotle from Plato is that **Aristotle does not share the Platonic rancor against time**. And this makes him far more tolerant of the arts.

Aristotle suggests that one point of art is to give us a kind of experience that is its own reward. But if the work of art is to grant such a self-sufficient experience it should itself captivate us by its presence. To the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic experience corresponds the self-sufficiency of the work of art. Engaged in the contemplation of the work of art we should not be led beyond it. The work of art should possess closure. The closure of the work of art should be such that it does not lead us on to something else. We enjoy art for its own sake, not because it serves some higher purpose. The self-

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<sup>60</sup> *Politics* VIII, 5, 1339b 41 – 1340a 6.

justifying nature of the aesthetic experience has its counterpart in the self-sufficiency of the work of art.

## 3

That the work of art should be such a self-sufficient, complete whole has become one of the commonplaces of aesthetics. It was given its most famous expression by Aristotle's characterization of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Of tragedy Aristotle has this to say:

We have laid it down that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. (104 – 105)<sup>61</sup>

We can generalize this understanding of tragedy and propose the following characterization of the work of art: **the work of art is an imitation of reality that forms a whole in the sense that nothing is felt to be missing, nothing is felt to be superfluous.** Eighteenth century aestheticians spoke in this connection of the **perfection** of the work of art. But how important is it really that a work of art be such a whole? Think of fragments or ruins! Can these be works of art? If so a certain incompleteness would seem to be compatible with art. Consider two kinds of painting: one composed towards the frame, so that it is experienced as in some sense necessary (e.g. Poussin). Consider another in which say the horizon line, so shoots across the canvas that the frame is experienced as an in some sense arbitrary termination (cf. Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*)! Do we really want to say that stronger closure makes for better art? Or consider two musical experiences, say one of a Haydn symphony with a very clear beginning, middle, and end, the other of a few bells, in some European village church, being rung by some local children. Such a musical piece, if we can call it that, has no clear closure. It does not so much end as fade away. And isn't there much music that similarly resists a strong **sense of ending**. In classical music one can say that, beginning perhaps with Beethoven, composers seem to have had ever greater difficulty ending their

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<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 7, 1450b 21-33.



pieces. Or think of the category of the sublime, to which we shall return when we turn to Kant. Here I only want to point out that the sublime implies a lack of closure. These examples should suffice to suggest that not all aesthetic objects need to have the kind of closure suggested by Aristotle.

## 4

Aristotle suggests that the highest function of music is to give **intellectual enjoyment** and it would seem that such enjoyment is bound up with an appreciation of **closure**. But Aristotle knows that the appeal of music cannot be reduced to a matter of intellectual enjoyment. Most people find in music very different pleasures. Aristotle ties this difference to a class distinction:

But since the spectators are of two kinds — the one free and educated, the other a vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, laborers, and the like — there ought to be contests and exhibitions instituted for the relaxation of the second class also. And the music will correspond to their minds; for as their minds are perverted from the natural state, so there are perverted modes and highly strung and unnaturally colored melodies. A man receives pleasure from what is natural to him, and therefore professional musicians may be allowed to practice this lower sort of music before an audience of a lower type (137).<sup>62</sup>

These lower pleasures of music depend not so much on a contemplation of form as on the mimetic power of music, and what music imitates are the emotions. Music affects us. It puts us in a certain state of mind. And just because of this it has an ethical and a political significance. Think of martial music! On this Plato and Aristotle are in agreement.

## 5

Related to Aristotle's distinction between the higher and lower pleasures of music is the twofold characterization of music that has returned in discussions of music again and again: one emphasizes the formal, almost mathematical quality of music — following Nietzsche we can perhaps call this the **Apollinian** aspect of music — while the other calls attention to its emotive content — perhaps we can speak here of its **Dionysian** aspect. Like Nietzschean tragedy, music seems to join both.

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<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII, 7, 1342a 18-27

It is this Dionysian side of music that makes it so affecting. Music seizes us, it opens us to dimensions of our being which normally lie submerged. Here is how Aristotle describes this power of music to move us:

Besides, when men hear imitations, even apart from the rhythms and tunes themselves, their feelings move in sympathy. Since then music is a pleasure, and virtue consists in rejoicing and loving and hating aright, there is clearly nothing which we are so much concerned to acquire and to cultivate as the power of forming right judgments, and of taking delight in good dispositions and noble actions. Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these and of the other qualities of character, which hardly falls short of the actual affections, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change (133).<sup>63</sup>

Music tunes us; it communicates an **ethos**. It is thus likely to influence the development of the individual. Thus it has an obvious educational function.

On the other hand, even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each. Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm. The whole subject has been well treated by philosophical writers on this branch of education, and they confirm their arguments by facts. The same principles apply to rhythms; some have a character of rest, others of motion, and of these later again, some have a more vulgar, others a noble movement. Enough has been said to show that music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young (134).<sup>64</sup>

Aristotle concludes his discussion by insisting that music deserves the high place that Greek education had traditionally accorded it.

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<sup>63</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* VIII, 5, 1340a 14-23.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* VIII, 1340a 39-1340b 15.

## 8. Tragedy

### 1

Aristotle's *Poetics* does not present us with a general theory of art, nor even with a complete poetics. It is really a treatise on tragedy, which does, however, in many places hint at a broader theory. But let me turn to his definition of tragedy and consider it in some detail:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions. (102)<sup>65</sup>

### 2

Let us consider the first part of the definition: tragedy is the **imitation of an action**. Aristotle is not pointing here to a property peculiar to tragedy, nor even to literature. Consider, e. g. the following passage:

The objects the imitator represents are actions with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad — the diversities of human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice is one dividing the whole of mankind. It follows, therefore, that the agents represented must be either above our own level of goodness, or beneath it, or just such as we are; in the same way as, with the painters, the personages of Polygnotus are better than we are, those of Pauson worse, and those of Dionysius just like ourselves (98).<sup>66</sup>

Note that painting is here described as representing agents. Indeed painting and poetry have often been thought to be both imitative arts, distinguished only by their media. *Ut pictura poesis*. This view was challenged decisively only by Lessing, in the 18th century, who insisted that painting, being bound to the moment, is incapable of representing actions, which take time.

What does Aristotle mean when he calls tragedy **the imitation of an action or praxis**? Aristotle distinguishes **praxis** from **poiesis**, action from a making. The

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<sup>65</sup> *Poetics*, 6, 1449b 24 - 29.

<sup>66</sup> *Poetics*, 2, 1448a 2 - 7.

difference is that poiesis is activity which has its end beyond itself.<sup>67</sup> Aristotle calls such activities which have their ends beyond themselves movements. What art describes are not mere movements, but **actions that have their ends within themselves**. This is to say that most of our activities do not constitute a praxis in the required sense, for example driving a nail into a board, etc. Part of the very meaning of action is a certain **closure**. This brings us back to the topic of closure discussed last time. Tragedy reveals a complete action and in so doing it reveals the **ethos** of the **agent**, his way of standing in the world. This is why Aristotle can say that the agents of actions are necessarily either good or bad men. Tragedy describes an action governed by a certain ethos. It thus cannot help but have an ethical significance.

Furthermore that action must be such that we can relate to it, that the fate of the tragic hero is felt to have a relevance to our own fate. Something common must unite us. What tragedy reveals has a general significance. This allows Aristotle to say that poetry is more philosophical than history:

From what we have said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse — you might put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do, — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to its characters. (106)<sup>68</sup>

### 3

The second characterization, **serious**, serves to distinguish tragedy from comedy, one making personages **better**, the other **worse** than they are.

3 and 4: The next two characterizations we discussed last time. Any work of art must be of a certain magnitude and it must be self-contained complete in itself. Aristotle

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<sup>67</sup> *Metaphysics*, IX, 6, 1048b 18 - 34.

<sup>68</sup> *Poetics* 9, 1451b 2 - 10.

spells this out in the paragraphs that follow. He denies that it is sufficient to give unity to tragedy by relating all its actions to a **single hero**. One individual can still experience too many different things to allow us to speak of unity. He suggests that action should be confined to a day or little more. Unity of place is not mentioned by him as a requirement.

The following items in the definition are pretty much self-explanatory. *Language with pleasurable accessories* refers to the poets' use of rhythm and melody; *each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work* to the difference between declamation and song; *in dramatic, not in a narrative form* requires no comment.

## 4

The part of the definition that has come in for the most discussion is the last. The action imitated in tragedy is said to be *one with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions*. Here we come to the heart of Aristotle's view of tragedy. Tragedy is an imitation of actions arousing pity and fear. What is meant here by *pity and fear*? What do we enjoy in their representation? The answer to this question is tied to what Aristotle means by **catharsis**.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle has rather little to say about pity and fear, more about what kind of plot is likely to arouse them. This deficiency is made up to some extent by a number of passages in the *Rhetoric*.

Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future. Of destructive evils only; for there are some evils, e.g. wickedness or stupidity, the prospect of which does not frighten us: I mean only such as amount to great pains or losses. And even those only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent: we do not fear things that are a long way off: for instance we all know we shall die, but we are not troubled thereby, because death is not close at hand (126).<sup>69</sup>

Aristotle goes on to describe the conditions under which we feel fear:

If fear is associated with the expectation that something destructive will happen to us, plainly nobody will be afraid who believed nothing can happen to him; we shall not fear things that we believe cannot happen to us, nor people who we believe cannot inflict them upon us; nor shall we be afraid at times when we think ourselves safe from them. It follows therefore that fear is felt by those who believe something to be likely to happen to

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<sup>69</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 5, 1382 a 21 - 28.

them, at the hands of particular persons, in a particular form, and at a particular time.  
(127)<sup>70</sup>

Aristotle goes on to give quite specific advice concerning what an orator should do to fill his audience with fear:

Consequently, when it is advisable that the audience should be frightened, the orator must make them feel that they really are in danger of something, pointing out that it has happened to others who were stronger than they are, and is happening or has happened, to people like themselves, at the hands of unexpected people, in an unexpected form, and at an unexpected time. (128)<sup>71</sup>

Death itself is a proper subject for tragedy only if it is presented in such a way that we recognize our impotence to make ourselves certain that death is a long way off. Fear then is tied to insecurity. To say that tragedy should make us feel fear is to say also that **it should rob us of our everyday sense of security**. Fear is therefore felt only when I recognize that what is happening to those on stage could be happening to me. A destiny may overtake me that I do not understand and of which I am not the master. Here we have the key to Aristotle's emphasis on the **marvelous**:

Such incidents have the greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvelous in them than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance. Even matters of chance seem more marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them; as for instance the statue of Mityls at Argos killed the author of Mityls' death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle; for incidents like that we think not to be without a meaning. A plot, therefore, of this sort is necessarily finer than others. (107).<sup>72</sup>

Once again we sense the deep opposition between Plato and Aristotle. Platonic beauty is an epiphany of true being. It thus promises security, an escape from time. The beauty of tragedy, on the other hand, reveals the final insecurity of the individual. Consider Oedipus. Oedipus's life stands for a life lived in an attempt to have the individual secure himself, a **prideful** life. Tragedy reveals to us the futility of such attempts. In a different way this is the point of the failure of Pentheus in Euripides'

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<sup>70</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 5, 1382 b 28 - 36.

<sup>71</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 5, 1383 a 8 - 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Poetics* 9, 1452 a 1 - 11.

*Bacchae*. But what is edifying about their failure? What does Aristotle mean when he speak of a **catharsis**?

## 5

Before I return to this question let me turn to the other emotion, to **pity**:

Let us now consider Pity, asking ourselves what things excite pity, and for what persons, and in what states of our mind pity is felt. Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or to some friend of, and moreover some such evil as is stated in our definition or is more or less of that kind. It is therefore not felt by those completely ruined, who suppose that no further evil can befall them, since the worst has befallen them already; nor by those who imagine themselves immensely fortunate.

(129)<sup>73</sup>

Aristotle proceeds to explain the grounds on which we feel pity:

The grounds, then, on which we feel pity are these or like these. The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us; in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. For this reason Amasis did not weep, they say, at the sight of his son being led to death, but did weep when he saw his friend begging: the latter sight was pitiful, the former terrible, and the terrible is different from the pitiful; it tends to cast out pity, and often helps to produce the opposite of pity. Again, we feel pity, when the danger is near ourselves. Also we pity those who are like us in age, character, disposition, social standing, or birth; for in all these cases it appears more likely that the same misfortune may befall us also. (130)<sup>74</sup>

The actor who would move us to pity should bring the actions he represents close to us; he has to bring them before our eyes in a way that these actions appear just to have happened or are about to happen:

Anything that has just happened, or is going to happen soon, is particularly piteous: so, too, therefore are the tokens and the actions of suffering — the garments and the like of those who have already suffered; the words and the actions of those actually suffering — of those, for instance, who are on the point of death. Most piteous of all is it when, in such times of trial, the victims are persons of noble character: whenever they are so, our

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<sup>73</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 8, 1385 b 11 - 22.

<sup>74</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 1386a 17 - 27.

pity is especially excited, because their innocence, as well as the setting of their misfortunes before our eyes, makes their misfortunes seem close to ourselves. (131)<sup>75</sup>

Tragedy, on Aristotle's view, reveals to the human being who he is: noble in his desire to give order and structure to his life and world, yet pitiful in his inability to secure himself.

**Tragedy reveals the tragic fate of man.** Consider in this connection the choral hymn from *Antigone*:

*strophe 1*

There is much that is strange, but nothing  
That surpasses man in strangeness.  
He sets sail on the frothing waters  
Amid the south winds of winter  
tacking through the mountains  
and furious chasms of the waves.  
He wearies even the noblest  
of the gods, the Earth, indestructible and untiring,  
overturning her from year to year,  
driving the ploughs this way and that  
with horses.

*antistrophe 1*

And man, pondering and plotting  
snares the light-gliding birds  
and hunts the beasts of the wilderness  
and the native creatures of the sea.  
With guile he overpowers the beast  
that roams the mountains by night as by day,  
he yokes the hirsute neck of the stallion  
and the undaunted bull.

*strophe 2*

And he has found his way  
to the resonance of the word,  
and to wind-swift all-understanding,  
and to the courage of rule over cities.  
He has also considered how to flee

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<sup>75</sup> *Rhetoric* II, 8, 1386 b 1 - 8.



from exposure to the arrows  
of unpropitious weather and frost.

Everywhere journeying, inexperienced and without issue,  
he comes to nothingness.  
Through no flight can he resist  
the one assault of death,  
even if he has succeeded in cleverly evading  
painful sicknesses.

*antistrophe 2*

Clever indeed, mastering  
the ways of skill beyond all hope  
he sometimes accomplishes evil,  
sometimes achieves brave deeds.  
He wends his way between the laws of the earth  
and the adjured justice of the gods.  
Rising high above his place,  
He who for the sake of adventure takes  
what is not for what is loses  
his place in the end.

May such a man never frequent my hearth;  
May mind never share the presumption  
Of him who does this.<sup>76</sup>

Death cannot be evaded. To affirm ourselves we must affirm ourselves as essentially mortal and recognize the need to accept our place and not aspire to godlike mastery. We should do our best to honor the laws of the land and justice. But as the fates of Antigone or Oedipus show, the opacity of the world makes it impossible to always distinguish evil-doing from accomplishing brave deeds. Tragedy teaches us to recognize and affirm the limits that are set to that power of self-assertion that makes human beings so wondrous. Should the death of Socrates be considered a tragedy? I leave this question to you.

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<sup>76</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 332-375, trans. Ralph Manheim, in Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1961, pp. 123-124.

## 6

But what is edifying about such recognition of our mortality and the opacity of the world? What is the meaning of **catharsis**? Again the *Poetics* give us no good answer. The definitive explanation that Aristotle is supposed to have given in the *Poetics* has been lost. In the *Politics* we are given more of a hint. There Aristotle not only emphasizes the power of music to arouse the emotions, but ties such an arousal to a purgation. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, would appear to have a **purgative** and a **healing** effect. Our souls are **lightened and delighted**. To say this is to suggest that ordinarily we suffer from a burden. This burden is the usually repressed fate of human beings to be at the mercy of powers greater than they are, of fate and the gods. This fatedness of human existence finds expression in the way the tragedians tend to return to a few tragically fated families, to the traditional stories, which, Aristotle suggests, should be kept as they are.

But the burden that weighs on us is not so much that we are powerless, but that we repress that powerlessness and the associated emotions. Just for this reason **we are unable to affirm ourselves in our entirety**, we deny that in us which places us at the mercy of time. First of all and most of the time we human beings live alienated from our own being. This is indeed also Plato's view, but what does he mean by alienation? for Plato it is **time** that is **the alienating force**, for Aristotle it is the **human being who is alienated from time** and needs to be reconciled with it if he is to fully affirm himself. Plato and Aristotle would thus appear to be holding deeply antithetical views: Plato, too, could speak of the healing power of the beautiful, but would mean by it something very different from what Aristotle has in mind when he speaks of the healing power of tragedy. For Plato the beautiful heals us by drawing us closer to our true home, which transcends time; for Aristotle tragedy heals us by letting us appreciate the beauty of our fragile existence.

In this connection we should not lose sight of the way the emotions have been controlled by tragedy. They are first of all distanced. The events we see on stage are not real. More importantly, the form of the tragedy, its closure, serves to establish an ordered, controlled aesthetic space separate from real life. I read the *Poetics* in a way that makes it compatible with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. But this is to suggest that **the human being is made whole by the joining of the Apollonian and the Dionysian**

**elements in the tragic work of art.** Like no other art form tragedy restores us to ourselves.

## 9. Ontological and Aesthetic Conceptions of Art

### 1

One of the striking differences between Aristotle's and Plato's theories of art is that Aristotle has little, if anything to say about inspiration; instead he invites us to understand the work of art as a product of a deliberate doing, where special emphasis falls on the role of **imitation** and **order**. On Aristotle's view the poet, or more generally the artist, knows quite a bit about what he is up to. He is not so much seized by some higher power, as he works, like other craftsmen, say a carpenter or a shoemaker, towards a quite specific end. To be sure, accident, spontaneity are not thereby ruled out. But what we can call the **vertical dimension** of artistic creation, the eruption of the divine in the work of art appears to have all but disappeared.

To this downgrading of the role of inspiration corresponds a downgrading of the ontological importance of the work of art. When Plato discusses art, he thinks of it first of all in relation to attempts to reveal what truly is. **Truth is made quite obviously the measure of art**. Judged by that measure art is found wanting, especially compared to philosophy

In Aristotle's *Poetics* it is far more difficult to determine whether or in what sense we are entitled to ask for truth in art. To be sure, poetry is said to be more philosophical than history in that it reveals the universal rather than the particular, reveals what it is to be human rather than describing particular human actions. In this sense it could be said to be more truthful. But is it a concern for truth that lets us seek out works of art? Far more than Plato, Aristotle appreciates the entertainment function of art. Leisure, as we have seen, is placed by him above work:

leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life, which are experienced, not by the busy man, but by those who have leisure. For he who is occupied has in view some end which he has not attained; but happiness is an end, since all men deem it to be accompanied with pleasure and not with pain.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 1338a, 1-6

Art gives us pleasure. That is its primary function. This has led aestheticians to suggest that with Aristotle we come to the beginning of the shift from an ontological to an aesthetic conception of art.

I have touched on this distinction a number of times. Let me reiterate the crucial point: On the **ontological conception** has a revelatory function. It reveals to us what truly matters. Revealing what truly matters it belongs with religion and philosophy. Art is thus understood first of all as standing in the service of truth.

On the **aesthetic conception** the work of art is first of all an occasion designed to occasion a particular pleasurable state of mind. It is judged to be beautiful if it succeeds in this. It is not so much truth but the pleasure it provides that matters. Aristotle would seem to describe tragedy in that way. A successful tragedy will lead to a catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear. Such catharsis is supposed to heal us and such healing is pleasurable. Similarly music is said to purge our emotions. By so doing, Aristotle continues, they provide an innocent pleasure.

Let me return here to the relevant passage:

Amusement is for the sake of relaxation, and relaxation is of necessity sweet, for it is the remedy of pain caused by toil: and intellectual enjoyment is universally acknowledged to contain an element not only of the noble, but of the pleasant, for happiness is made up of both. All men agree that music is one of the pleasantest things, whether with or without song; as Musaeus says, '**Song is to mortals of all things the sweetest**' Hence and with good reason it is introduced into social gatherings and entertainments, because it makes the hearts of men glad: so that on this ground alone we may assume that the young ought to be trained in it. For innocent pleasures are not only in harmony with the perfect end of life, but they also provide relaxation. And whereas men rarely attain the end, but often rest by the way and amuse themselves, not only with a view to a further end, but also for the pleasure's sake, it may be well to let them find refreshment in music. (132-133).<sup>78</sup>

Why is art innocent? Why are its pleasures innocent? The innocence of art is linked by Aristotle to the way it has removed itself from the ordinary business of everyday life. In that sense propaganda can not be art because it wants to incite us to action, while art is innocent precisely when it does not want to incite us to action, but wants to be enjoyed for its own sake. Such art is **autotelic**, i.e. it bears its telos, its end, within itself and thus

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<sup>78</sup> *Politics*, VIII, 1339b15-31

justifies itself; **aesthetic experience** so understood requires no justification. The innocent pleasure it provides is justification enough. The work of art is in a sense separated off from everyday reality; the same can be said of aesthetic experience. Here we have a key to the significance of the **frame**, and more generally of framing devices.

Whatever appears in a frame is in a sense disarmed. I can surrender myself to it without having to worry about consequences. That is why art is allowed by Aristotle to imitate not only the good emotions, but the bad ones as well. They have already been disarmed. Given such an understanding of art, the philosopher cannot consider it a serious rival to his pursuit of truth.

Plato's attack on the poets is so severe because he sees them, especially Homer, still as rivals, and that is to say, he ascribes to them a far greater significance than Aristotle appears to do.

## 2

But suppose Plato had accepted Aristotle's analysis of aesthetic pleasure as innocent, self-contained, pursued for its own sake — how would he have evaluated it? Can pleasure ever be innocent? Plato would certainly have insisted that art serve the good life. And Aristotle would have agreed. But their conceptions of the good life differ. Aesthetic pleasure is definitely part of Aristotle's this-worldly conception of the good life. Plato on the other hand looks beyond this life, beyond temporal reality for the source of meaning. Thus according to him the good life has its telos in a beauty that lies beyond sensible beauty. Given such an understanding, the apparently self-sufficient character of sensible beauty poses a threat. Its apparent self-sufficiency lets us lose sight of that higher beauty of which sensible beauty should be only a foretaste. For Plato the experience of sensible beauty, say the pleasure we take in a work of art, has to be essentially incomplete. So understood aesthetic experience is essentially incomplete. It should not claim to offer more than a foretaste. And because of this, claims to the self-sufficiency of art pose a threat.

Just as for the Christian all fully justified activity must be for the sake of God, so for Plato all fully justified activity must be for the sake of a higher reality that transcends out ephemeral existence. If art is not willing to subordinate itself to this higher being or

to God, it becomes evil in that it puts itself in a place that belongs to God. Sensible beauty, Plato might have said, usurps the place of true beauty. Such is the beauty of Aaron's golden calf, and the aura of the golden calf attends much art. From the Platonic point of view, or from the Christian, indeed from any point of view that understands life as calling us to a higher goal, the supposedly so innocent pleasures of art no longer seem so innocent. This returns us to the question raised already in the very first lecture: how do we justify spending time and money on art when there are so many more important things to be done? Here we should remember that guilt is incurred not only by doing what should not be done, but also by failing to do what should be done. If in our pursuit of art we neglect more important tasks, do we not thereby become guilty?

Aristotle escapes this conclusion because he sees self-justifying action in this life as the goal of life. Philosophizing is one form such self-justifying action can take. So is enjoying a work of art. There is a sense in which artists help solve the problem of the meaning of life in that they provide for pleasurable experiences that justify themselves. That is as close as we mortals can come to happiness.

### 3

Closely tied to the distinction between an art of **inspiration** and an art that is the result of **deliberate doing** is that between **seizure** and **freedom**. The person who is inspired is not free to play — think of the metaphor of the magnet. He loses his freedom as he is drawn or seized by some higher power, say a divinity. And the same is true of those who come under the spell of such an inspired artist: a higher power seizes them.

Aristotle, on the other hand, makes human freedom the foundation of art. Art is said to have one origin in imitative play, which shares the innocence of art — think of the role-playing children engage in. Aristotle thus seeks the origin of art in **playful imitation** or **mimesis**. Imitation, however, is inseparable from **freedom**, in that it presupposes the ability of the individual to transcend the here and now, the ability to oppose to whatever situation he is in other possible situations. In the imagination a space opens up extending far beyond my limited world, indeed beyond reality, a space of boundless possibilities. The imagination extends thus to what is not real. Art thus, according to Aristotle, does not deal with what we usually consider real, but with the possible as being probable. Let

us consider once more the passage in which Aristotle distinguishes the poet from the historian:

From what we have said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i. e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse — you might put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do, — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to its characters. (106)<sup>79</sup>

On first reading this passage, it may seem that in spite of what I have just suggested, the passage gives an ontological significance to art. It seems to place poetry close to philosophy in that it too reveals universals, rather than singulars. Like Hegel, as we shall see later, Aristotle would seem to place the poet, and we can generalize and say the artist, in the same circle as the philosopher. What Aristotle has to say here would seem to be close to the Platonic definition of **beauty as the epiphany of form**, only that now the form's place is taken by the universal. But in that case, why art at all? Why not just philosophy?

Aristotle does indeed not understand beauty simply as the appearance of the universal, despite what the passage I just read you suggests. Consider in this connection once more his discussion of the **marvelous**.

Such incidents have the greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvelous in them than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance. Even matters of chance seem more marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them; as for instance the statue of Mityx at Argos killed the author of Mityx' death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle; for incidents like that we think not to be without a meaning. A plot, therefore, of this sort is necessarily finer than others. (107).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Poetics* 9, 1451b 2 - 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Poetics* 9, 1452 a 1 - 11.



It is the appearance of design, of meaning that counts here. The poetic design may indeed conceal a real impossibility. Illusion suffices the poet.

The turn away from reality to illusion is significant in understanding the aesthetic turn. The passage shows quite clearly Aristotle's unwillingness to measure the success of art only or even primarily by truth criteria.

## 4

This reflects itself also in a change in the meaning of the word *mythos*, and *mythos* is the word which is translated as plot and said by Aristotle to be the heart and soul of tragedy. Crucial in the transformation of the Platonic *mythos* to the Aristotelian understanding is the break of its tie to **inspiration**. The Platonic myths are not free inventions. They are rather imposed on the poet by a higher power. The poet is bound in their invention by some divinity that seizes him or, we can say, by his recollection of the forms. When Aristotle discusses the construction of a good plot there is no suggestion of that sort. The poet's play with possibilities that what he has inherited and his imagination have suggested to him selects among these possibilities those that best serve his end. In constructing his *mythos*, his myth, or perhaps better fable, the artist does not try first of all to reveal reality, but to create another reality, with its own specific closure, a reality that for the time of the performance has the power to bracket or displace ordinary reality. Aesthetic reality and reality are here still related. The artist, too, should present us with what we experience as a possible world. But the poetic fiction possesses a unity that lets us experience it as a self-justifying whole. The real world is not like that.

Let me try to make this clearer by opposing two kinds of stage productions: one considers the stage an aesthetic space, separated from the audience by the proscenium arch and the stage curtain. Spectator and actor are thus separated. This distance disarms our emotions. Vicariously we are allowed to participate in the emotions exhibited on stage, but such participation is protected by aesthetic distance.

Theater does not have to be this way; think of a medieval or baroque theatrical performance in which an entire village joined. The boundary between actor and spectator is here much more fluid and porous. The tale is allowed to invade reality. In this light

we should consider the significance of the attack on the separation of stage and auditorium that is part of the history of the theater in the twentieth century.

But let me return to Aristotle. Is there not still something left of the old ontological conception in his account? Perhaps even a great deal? Can the spectator really distance himself effectively from the tragic hero? We witness Oedipus. Is it not the human condition, our condition that is revealed to us? Does every tragedy not possess a mythic quality in the older sense in that it reveals the human situation as ruled by an opaque fate. Tragedy does not cover up this truth. It does not show us some higher truth, some transcendent meaning that illuminates and justifies the tragic fate of mortals that all they can ever be and achieve will sooner or later be overtaken by time. And yet, in making this fate the beautiful object of intellectual contemplation, and just this is said to make tragedy a worthy occupation of the free human being, I distance myself from and transcend that fate, as I enjoy its aesthetic representation, become as it were, the spectator of my own tragic fate. Human beings purge themselves from the emotions, by opening themselves to them, by recognizing them as their own, even as they gain a distance from them that lifts their weight. Poetically transfigured life is experienced as beautiful after all.

## 10. Beauty as the Epiphany of Form

### 1

I contrasted Plato's and Aristotle's very different conceptions of the beautiful and of art. Aristotle, I suggested, tends more towards an **aesthetic** conception of art, while Plato has what I called an **ontological** understanding of art. Aristotle's more positive attitude towards time allows him to be more positive about the sensible and thus about art; for Plato, on the other hand, the beauty that art can provide, bound as it is to the senses, at best a figure, a pale image of that true beauty that lifts us altogether beyond time and of which Diotima speaks in the *Symposium*. And again, while Aristotle tends to think of our experience with art as a self-sufficient, self-justifying experience, Plato has to subordinate such experience to the larger project of returning us to the spirit's true home in being.

Once more I must emphasize: we should not exaggerate this difference. As I just stated it, I overstated the case. This must be kept in mind. Still, it provides a useful orientation.

### 2

Of the two thinkers it was Plato more than Aristotle who came to dominate subsequent speculation on the beautiful and thus on art. More particularly, it was Plato who came to dominate aesthetic speculation in the Middle Ages. In this transmission of Platonic ideas the two most important figures are Plotinus and St. Augustine. I have asked you to read the selections from their works in our reader, although I shall spend rather little time on them.

When we turn to Plotinus we meet with Platonic themes on just about every page. Fundamental to Plotinus' thinking is the antithesis between **matter** and **form**. Matter is associated with temporality, darkness, chaos, the indefinite, the measureless or *apeiron*. Form is associated with the permanent and abiding. Form makes definite and thus reveals. Plotinus gives particularly clear expression to what earlier I termed the Platonic definition of the beautiful: beauty is *splendor formae*, the becoming visible of the form.

Plotinus's proximity to Plato is evident in the following passages:

Our interpretation is that the Soul — by the very truth of its nature, by its affiliation to the noblest Existents in the hierarchy of Being — when it sees anything of that kin, or any trace of that kinship, thrills with an immediate delight, takes its own to itself, and thus stirs anew to the sense of its nature and of all its affinity. (143)<sup>81</sup>

Plotinus, too, places the true home of the soul at the top of the hierarchy of being. Our temporal existence places us at a distance from that home, longing to return to it. Life could be seen as a journey in search of our lost home. As the poet Novalis put it: “Where are we going? Always home.” On this journey we meet with traces or figures of that home. All that is beautiful presents itself to us as such a trace. As Plotinus puts this point:

We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form. All shapelessness whose kind admits of pattern and form, as long as it remains outside of Reason and Idea, is ugly by that very isolation from the Divine Thought. And this is the Absolute Ugly: an ugly thing is something that has not been entirely mastered by pattern, that is by Reason, the Matter not yielding at all points and in all respects to Ideal-Form. (143)<sup>82</sup>

Beauty is tied here to the imposition of a formal order on matter. I remind you of that passage from the *Philebus*, where Plato praises the beauty of geometric forms and mechanically produced volumes.

But where the Ideal-Form has entered, it has grouped and co-ordinated what from a diversity of parts was to become a unity: it has rallied confusion into co-operation: it has made the sum one harmonious coherence: for the Idea is a unity and what it moulds must come to unity as far as multiplicity may.

And on what has thus been compacted to unity, Beauty enthrones itself, giving itself to the parts as to the sum: when it lights on some natural unity, a thing of like parts, then it gives itself to that whole. Thus, for an illustration, there is beauty, conferred by craftsmanship, of all a house with all its parts, and the beauty which some natural quality may give to a single stone.

This, then, is how the material thing becomes beautiful — by communicating in the thought that flows from the Divine. (143)<sup>83</sup>

That the soul has its home with the forms is a theme that we encountered already in the *Phaedrus*. Beauty guides us back to this home. Recall the ascent from beautiful

<sup>81</sup> *Ennead* I, 6, 2, trans. Stephen McKenna

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

particulars to the invisible form of beauty of which Diotima speaks in the *Symposium*. Plotinus recalls that view when he has beauty play a part in a process of purification.

So, we may justly say, a soul becomes ugly — by something foisted upon it, by sinking itself into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into Matter. The dishonor of the Soul is in its ceasing to be clean and apart. Gold is degraded when it is mixed with earthly particles; if these be worked out, the gold is left and is beautiful, isolated from all that is foreign, gold with gold alone. And so the Soul; let it be but cleared of the desires that come by its too intimate converse with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again — in that moment the ugliness that came only from the alien is stripped away. (146/147)<sup>84</sup>

Very much in keeping with what Plato had taught in the *Symposium*, Plotinus, too, distinguishes a higher beauty, transcending time and the senses, from a lower, temporal and sensible beauty. The parallels are obvious:

And one that shall know this vision — with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger for It as for all his welfare, he that has known must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all other loves than this he must despise, and disdain all that once seemed fair.

This, indeed, is the mood even of those who, having witnessed the manifestation of Gods or Supernals, can never again feel the old delight in the comeliness of material forms: what then are we to think of one that contemplates Absolute Beauty in Its essential integrity, no accumulation of flesh and matter, no dweller on earth or in the heavens — so perfect Its purity — far above all such things in that they are nonessential, composite, not primal but descending from This? ((143)<sup>85</sup>

Even more decisively than the *Symposium* Plotinus' discussion of beauty tends towards mystical experience:

But what must we do? Where lies the path? How come to vision of the inaccessible Beauty, dwelling as if in consecrated precincts, apart from the common ways where all may see, even the profane?

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joys. When he perceives those shapes of grace that shown in body, let him not

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<sup>84</sup> *Enneads* I, 6, 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Enneads* I, 6, 7.

pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is, **like a beautiful shape playing over water** — is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depth of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So, too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depth loathed by Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Lower world, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here. (149) <sup>86</sup>

I call your attention especially to the Narcissus myth Plotinus here alludes to, where it is interesting to note that Alberti, in his influential treatise *On Painting*, will refer the reader to the same myth, calling **Narcissus** the inventor of painting, an odd reference given the fact that **Alberti** is writing in praise of painting.

Plotinus' downgrading of sensible beauty and therefore also of art would seem to be at least as decisive as Plato's.

Now it must be seen that the stone thus brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone —for so the crude block would be as pleasant — but in virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art. This form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters into the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands, but by his participation in his art. The beauty, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art; for it does not come over integrally into the work; that original beauty is not transferred; what comes over is a derivative and a minor: and even that shows itself upon the statue not integrally and with entire realization of intention, but only in so far as it has subdued the resistance of the material. <sup>87</sup>

And yet Plotinus shows himself more generous to art than this may suggest in a passage that I read you in an earlier lecture:

Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen, but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight. <sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Enneads* 6, 1, 8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Enneads*, 5, 8, 1.

Once again beauty is understood as an epiphany of the divine. In this connection we should recall once more those passages in Plato, which show that he, too, entertains the possibility of art reaching up to the forms directly, without imitating the things of the world, allowing it to create works that reveal divinity more clearly than natural objects. Music with its harmonies offers an example.

## 3

Neo-Platonism gave to Christianity its conception of the beautiful, although the translation into the Christian context gives is a richness that it had not possessed before. Both accounts presuppose a conception of the human being as essentially removed from his true home. Platonism interprets this removal in terms of our temporal condition, which alienates us human beings from that realm of being which is our true home. Every beautiful thing, I suggested, is a metaphor, a figure of that true home.

The Christian understanding of the fall invites a very different interpretation of the way human beings are removed from their essence. The original state from which we humans have fallen is now identified with that blissful state in which Adam and Eve found themselves in paradise before pride led them into transgression. Important in this connection is that even before the fall Adam and Eve had a body and existed in time. Similarly the terrestrial and temporal can be redeemed and changed back into paradise-like state. The idea of paradise lost has its counterpart in paradise regained. The second Adam, Christ, **spirit become flesh**, can undo the consequences of the sin of the first, binding once more matter to spirit, soul to body, thus healing the split that now divides human being as the result of Adam and Eve's original disobedience. With its emphasis on the incarnation, on the resurrection of the body, that is to say on the redemption of the flesh, orthodox Christianity had to arrive at a more positive evaluation of the senses than the Platonic tradition, which makes it difficult to redeem the body. The Christian conception of the ideal state is not as exclusively spiritual as the Platonic. Thus St. Augustine assures us:

But when the soul has properly adjusted and disposed itself, and has rendered itself harmonious and beautiful, then will it venture to see God, the very source of all truth and the very Father of Truth. O great God, What kind of eyes shall those be! How pure! How beautiful! How powerful! How constant! How serene! How blessed! And what is

that which they can see? What should we believe? What should we say? Everyday expressions present themselves, but they have been rendered sordid by things of least worth. I shall say no more than that to us is promised a vision of beauty — the beauty of whose imitation all other things are beautiful, and by comparison with which all other things are unsightly. (184/185)<sup>89</sup>

Beauty on earth gives us a figure of the beauty of heaven. As it recalls the beauty Adam and Eve saw in paradise, so it prefigures the beauty that the saved shall see in paradise regained. Every thing, and especially every beautiful thing, points in three directions: to the past, to the future, and to that heaven that transcends time. This figural conception of beauty was summarized by Alan of Lille in his famous hymn to the rose dating from the twelfth century:

Omnis mundi creatura  
 Quasi liber et pictura  
 Nobis est, et speculum  
 Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis  
 Nostri status, nostrae sortis  
 Fidele signaculum.

“All the created things that make up the world are like a book, a picture, or a mirror to us, the truthful sign of our life, death, condition, and destiny.”

Significant is the way the person has here become important. Things are said to speak to us of what matters in our life. Artists intercept and interpret that speech.

The simile likening the world to a book must be taken seriously. According to the medieval view God is the author of **two books**. One of them is **Holy Scripture**, the other **Nature**. Both books speak to us of our condition and destiny, but they do so not transparently, but in figures, in metaphors. Thus both books demand **interpretation**. Art, on this view, is by its very nature interpretation. It possesses a **hermeneutic function**.

Consider, e.g. the word "Jerusalem." First of all it refers us to a particular city with a specific history. This is its **literal or historical sense**. But to a medieval listener "Jerusalem" also means the Church: the community of believers. This is its **allegorical sense**. But this does not exhaust its meaning, for the historical Jerusalem was understood

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<sup>89</sup> *De Ordine*, 11, 18, 51.



to prefigure the Heavenly City that is the destiny of the faithful. The medievals spoke of its **anagogical meaning**. And Jerusalem was also understood as a figure of the individual soul. This was called its **tropological meaning**. Medieval art cannot be adequately understood without some understanding of these meanings. That is especially true of medieval church architecture.

But not only the Bible has these dimensions of meaning. Everything we encounter was thought to possess a spiritual significance that invites interpretation. Take for example a pearl. According to some medieval accounts the pearl originates when lightning strikes the shell. So understood the shell becomes an obvious figure of the **Virgin**. It is this **spiritual perspective** that governs medieval art, **per-spective** in that literal sense that it invites us to see through the sensible appearance to its spiritual significance.

What stands between us and such a view is the characteristically modern emphasis on univocal speech, the privileging of the simple and literal meaning of the text. Given such an understanding it seems odd to say that things speak to us or that nature is a book. Such talk would seem to be no more than an anthropomorphizing metaphor. I would suggest, however, that even if the medieval interpretation of the spiritual significance of things lies behind us and if we can no longer take seriously a view that argues that Scripture provides us with an authoritative key to the decoding of the hidden meanings of things, these meanings still speak to us and remain active in the words that name us. Take a word like "pearl" or "rose." And there are still thinkers who, like Freud or Bachelard, can teach us to decode the significance of things. And there is still art and poetry that interprets these meanings for us. We are still not done with an understanding of art as an essentially hermeneutic enterprise.

## 11. The Turn to Modern Esthetics

### 1

In Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* the following charge is made against Descartes and, more generally against modernity, especially against its art and aesthetic theory:

It is a Cartesian misconception to reduce clarity in itself to **clarity for us**.

As Maritain understands this prejudice, it is tied to the anthropocentric prejudice that is concerned with being first of all as it presents itself to the knower. Emphasis shifts away from the being of what is to the perceiving subject. The **turn to the subject** is characteristic of modern philosophy. Part of that turn is the emphasis placed on epistemology or the theory of knowledge. The emergence of modern **aesthetics** is part of that turn.

A consequence of this is that beauty is not so much sought in the object as in the way the object appears to the subject, in the effect it has on the subject. The emphasis is on appearance. The ontological approach is given up for a more subjective approach. Being comes into view first of all as an object to experience.

This leads then to the question: **what is the structure of the experience of the beautiful?** After we have answered that question, we may return to the beautiful object and ask: what qualities must it possess to occasion a certain experience. Instead of an **ontological**, we meet with an **epistemological** approach. Instead of defining the beautiful, following the Platonic tradition, as the **epiphany for form**, we now speak of it as the **object of a particular kind of experience**. Within the framework provided by Descartes, we arrive thus as the definition of the experience of the beautiful as *a perception of perfection that is clear, but not distinct*.

That definition deserves careful scrutiny: first of all, what is meant by **clear, but not distinct**. The phrase is of course used to distinguish the perception of the beautiful from a perception that is clear and distinct. What then does Descartes mean by *clear and distinct*? In the *Principles* Descartes offers us the following definition:

I term that clear and distinct which is present to an attentive mind in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye, they operate

upon it with sufficient strength. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear.<sup>90</sup>

What presents itself clearly and distinctly is thus transparent. In it there is nothing that escapes the mind's grasp. Nothing is hidden, no mystery remains. From Descartes' definition it follows that whatever we are presented by our eyes may be clear, but can never be distinct; for to see something clearly and distinctly is to see it totally and with complete adequacy. The phenomenon of perspective precludes this. Perspectival understanding is inevitably partial. Clarity and distinctness demands thus a stand-point beyond perspective, the stand-point of thought. The evidence of perspective has to be replaced with a more perfect inner evidence. The self-certainty of the *cogito* provides Descartes with his paradigm.

According to Descartes it is only the clear and distinct that gives us access to truth and to reality itself. Reality is given its measure in our ability to comprehend it. Sensory perception has to be transformed into intellectual knowledge if it is to lead us to the truth. A downgrading of the senses is the inevitable consequence. The threat that this poses to the ontological conception of art should be evident. If art is not to give up its claim to serve the truth, it must become as much like thought as possible, i.e., it must destroy itself as art. Neo-classicism, as already mentioned, was well on the road towards such a self-destruction of art. Its embarrassment about color, about the sensuous aspect of art is of a piece with its fundamentally Cartesian approach to art.

Descartes himself spent little time discussing perceptions that are clear, but not distinct. But their importance for aesthetics is brought out by a passage in Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics*:

When I am able to recognize a thing among others, without being able to say in what its difference and characteristics consist, the knowledge is confused. Sometimes indeed we may know clearly, that is without being in the slightest doubt, that a poem or a picture is well or badly done because there is in it an "I don't know what" which satisfies or shocks us. Such knowledge is not yet distinct.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, I, XLV, *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols., trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Dover, 1955), vol. I, p.237.

<sup>91</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics XXIV*, trans. Montgomery (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1953).

For Leibniz the knowledge that something is beautiful is thus clear, but not distinct. To know something distinctly is to be able to explain what something is. This is not the case with our perception of the beautiful.

Leibniz himself spent little time on beauty and clearly subordinates the clear and confused to the clear and distinct. The former is rehabilitated by his student Christian Wolff. Wolff argues that our knowledge of particulars is never clear and distinct. I have no clear and distinct understanding of this tree in its particularity. Whatever I can say clearly and distinctly about this tree may indeed yield a description definite enough to single it out from all others, but this description will fit equally well infinitely many possible trees very much like the one I am now describing. But this is to say that the tree in its concrete particularity has eluded me.

To confine oneself to the clear and distinct is to confine oneself to abstractions from concrete particulars. The disciplines which, according to Wolff deal above all with particulars are history and psychology. As the science of particulars, these disciplines have to take its place besides philosophy, if our understanding of reality is not to remain one-sided.

## 2

It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who, by applying Wolff's insights into history to art, became the founder of modern aesthetics. It was he who coined that term to name the newly established philosophical discipline. He did so in his dissertation of 1735, written when he was just twenty. Baumgarten distinguishes **understanding** from **sensibility** as **distinct** from **confused** perception. A thought becomes distinct as I abstract from the concrete texture of reality.

par. 14. Distinct representations, complete, adequate, profound through every degree, are not sensate, and, therefore, not poetic.<sup>92</sup>

Baumgarten infers from this the essential difference between poetic and philosophical discourse:

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<sup>92</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, tr. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), p. 42.

This is the principal reason why philosophy and poetry are scarcely ever thought able to perform the same office, since philosophy pursues conceptual distinctness above everything else, while poetry does not strive to attain this, as falling outside its province.<sup>93</sup>

The distinction between clear, but confused and clear and distinct perception reappears as the distinction between **intensive** and **extensive clarity**. Intensive clarity focuses on just one characteristic a thing, singles it out for attention, abstracting it from the rest. The more is represented in a perception the greater its extensive clarity. Extensive clarity loses in distinction as it gains in extension. Every individual is infinitely complex. For this reason no clear and distinct discourse will ever prove adequate to it.

### 3

So far what I have said does not really allow us to distinguish history in Wolff's sense from poetry. Both are examples of sensate discourse. The difference is suggested by Baumgarten's definition of poetry as *perfect sensate discourse*. What then is meant by perfection? With this we turn from the matter to the form of poetry, and more generally of art.

In his *Metaphysics* Baumgarten defines perfection as follows:

If many things considered together contain the reason for some other thing, they harmonize in respect to this thing. This harmony is perfection.<sup>94</sup>

In this sense the different steps of a proof may be said to harmonize with respect to the theorem to be proved. But the perfection of a proof must be distinguished from the perfection of a work of art, from beauty. Beauty Baumgarten understands as perceived perfection:

Perfection, in so far as it is to be found in appearance, or in so far as it is recognized by the faculty of taste in its widest sense, is beauty.

The notion of perfection refers thus to **a manifold united by a common theme**. The simple is thus never beautiful, a point with which we are familiar from Aristotle's *Poetics*. The beautiful is an organized whole. To appreciate beauty is to appreciate connections. Baumgarten thus likens taste, i. e. the faculty by which beauty is

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>94</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle, Hemmerden, 1779), par. 73.

appreciated, to reason. But while the latter has a clear and distinct grasp of these connections, taste grasps them more intuitively. Or, to quote Baumgarten once more:

The faculty of recognizing the connections between things indistinctly is the analogon of reason (*analogon rationis*).<sup>95</sup>

This **analogon rationis** is **taste**. Just as **logic** is the science that investigates the norms that govern **clear and distinct reasoning**, **aesthetics** investigates the norms governing **taste**.

Let me sum up the discussion so far by yet another quote from Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*:

The law of the faculty of judgment is as follows: if a given manifold is recognized as either fitting together or as not fitting together, then its perfection or imperfection is recognized. This happens either sensually or distinctly. The faculty of judging by means of sense is taste in its widest sense.

Where then is beauty located, in the perceiver or in the thing perceived? Does God know beauty? In Baumgarten's sense, the answer would have to be no, for God does not know things confusedly. Our ability to appreciate beauty marks us as finite, imperfect knowers. Precisely because of our finitude we can recognize the particular and concrete only indistinctly.

The implications of this view of perfection are spelled out further by Baumgarten's conception of the work's of art, more especially the poem's, **theme**.

Par. 66. By **theme** we mean that whose representation contains the sufficient reason of other representations supplied in the discourse, but which does not have its own sufficient reason in them.<sup>96</sup>

In creating a unity out of a manifold the poet is like another god, the work he creates like another world, having its own closure. The simile leads Baumgarten to make the following provocative claim:

We observed a little while ago that the poet is like a maker or creator. So the poem ought to be like a world. Hence by analogy whatever is evident to the philosophers concerning the real world, the same ought to be thought of a poem.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Metaphysica*, par. 640.

<sup>96</sup> Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, p. 62.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

This is to say that whatever the metaphysicians have said about the world is by analogy true of the poem. Take Leibniz's monadology, which represents the world as a perfectly ordered whole. The philosopher's discourse, to be sure, aims to be not sensate, but clear and distinct. But note what the simile suggests: the work of art has a structure that is very much like that of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds. The poem's theme is its God. Or, we can say, **the world is a poem that has God for its theme**. Today we are, to be sure, unlikely to be convinced by Leibniz's metaphysics. But note that Baumgarten's simile does not depend for its effectiveness on whether Leibniz is right or wrong. Baumgarten invites us, although this is hardly what he intended, to read the *Monadology* as a philosophical poem that presents a world whose order is not secured by clear and distinct reasoning but by an act of imagination. Just this makes it a poem, despite its medium.

According to Baumgarten, and the point is one with which we are already familiar from Aristotle's *Poetics*, the work of art should contain nothing that does not make a direct contribution to the revelation of the theme. In a good poem nothing can be left out or added without a loss of perfection. Baumgarten speaks in this sense of the absolute brevity of a successful poem.

## 4

By now Baumgarten's definition of the beautiful as sensibly apprehended perfection should pose no problem. Let me therefore ask: why does the beautiful please? Like all the rationalists, Baumgarten sees human knowledge as having its measure in divine knowledge. God knows the infinite complexity of the world clearly and distinctly. But as finite knowers we are incapable of thus reconciling infinite complexity with clear and distinct knowledge. **We must give up either extensive or intensive clarity.** Baumgarten thus emphasizes the one-sidedness of clear and distinct knowledge. It cannot do justice to reality. Nor does it fulfill us as knowers. The senses and the body are shortchanged by the turn to the clear and distinct. Wanting to penetrate reality to seize it in its essence, the abstracting intellect loses the concrete texture of reality, exchanges reality for a pale representation. The lower faculties, on the other hand, put us in touch with the texture of reality, but they do so in a way that fails to satisfy the

demands of the spirit. There is a sense in which the artwork appears to heal that strife. By its matter it is linked to the lower faculties, by its form to the higher faculties. Again we have the theme, familiar already from the *Symposium*, of the healing power of the beautiful, which for a time at least restores to us a unity we have lost and yet deeply desire. But note that on Baumgarten's aesthetic approach this recovery of the whole is purchased at the price of truth. What matters about art, on such an approach, is its coherence, not its truth.



## 12. The Critique of Judgment: Introduction

### 1

Last time I tried to show how modern aesthetics was founded within a generally Cartesian framework by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. For such a founding to become possible the privileging of the clear and distinct over the clear and confused that is so characteristic of Cartesian thought had to be challenged. I thus sketched how within the rationalist tradition, as we move from Descartes to Leibniz, from Leibniz to Wolff, and on to Baumgarten, we meet with an increasing emphasis on the clear and confused, or, to use Baumgarten's language, on extensive rather than on intensive clarity. To express the same point still differently: we meet with a growing conviction that **reason** needs to be supplemented with **taste**.

When Baumgarten defines **aesthetics** as the science that investigates the norms governing **taste**, and taste as the *faculty of recognizing the connections between things indistinctly*, he appeals to a then well established notion. The opposition of reason and taste helps to define the intellectual climate of the 17th and 18th centuries.

How was taste understood? Think back to the example of clear and confused knowledge that Leibniz gave. I see the picture. I am altogether convinced that what I see is beautiful. But I cannot justify my conviction. What makes me so certain, we might say, is not reason, but taste.

The concept of taste was given wide currency in the 17th century by the Spaniard Baltasar Gracián, a neglected thinker, who occupies somewhat the same place in the history of taste that Descartes occupies in that of reason. Both thinkers emphasize the individual subject: one the subject of knowledge, the other the subject of feeling. Taste is described by Gracián as an innate good sense. The man of taste knows what to do, even though he does not know how to explain his success. Taste is thus essentially private; it cannot give reasons and in this respect is like Platonic inspiration. The man of taste will be found exemplary by others. Thus he can set an example.

Following Gracián the term taste finds application in many different fields of activity. Applied to the field of politics, e.g., it gives rise to the notion of the *politicus*,

the person who moves across the stage of the world, always doing the right thing. The English gentleman represents a version of the man of taste.

This concept of taste as a faculty that cannot give an account of its successes raises the question of how good taste is acquired. No doubt, it helps to associate with persons of taste, to be confronted with the examples they set: this is a good setting for the development of good taste. But there are those who will never acquire good taste. And some seem to have good taste without proper training. Taste is also something of a gift. The concept of taste thus looks back to Plato's inspiration theory as it looks forward to the concept of genius, which could be understood as taste raised to a higher power. I shall have quite a bit more to say about genius in a later lecture.

But if some people have good taste and are recognized by their success, can one not acquire good taste by patterning oneself after people of acknowledged good taste? Thus, together with the concept of taste, the idea of a model to be imitated also becomes important. The age of taste is thus also the age of the **academy**, of rules: rules how to think, how to paint, and how to move at court.

But besides this academic tendency, there is always the other, in tension with it: let the **heart** speak. Good sense, Boileau writes, stands even above Virgil. The tension to which I have pointed could not find clearer expression than in this saying. Heart, feeling (Bouhours), delicacy become important terms in aesthetics. Dubos speaks of a sixth sense that judges beauty. This would make further analysis of what constitutes beauty as fruitless as speculation about what constitutes yellow. Both on this view are givens, there to be experienced by those who have the proper sense, where the sixth sense that appreciates beauty is presumably more rare than sight. Bad taste on that view would seem to be a bit like bad eyesight.

The country in which the theory of taste finds its final home and most influential exponents is England. I already suggested that we can understand the English gentleman as a version of the person of good taste. A very characteristic example of the literature on taste is Hume's essay *Of the Standard of Taste*. Hume fundamentally agrees with those who say that taste is always right. But isn't there such a thing as bad taste? To distinguish between good and bad taste we have to find a standard of taste. This Hume suggests, is provided by an empirical investigation into what has generally pleased at all

ages and at all times. It is of course quite possible that at a particular time a majority will find something beautiful that a few years later will be completely forgotten. Such short lived beauty hardly deserves the name. Durable admiration, on the other hand, is a sure sign of the beauty of objects, according to Hume. There does thus seem to be a general principle of approbation and blame. If you don't find beautiful what has generally been judged beautiful you lack **delicacy of imagination**.

The curious ambiguity that pervades the entire discussion of taste is thus also found in Hume: we meet on one hand with a stress on sentiment that finally has no justification, on the other with a stress on rules to be discovered by empirical investigation. The ancients are the great examples. Hume, too, calls that artist wisest who entrusts himself to these models. Objective rules and subjective freedom thus collide. The artist and the connoisseur of the eighteenth century thus find themselves tossed between these two extremes, between the rules of the academy and the freedom of taste.

## 2

Kant is open to both the British tradition and to the rationalism in which he had been trained. The two most important thinkers for the aesthetics developed in the *Critique of Judgment* are thus Burke, to whom Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime owes a great deal, and Baumgarten. As we shall see, Kant's personal taste in art was very much in tune with the then reigning neo-classicism, as represented by Winckelmann.

For a long time Kant has felt that the beautiful was not really capable of a genuinely philosophical treatment, as would indeed have to be the case if the beautiful were indeed appreciated by something like a sixth sense. Thus his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* written in 1763 were written very much in the spirit of English discussions of taste, especially of Burke.

In the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781, the effort of Baumgarten is dismissed as impossible and the term "aesthetic" as used by him rejected as unfortunate:

The Germans are the only ones who now use the word "aesthetics" to refer to what others call a critique of taste. This has its foundation in the false hope of the excellent analyst Baumgarten to place the critical judgment of the beautiful under principles of reason and

to elevate the rules governing such judgment to a science. But this effort is vain. For these rules and criteria have their origin in experience; thus they can never serve as *a priori* laws to which our judgment of taste should conform; rather the latter is the real touchstone of the former. It is therefore advisable to either drop the term altogether, and to reserve it for that doctrine that alone can be a true science... (A 21)

Kant is referring here to his own transcendental aesthetic, which inquires into space and time as the pure intuitions that have to be presupposed by all sensible experience.

Transcendental aesthetic is the science of the *a priori* principles of sensibility. It was only in 1787 when the second edition of the critique appeared that Kant began to change his mind, apparently not so much because of new reflections about art, but because the evolution of his own thinking demanded it. At any rate, in 1787 he writes in a letter that he has found a new kind of principles and that he is envisioning writing a **critique of taste**. This project then expanded into the *Critique of Judgment*.

### 3

What is judgment? In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the faculty of judgment had appeared as the faculty of subsuming a manifold under a unity, or of constituting a manifold as a unity: e. g. roses are red; this is a rose. The *a priori* principles governing such judgments were exhibited in the categories, these pure concepts of the understanding, and finally rooted in the fact that experience requires one subject and thus constitutes necessarily a manifold united into a whole. In the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* (IV) judgments like roses are red are called **determinant judgments**. In such a judgment the concept, here “red” is given and applied. The general functions as a rule of synthesis. The movement is from the general or universal to the particular.

From such judgments Kant distinguishes **reflective judgments**. The **reflective judgment** attempts to find a general term when only the particulars are given: here the general is not given as a rule, but needs to be established.

Consider for example the legend of **Newton** sitting under the apple tree, the apple falls and suddenly Newton has an intuition that all the many, seemingly so different things of nature, planets, stars, the coffee swirling in a cup, falling trees, that all these were expressions of the same force and he responds to that intuition by formulating his laws of motion. Newton, we might want to say, using Baumgarten's language, has an

intuition of the perfection of nature, an aesthetic intuition. That intuition is presupposed by the attempt to state the laws of motion. To generalize, the scientist seeks to find for countless phenomena a few simple principles or laws. The movement to such a law is what Kant calls a **reflective judgment**.

Kant is struck by the way science seems confident in its ability to find such laws. Such confidence does not seem obviously well founded. It has at any rate no basis in the understanding. And yet it is a presupposition of doing science, and more generally of our ability to understand nature. Kant speaks in this connection of the **transcendental concept of the purposiveness of nature (V)**. Transcendental here describes a concept that refers to something demanded by the very possibility of understanding nature.

Now this transcendental concept of the purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor a concept of freedom, since it attributes nothing whatsoever to the object (nature), but through this transcendental concept [we] only think of the one and only way in which we must proceed when reflecting on the objects of nature with the aim of having thoroughly coherent experience. Hence it is a subjective principle (maxim) of judgment. This is why we rejoice (actually we are relieved of a need) when, just as if it were a lucky chance favoring our won, we do find such a systematic unity among merely empirical laws, even though we necessarily had to assume that there is such a unity even though we have no insight into this unity and cannot prove it. (23/24)<sup>98</sup>

In looking for such principles we presuppose that nature is such that it harmonizes with our intellectual faculty and its demand for order or perfection. That is to say, **we demand and expect more order** than is assured by the categories, the principles presupposed by the very possibility of experience. We demand purposiveness of nature. We can restate this demand as a demand that the manifold of nature form a harmonious whole. Thus what seems like a lucky accident as far as our understanding reaches is yet demanded as necessary by the reflective judgment which posits it as a regulative principle. This principle governs scientific research. And because we demand such unity and yet do not seem to be entitled to what we demand, such unity when first sensed and then discovered gives rise to delight. We feel in tune with nature. It is as if nature had been created to be understood by us, to be our home.

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<sup>98</sup> Page references in text are to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

Let me return to Newton sitting under the apple tree. As he senses a unity in a vast manifold of seemingly disparate things, he experiences a quite distinct delight, delight in the way nature seems made to be understood. This is an **aesthetic** delight. And when the object is judged to occasion such delight, necessarily it is called **beautiful**. In Kant's words:

The object is then called beautiful, and our ability to judge by such a pleasure (and hence also with universal validity) is called taste. (VII, 30)

Recall that Baumgarten had identified what was commonly called taste with the faculty of judging perfection clearly but confusedly. Kant cannot make sense of such a confused judgment. Taste is now understood as **a perception of purposiveness without an understanding of the purpose**. I shall return to this point in the following lectures.

When Newton proceeds from such aesthetic appreciation and arrives at a statement of his laws he proceeds from an **aesthetic** to a **teleological** judgment. The latter is grounded in the former. This is why the first part of *the Critique of Judgment* deals with the aesthetic judgment and thus with art, while its second part deals with the teleological judgment and thus with science.

#### 4

In the beginning of my discussion of Kant I suggested that the evolution of his own thinking led to the writing of the *Critique of Judgment*. Let me return to this point in closing.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had insisted that what we experience and can know are always only phenomena, appearances, constituted by the understanding that has always already subjected the manifold of sense to its concepts. The world is first of all world for me. I cannot know things as they are in themselves. The concept of appearance does indeed require me to form the idea of a thing in itself, but I cannot understand what it points to. That we have no access to things in themselves is bound up with our finitude, and bound up with it, too, is the distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Important here is the point that the world explored by science should not be identified with the whole of reality.

The distinction gains in importance when we turn to the second critique. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* human beings are discussed as persons, i.e. as moral agents. As such agents they have to act by certain principles. These principles can have their origin either within reason or without. When acting by the former we call the person autonomous, in the latter case heteronomous. Human freedom is linked by Kant to **autonomy**. This double view of the human being as a natural being that science can investigate and as a moral agent, a person, allows Kant to say the following:

Now, although these two domains do not restrict each other in their legislation, they do restrict each other incessantly in the effects that their legislation has in the world of sense. Why do these two legislations not form one domain? This is because the concept of nature does indeed allow us to present its objects in intuition, but as mere appearances rather than as things in themselves, whereas the concept of freedom does indeed allow us to present its object as a thing in itself, but not in intuition; and so neither concept can provide us with theoretical cognition of its object (or even of the thinking subject) as things in themselves, which would be the supersensible. We do need the idea of the supersensible in order to base on it the possibility of all those objects of experience, but the idea itself can never be raised up and expanded into a cognition. (II, 14)

This, Kant thought, he had shown in *the Critique of Pure Reason*, especially in the Third Antinomy.

And yet this separation between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom becomes unsatisfactory as soon as we consider that morality is supposed to be effective in the world.

So there must after all be a basis *uniting* the supersensible that underlies nature and the supersensible that the concept of freedom contains practically, even though the concept of this basis does not reach cognition of it either theoretically or practically and hence does not have a domain of its own, though it does make possible the transition from our way of thinking in terms of principles of nature to our way of thinking in terms of principles of freedom. (15)

This split into a moral and a natural order is a consequence of human finitude. The moral law and, bound up with it, our understanding of ourselves as free agents, forces us to recognize that we are not only members of the realm of phenomena, which is the realm explored by science, a realm where necessity reigns, but also of the realm of freedom. But our world is one. The recognition of this unity begins with it the need to mediate between what has been split apart, between the order of nature and the order of

morality. The reflective judgment offers such mediation by inviting us to think nature as ordered with an eye to the purposes of humanity. The gulf separating nature and morality has been bridged. The experience of beauty, being an essential aspect of this closing, presupposes thus a being who knows himself to belong to two orders, to nature and to freedom. This double sense of belonging is an expression of our finitude.

In the experience of the beautiful the human being senses himself to be at one with nature without having to betray practical reason and its demand for autonomy, but also without having to assert his freedom in the face of his natural desires. Thus the beautiful carries the promise of a higher mode of existence that has overcome the rift between reason and nature.



### 13. Kant's Critique of Empiricism

#### 1

All philosophy that is constructive must also be destructive. Every original thinker must also be polemical. The polemical side of Kant is very much in evidence in the discussion of the four moments. Among other things, Kant is here concerned to show what distinguishes his position from the **rationalists** on one side, from the **empiricists** on the other. I shall follow these two arguments, rather than Kant's own architectonic, which relies on the table of categories as stated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to arrive at the four moments of the beautiful, one each of quality, quantity, relation, and modality.

Today I would like to discuss Kant's critique of empiricist aesthetics. The first moment raises the key issue. The central idea here is that of **interest**. Consider the explanation at the end of the First Moment:

*Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking devoid of all interest. The object of such a liking is called beautiful. (53)*

1. **Taste** is the faculty of judging of an object **beautiful** (or ugly).
2. It does so by **referring it to a satisfaction (or dissatisfaction)** we feel as we look at or listen to it.
3. That satisfaction is said to be **entirely disinterested**.

At a first glance it might seem that Kant is here not so much disagreeing as agreeing with the British empiricists. Take the view that the appreciation of the beautiful requires something like a special sense. Hutcheson, e.g., in his *Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* speaks of the appreciation of the beautiful as being **immediate, by means of a special sense**. Such appreciation of the beautiful is said to precede and to be **independent of all interest**. (Sect I, Art X, XIV, XV). See also Home, *Elements of Criticism*. The aesthetic experience is here interpreted as another pleasant sensation, not so very different from the pleasures of the senses, such a taste or smell. Perhaps the spirit of such an approach is best expressed in a passage such as the following, from Dubos, *Reflections* (trans. Nugent, 1748):

Do we ever reason, in order to know whether a ragoo be good or bad; and has it ever entered into anybody's head, after having settled the geometrical principle of taste, and defined the qualities of each ingredient that enters into the composition of these messes,

to examine into the proportion observed in their mixture, to decide whether the ragoos are good or bad? No, this is never practiced. We have a sense given us by nature to distinguish whether the cook acted according to the rules of his art. People taste the ragoos, and tho' unacquainted with those rules, they are able to tell, whether it be good or no. The same may be said of productions of the mind and of pictures made to please and move us.

According to this view the aesthetic experience is characterized by its immediacy. Thus it cannot involve an appeal to rules. Such an appeal is incompatible with the required immediacy.

But similarly it cannot involve an interest, it would seem. For what is **interest**? I am interested in something that will satisfy me. Thus I may be interested in art, e.g., in looking at or owning works of art. But my interest in art should not be confused with the pleasure I have when actually looking at the work of art. At that point I am satisfied. While I am actually enjoying the work of art, there would seem to be no interest. The immediacy of enjoyment would seem to leave no more for interest than for attention to rules. Thus it would seem that Kant, when he insists on the disinterested nature of aesthetic enjoyment finds himself in fundamental agreement with the British.

Yet he himself makes this interpretation impossible by arguing that **the pleasant is bound up with interest**, where the pleasant is defined as **that which pleases in sensation**. In what sense is such pleasure interested? And what does Kant mean when he calls aesthetic pleasure disinterested?

## 2

Crucial here is the way Kant links both the **pleasant** (Pluhar prefers "Agreeable" as a translation of *angenehm*; I prefer pleasant because of its tie to pleasure) and the **good to desire**.

Both the **agreeable** and the **good** have a reference to the faculty of desire, and they bring with them, the former a satisfaction pathologically conditioned by stimuli, (*stimuli*), the good a pure practical liking that is determined not just by the representation of the object but also by the presentation of the subject's connection with the existence of the object; i.e. what we like is not just the object but its existence as well. A judgment of taste, on the other hand, is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object: it [considers] the character of the object only by holding it up

to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Nor is this contemplation, as such, directed to concepts, for a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither *based* on concepts, nor directed to them as *purposes*. (51)

Interest, Kant thus tells us, is **interest in existence**. Interest is concern. I care for something or someone. The human being is interested because he is a being in need. Indeed his need is twofold, in keeping with his twofold being. As a being of nature the human being is in need of what satisfied his appetites and desires. As a moral being strives for autonomy. As a sensible being he is interested in the **pleasant**, as a reasonable being in the **good**.

Let me consider the former (I shall return to the latter in my next lecture): The interest in the pleasant is an interest to submerge myself in my natural being, an interest that seeks to appropriate and in such appropriation to enjoy. The pleasure of food provides an obvious example. Such pleasure is tied to an **interest in the existence of something** that thus appropriated will give me pleasure. Kant insists that in such pleasure we are pathologically conditioned. I allow something to happen to me. Thus when I say something is pleasant in this sense I say that some desire needs this object to be satisfied. The human being here depends on something else, is thus not autonomous.

Although correct, it may thus be misleading to say that what distinguishes aesthetic pleasure from mere pleasure on Kant's view is that one is interested while the other is not. The key difference is rather that one has its center within the human being, while the other depends on the existence of some object. Only when I reflect and call something pleasant can I say that in this case an interest is connected with my appreciation, while when I reflect on my appreciation of the beautiful I recognize that this is not the case.

But why is the judgment that something is beautiful not interested in whether something exists? In one sense this claim would seem to be obviously false. Do we not want there to be beautiful objects, objects that give us aesthetic pleasure? What then is the difference between the beautiful and the pleasant? Kant might ask: but do we desire what is beautiful? Or rather: what is our relationship to the beautiful object? When we appreciate the beauty of something, Kant insists, we do not want to devour it, we want to let it be, keep our distance from it. The existence of the beautiful object has been bracketed. Thus the beauty of a Chinese bridge does not become less beautiful when

mirrored in a quiet pond; quite the opposite. The unreal image may well strike us as more beautiful.

To say that the aesthetic judgment is disinterested is to say that it does not demand the other as existing, as the beautiful object is not appropriated, but merely **contemplated**. Before I can enjoy an object aesthetically I have to free myself from it and for it. That is to say, I may now look at it as an object of desire. If a painting does not allow me to assume this detached position I have failed from an aesthetic point of view. If, for example, when looking at a Dutch still life showing a beautiful ham and a glass filled with red wine my hunger and thirst are aroused, I have failed as an aesthetic observer, where this may have its source more in my inability to free myself from my desires or in the painting. Similarly when looking at a nude by Titian my sexual appetite is aroused, then from the aesthetic point of view, at least how Kant understands it, this must be considered a failure, whatever other pleasures I may derive from it.

On this view what distinguishes aesthetic enjoyment from, say, our enjoyment of food or similar pleasures is that the former is characterized by a peculiar distance between subject and object. Aesthetic enjoyment asks nothing of what it enjoys. It lets it be. Kant here anticipates what later was to be called **psychical** or aesthetic **distance**. Edward Bullough wrote a famous essay on **psychical distance**, which has become a point of departure for countless subsequent discussions. The main point is simple enough: aesthetic experience is said to have "a *negative*, inhibitory aspect — the cutting out of the practical side of things and of our practical attitude to them — and a positive side — the elaboration of the experience on the new basis created by the inhibitory action of distance."<sup>99</sup> In aesthetic experience the human being leaves behind or brackets out the everyday claims that objects have on us. We step so to speak back from things, leave behind our usual engagement in the world. Such disengagement is a presupposition of aesthetic enjoyment. We could speak in this connection, with Arthur Danto, of a **transfiguration of the commonplace**. Duchamp demonstrated the power of dislocation that establishes distance with his ready-mades. His snow-shovel, exhibited in a museum

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<sup>99</sup> Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and an Esthetic Principle," in *A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology*, ed. Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, 1952), p. 404.

with the label "In Advance of the Broken Arm" is an obvious illustration of the transfiguration of the commonplace.

## 3

Kant, no doubt, would have pointed out that mere distancing is not sufficient to establish beauty. The judgment that something is ugly is also an aesthetic judgment. But in this case we are not satisfied, but dissatisfied. Of what nature then is the satisfaction we take in the beautiful? Kant links such satisfaction to the **free and harmonious play of imagination and understanding**. Already in the introduction Kant writes that the apprehension of beautiful forms

could never occur if reflective judgment did not compare them, even if unintentionally, at least with its ability [in general] to refer intuitions to concepts. Now if in this comparison a given presentation unintentionally brings the imagination (the power of a priori intuitions) into harmony with the understanding (the power of concepts), and this harmony arouses a feeling of pleasure, then this object must thereupon be regarded as purposive for the reflective power of judgment. A judgment of this sort is an aesthetic judgment about an object's purposiveness; it is not based on any concept we have of the object. (VII, 30)

The beautiful object looks purposive; but to say that something looks purposive is to say also that imagination and understanding are in harmony, and we can speak of a harmonious play as long as the aesthetic judgment has not given way to a teleological judgment, that is to say, as long as such play is not put to rest by the discovery of a determinate purpose. I shall return to this point next time. Here I want to emphasize only that for Kant it is precisely the form of the beautiful that matters; its material existence is unimportant. When Kant speaks of an entirely disinterested satisfaction he means one that is not dependent on the material aspect of what satisfies it. It is as if the material art object were only an occasion allowing us to appreciate a particular form. It follows from this that from a purely aesthetic point of view it matters little whether a particular work of art is enjoyed is the original or a very good copy: what lets us prefer the original to a very good reproduction of, say, a Rembrandt drawing has little to do with aesthetic judgments.

One question that must be raised in this connection is whether Kant is in fact right to distinguish so sharply between aesthetic pleasure and sense pleasure. Kant places so much emphasis on the **pure** imagination and the understanding that whatever appeals not by its form but by its material qualities, say by its tone colors or colors, would seem to be incidental to art. Like the neo-classicists Kant, too, has to be suspicious of painting that relies on the texture of the paint or music that relies, say, on the lush tone of a cello. Such suspicion of paint or tone color would seem to be of a piece with his insistence that aesthetic interest be divorced from erotic interest. If Plato linked love and beauty, Kant divorces them.

## 4

The second moment, which characterizes the beautiful as "that which pleases universally without a concept," yields a second way in which Kant's view differs from that of the empiricists. If the beautiful and the pleasant were one, then it would be impossible to escape the conclusion that ultimately there is **no disputing about taste**. There would be no reason to demand agreement in such matters. All one could hope for is that it might be possible to generate empirically certain general observations, in the manner of Burke, Hume, and the young Kant. And yet, Kant insists, when we make an aesthetic judgment we **demand universal agreement**. The aesthetic judgment speaks as if with a universal voice.

At first this seems difficult to reconcile with the fact that aesthetic judgment is inevitably particular, a judgment that what I am now looking at or listening to is beautiful, not a judgment that things of this type are beautiful. The latter judgment would have to be based on experience. It is not even this particular something that I can really call beautiful in itself, for I call it beautiful only with reference to the particular delight I feel as I look at it. In a sense then the appreciation of beauty is inevitably private, just as the good taste of some dish is not an objective fact. But how then are we to reconcile this privacy with the fact that the aesthetic judgment speaks with a universal voice?

Usually when we make a judgment that demands the assent of others we are willing to exhibit some publically available ground or reason in which this judgment is rooted. Beauty is not in this sense a publically available fact. To be sure, any beautiful

thing, say a work of art, is also a thing in the world and a great many true statements can be made about it. But while such statements may be true of the object, they will inevitably fail to do justice to what makes this a beautiful object. My judgment that it is indeed beautiful refers the object to the special delight that I feel as I look at it. But if Kant is right I am right to think that every human being is able to share such delight. The reason is that the faculties involved, imagination and understanding, as conditions of the very possibility of experience, are common to all human beings. To recognize someone as a fellow human being, is to know that person to be in possession of these faculties and thus to be capable of making an aesthetic judgment. Not that there is some objective feature or characteristic to which we can point when we judge something to be beautiful. The aesthetic judgment is subjective, and yet it is entitled to assume that all human beings, as beings of imagination and understanding, are capable of responding in the same manner. Essentially the same point returns in the fourth moment where Kant suggests that when making an aesthetic judgment, we ask for the agreement of all because we are in possession of a ground common to all, a **common sense**, by which he means no more than the result of the interplay of imagination and understanding. The feeling of pleasure that results from the harmonious interplay of these faculties can therefore also be postulated to be common.

Next time I want to turn to Kant's critique of the rationalists, especially of Baumgarten.

## 14. Kant's Critique of Rationalism

### 1

In my last lecture I focused on Kant's analysis of the beautiful as a subject of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. I spent quite a bit of time trying to explain what Kant means by interest. Interest, I pointed out, is linked to need. The person who is interested is oriented towards the future. To define the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction is to suggest that aesthetic experience allows us to lose ourselves in the present. Thus it frees us from our usual worries and anxieties. In aesthetic experience we take our leave from the usual business of life.

If Kant understands the human being as a being in need, this need, I pointed out, is twofold, in keeping with Kant's understanding of the human being as belonging partly to nature, to the world of sense, partly to reason. As a being of nature the human being is interested in physical pleasure. As a being of reason, or as a moral being, the human being is interested in the good. If we can term the confusion of the beautiful with the pleasant the **hedonistic fallacy** — Dubos might be said to have been subject to this fallacy when he insisted that enjoying a beautiful picture is not so very different from enjoying a well cooked stew— we can call the confusion of the beautiful with good the **moral fallacy**. An object is called beautiful because it agrees with certain ideas we have concerning what ought to be. We might thus find a painting beautiful because we find it morally uplifting. The work is measured by some conception of what ought to be.

The confusion of aesthetic and moral categories was part of the aesthetic of the aesthetics of neoclassicism. Winckelmann, the most influential theorist of this movement is quite representative of this when he speaks of the quiet grandeur and noble simplicity of the Greek soul, finds their expression in the masterpieces of Greek art, and holds these up to the artists of the present as standards that are to be imitated and aspired to, even if they can never be surpassed. Similarly French classicists identified their fight for linearism, simplicity, and the stress on rules, so opposed to the painterly qualities and the capriciousness of a Fragonard, or, more generally of the rococo, with a struggle for the noble and good and against irrationalism. Ingres was the self appointed defender not just



of linearism and the classical tradition, but of morality as well<sup>100</sup>. According to this view, art ought to be rooted in a state of affairs that ought to be. Thus it teaches us. Tolstoy has given us what perhaps the most famous defense of this moralistic view of art in his essay *What is Art?* As we saw, moralistic criteria of course already play an important role in Plato's condemnation of the poets.

One consequence of the moral fallacy, if indeed it is a fallacy, the term 'fallacy' may unduly prejudge the matter, is that the aesthetic experience is not viewed as self-justifying and its own reward, but as essentially an incentive to action. It is to fill us with the desire to realize what morality demands. It thus becomes a tool in the moral education of the citizens. The work of art should carry a message. It should edify. Furthermore it should be possible to detach this message from the work of art. Kant's first moment thus distinguishes the aesthetic judgment from all moral judgments by insisting that the pleasure we take in the beautiful is free from all interest, while moral concern is essentially concern with actions to be done.

## 2

The second moment further develops the difference between the aesthetic and the moral judgment by insisting that the **beautiful pleases without any concept**. The aesthetic judgment is not bound to any rule. It is impossible to tell someone that he ought to like a particular work of art because it exhibits certain qualities, e.g. expresses certain uplifting moral ideals. Suppose you insist that one ought to like a manifold, a, b, c, d, because it exhibits a certain concept A. Why should I like A? Suppose you defend A on moral grounds. Then what you will have is a moral, not an aesthetic judgment. Suppose you argue that A is in the interest of the state. Again you will not have an aesthetic, but a political judgment. But let me cite Kant:

Objective purposiveness can be cognized only by referring the manifold to a determinate purpose, and hence through a concept. Even from this it is already evident that the beautiful, which we judge on the basis of a merely formal purposiveness, i.e. a purposiveness without a purpose, is quite independent of the concept of the good. For the

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<sup>100</sup> See W. Friedländer, *David to Delacroix*, tr. R. Goldwater (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1952 ).

good presupposes an objective purposiveness, i. e. it presupposes that we refer the object to a determinate purpose. (73)

Objective purposiveness is precisely what is expressed by my diagram: a, b, c, d — A. Moral judgments of art are of this sort. But this, Kant insists, is incompatible with the character of the beautiful as purposive without a purpose. You cannot state a purpose A when you appreciate something beautiful. The beautiful is not good for anything. It has no purpose.

But could we not follow Baumgarten and locate the purpose that justifies a manifold within rather than without the beautiful object, make it part of the work of art, as Baumgarten did when he spoke of the theme of the work of art? Once again let me quote Kant:

Objective purposiveness may be extrinsic, in which case it is an object's *utility*, or intrinsic, in which case it is an object's *perfection*. If our liking for an object is one on account of which we call the object beautiful, then it cannot rest on a concept of the object's utility, as is sufficiently clear from the two preceding chapters; for then it would not be a direct liking for the object, while that is the essential condition of a judgment about beauty. But perfection, which is an objective intrinsic purposiveness, is somewhat closer to the predicate beauty, and that is why some philosophers of repute have identified perfection with beauty, adding, however, that it is *perfection thought confusedly*. It is of the utmost importance, in a critique of taste, to decide if indeed beauty can actually be analyzed into the concept of perfection. (73)

Kant is of course referring to Baumgarten when he speaks of celebrated philosophers, but also of those who followed him. Why do we have to go beyond Baumgarten? Note that Baumgarten's insistence that the judgment of beauty is not clear and distinct gives him a ready answer to Kant's charge that the beautiful pleases immediately, that there is no reason or concept we could state to explain why something is beautiful. Baumgarten would of course have agreed to this. Baumgarten, as we have seen, does not understand the theme, the A that organizes a work of art into a whole as a concept grasped by a clear and distinct understanding. It is only grasped by taste, the *analogon rationis*. But just such invocation of a confused quasi-judgment, Kant insists, does not make sense.

Now a judgment of taste is an aesthetic judgment, i. e., a judgment that rests on subjective bases, and whose determining basis cannot be a concept and hence cannot be the concept of a determinate purpose. Hence in thinking of beauty, a formal subjective purposiveness, we are not at all thinking of a perfection in the object, an allegedly formal and yet also

objective purposiveness; and hence the distinction between the concepts of the beautiful and the of the good which alleges that the two differ only in their logical form, with the first merely being a confused and the second a distinct concept of perfection, while the two are otherwise the same in content and origin, is in error. For in that case there would be no difference in kind between them, but a judgment of taste would be just as much a cognitive judgment as in a judgment by which we declare something to be good. So, for example, the common man bases his judgment that deceit is wrong on confused rational principles, and the philosopher bases his on distinct ones, but both at bottom base their judgment on one and the same rational principles. In fact, however, as I have already pointed out, an aesthetic judgment is unique in kind and provides absolutely no cognition (not even a confused one) of the object; only a logical judgment does that. (74/75)

Kant has to reject Baumgarten's analysis of our experience of beauty because of the sharp division he has drawn between sensibility and understanding, distinguishing himself in this respect from both the German rationalists Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten and from the British empiricists, e.g. Hume, who had all insisted that there is a continuum that links the two, although they had placed different emphases on the poles of the continuum, the former understanding percepts as confused concepts, the latter understanding concepts as washed out percepts. Neither a sense judging nor a sensible understanding makes any sense to Kant. Thus he has to reject Baumgarten's interpretation of taste as an *analogon rationis*. He recognizes no such analogy.

Kant rejects the teleological judgment as an interpretation of the aesthetic judgment, because it involves an act of abstraction, while, if Kant is right, every beautiful object must resist such abstraction if I am to continue to appreciate it as beautiful. If I were to succeed in finding an A that totally accounted for the beautiful manifold a, b, c, d the mind would no longer feel free. The work would no longer feel inexhaustible. The more I experience a work of art as totally accounted for by certain rules, the less beauty I will find in it. Works of art are not predictable. Academic training cannot give rules for the production of great art. Kant echoes here a point with which by now we should be familiar: the presence of the conceptual destroys the aesthetic. The work of art is no longer that pleases just in being seen. Rather our mind turns to the idea the artist is expressing, to its content. A genuinely beautiful work of art will not allow for the abstraction of such a content from the work of art. Or rather, when it permits the abstraction of such a content, say a painting represents the Crucifixion, that fact will have

nothing to do with its success as a work of art. The very term "content" invites confusion — as if we could oppose what the word means from its form. In characterizing the aesthetic conception I referred earlier to MacLeish's dictum: the poem should not mean, but be. Kant's analysis of the beauty implies a very similar demand. Implied is, e.g. a rejection of allegory. It is of course often meaningful to speak of the content of a work of art. And it may well be the case that we take a special interest in certain works of art because of their content. Kant admits this. But he would insist that our appreciation of such works is no longer a purely aesthetic appreciation.

## 3

The crucial distinction between **free** and **dependent beauty**, which Kant introduces in par. 16 and which dominates the discussion of the Third Moment at first seems to add little to what has already been said. Dependent beauty presupposes a concept of what a thing ought to be like. Free beauty, on the other hand is independent of such a concept. The examples of free beauty Kant demand careful consideration:

Flowers are free natural beauties. Hardly anyone apart from the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is [meant] to be; and even he, while recognizing it as the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural purpose when he judges the flower by taste. Hence the judgment is based on no perfection of any kind, no intrinsic purposiveness to which the combination of the manifold might refer. Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise) and a lot of crustaceans in the sea are [free] beauties themselves [and] belong to no object determined by concepts as to the purpose, but we like them freely and on their own account. Thus designs *à la grecque*, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper, etc., mean nothing on their own; they represent [*vorstellen*] nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties. What we call fantasias in music (namely, music without a topic [*Thema*]), indeed all music not set to words, may also be included in the same class (76-77)

The choice of examples is interesting here. First of all they are drawn from nature, where Kant is thinking not so much of the flowers and birds of Königsberg that he knew so well, but of a tropical nature he knew only from pictures. His examples of manmade beauties are not works of art that he held in especially high esteem: ornament and music are singled out. That is significant, for it was in the name of both that painting in the early twentieth century was to free itself from the rule of representation. In the phrase

“without a topic [Thema]” we sense a criticism of Baumgarten. At the same time Kant gestures forwards to romanticism with his conception of a free beauty. Consider the following passage from Ferruccio Busoni's *A New Esthetic of Music*:<sup>101</sup>

Such lust of liberation filled Beethoven, the romantic revolutionary, that he ascended one short step in the way leading music back to its loftier self: — a short step in the great task, a wide step in his own oath. He did not quite reach absolute music, but in certain moments he divined it, as in the introduction to the fugue of the Sonata for Hammerclavier.

Indeed, all composers have drawn nearest the true nature of music in preparatory and intermediary passages ( preludes and transitions ), where they felt at liberty to disregard symmetrical proportions, and unconsciously drew free breath. Even a Schumann (of so much lower stature ) is seized, in such passages, by some feeling of the boundlessness of this pan-art ( recall the transition to the last movement of the D-Minor symphony ); and the same may be asserted of Brahms in the introduction to the Finale of the First Symphony.

In Kant we begin to feel this romantic sense of aesthetic freedom, of which there is little trace in Baumgarten or Winckelmann, although the English had prepared the way for Kant. We should keep in mind that freedom in the Third Critique means something quite different from the freedom of the moral person, who is free precisely when he acts in accord with the moral law that he bears within him or her. In aesthetic experience, we do not feel bound by any law. Freedom here suggests a return to the spontaneity of nature. Kant's conception of free beauty places itself in opposition to the restraints structure might impose.

#### 4

However. Kant not only points to the future, but also to the past. The resulting tension comes to the fore in those surprising pages in the third moment when Kant deserts the banner of free beauty and suddenly finds some very kind words for adherent beauty, which move him right into the neighborhood of Winckelmann, which were indeed written in the spirit of Winckelmann. I am referring to Kant's discussion of the ideal, par. 17. Human beauty, or the beauty of a horse, or that of a building presupposes, Kant insists, some concept of the kind of thing we are judging. In judging a horse

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<sup>101</sup> In *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover, 1962).

beautiful we inevitably refer it to the **normal idea** of a horse; in judging a house, we consider the function it is to fulfill, in judging the beauty of a human being we presuppose not only the normal idea of a human being, but also a **rational idea**: the idea of the human being as a rational being, provided by the conception we have of ourselves as moral agents. This idea finds expression in the **ideal of beauty**, a particular representation adequate to that idea. With Kant's discussion of the ideal of beauty we are suddenly back with Winckelmann and his quiet grandeur and noble simplicity of the Greek soul.

Kant admits freely not from a purely aesthetic point of view nothing is gained by this turn to the ideal. But he also points out that taste gains by this admixture of an intellectual satisfaction in as much as it becomes fixed. Thus rules may be prescribed in art after all, provided that we remember that these are rules not for taste, but for the unification of taste with the demands of reason. And although Kant is quick to point out that by this admixture neither the moral nor the aesthetic sphere gains, he yet immediately weakens this claim by saying that due to this wedding of the two realms the two spheres are brought into harmony and thus our whole faculty gains. While Kant's analysis of beauty thus invites a critique of neo-classicism for adulterating the purity of the aesthetic, he himself goes on to defend it.

One could add perhaps an additional criterion in favor of a subordination of the aesthetic to the intellectual faculty. Perhaps freedom, if it is not given a framework by the intellect in which it can unfold, will find it difficult to become fixed. Perhaps it needs the resistance of rules as support or perhaps as an opposition to be conquered. Perhaps the great work of art is one that begins with the rules of art only to transfigure these rules in such a way that the artwork appears the product of free play.

The fourth moment has nothing to add to this discussion. The final pages once more re-assert the importance of freedom, and reject regularity.

But let us return once more to the two points of view that confront each other in the Third Moment. If one does not have the historical situation in mind this confrontation may seem curious and difficult to understand. If it is kept in mind it becomes very revealing of the peculiar place Kant occupies in the history of aesthetics. On one hand he remains faithful to the old idea of art as imitation. On the other hand, with his

understanding of free beauty he points to an absolute art that would be free of the requirements of representation, indeed of all meaning. The passage I read from Busoni's *A New Esthetic of Music* has its counterpart in all the arts.

## 15. The Sublime

### 1

In Kant's discussion of the beautiful we were able to note a tension: on one hand, in his discussion of **free beauty** he looked forward to romanticism and indeed to more modern conceptions of art; on the other, in his discussion of the **ideal**, a form of **dependent beauty**, he showed himself in fundamental agreement with the classicism of a Winckelmann. This standing between the ages finds an even clearer expression in Kant's discussion of the **sublime**, as opposed to the **beautiful**.

What we find beautiful presents itself to us, on Kant's interpretation, as if it were made to be appreciated to us. It suggests an attunement of the beautiful and the human knower: **in beautiful nature we thus tend to feel at home**. This is one implication of Kant's talk of **purposiveness**. For this reason the beauty of nature invites thoughts of a higher purpose behind appearance, thoughts of a creator who cares for us.

With the **sublime** emphasis shifts to something quite different: sublime nature no longer suggests that we human beings are at home in the universe — quite the opposite. The world becomes inhospitable, something threatening and ominous. And yet it is precisely this threatening aspect that, if Kant is right, we enjoy aesthetically. How is this to be explained?

Kant's discussion owes a great deal to and invites comparison with Edmund Burke's *Inquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*.<sup>102</sup> If I had more time, I would consider Burke's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in more detail. Here let me just sketch the way Burke draws the distinction. Crucial is his distinction between two kinds of passion: the passions that belong to **self-preservation** are opposed to the passions that belong to **society**.

Of the former Burke has this to say:

The passions which concern self-preservation, turn mostly on *pain* or *danger*. The ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death* fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but *life* and *health*, though they put us in a capacity of being affected with pleasure, they make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. (38)

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<sup>102</sup> Page references in the text are to Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).



To these passions are opposed those that belong to society:

The other head under which I class our passions, is that of *society*, which may be divided into two sorts. 1. The society of the *sexes*, which answers the purposes of propagation; and next that more *general society*, which we have with men and with other animals, and which we may in some sort be said to have even with the inanimate world. (40)

The distinction between the beautiful and the sublime answers to this distinction, where it is worth noting that Burke reverses the order and treats first of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that it, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling. (39)

Not that we should confuse the terrible with the sublime. The latter is the former placed at a safe distance. To quote Burke once more:

The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances. (51)

They are delightful because they make us feel more alive. The pleasure of the sublime is the pleasure of self-assertion.

Beauty, by contrast, answers to our social being: it divides into personal beauty which channels sexual desire, and a more general beauty, which Burke links to sympathy, imitation, and ambition. What matters to me here is first of all the way Burke associates the sublime with the self-concerned individual. This suggests that the emergence of the sublime in the eighteenth century as an aesthetic category to rival and indeed to surpass the beautiful has something to do with a heightened self-assertion that pulls the individual out of society.

## 2

Like judgments of beauty, judgments of sublimity are **aesthetic judgments**. Their structure is thus quite similar, Kant notes in the *Critique of Judgment*, although, while in the case of the beautiful, he claims, there is a harmonious play between imagination and understanding, in the case of the sublime, the reference is not to the understanding, but to reason. The relationship of what presents itself to us to the lower faculties is indeed a disharmonious one:

Natural beauty carries with it a purposiveness in its form, by which the object seems as if it were predetermined for our power of judgment, so that this beauty constitutes in itself an object of our liking. On the other hand, if something arouses in us, merely in apprehension and without any reasoning on our part, a feeling of the sublime, then it may indeed appear, in its form, contrapurposive for our power of judgment, incommensurate with our power of exhibition, and as if it were violent to our imagination, and yet we judged it all the more sublime for that. (98-99)

Note how this gives something like an epistemological twist to Burke's account. Sublime nature seems to transcend our ability to comprehend it. The imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) cannot hold on to it, as if it were a beautiful picture. **The sublime floods every frame.** But precisely this inadequacy awakens a faculty in us, namely **reason**, which is not bound to the finite and comprehensible.

In this connection Kant emphasizes that, while in the case of the beautiful the reason for the harmonious play of our faculties must be sought in the beautiful — in the case of beautiful nature, it must be sought in the makeup of nature — this is not the case with the sublime:

We see from this at once that we express ourselves entirely incorrectly when we call this or that *object of nature* sublime, even though we may quite correctly call a great many natural objects beautiful; for how can we call something by a term of approval if we apprehend it as in itself contrapurposive? Instead, all we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind. For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility. (99)

In recognizing the sublimity of nature, human beings are really recognizing their own sublimity. There is something about the human mind, about human reason, that allows it to transcend all that is finite, all of nature, something that puts it in touch with the **infinite** within us, which we experience as our freedom. The **subjectivity** of the sublime, as opposed to the **objectivity** of the beautiful should be apparent.

Still, despite this difference, the structure of the judgment of the beautiful and that of the sublime is similar enough to make all four moments of the beautiful applicable to the sublime as well. The sublime, too, pleases **without an interest**; that is to say, the experience again is characterized by aesthetic distance; the objects of our contemplation

are, as it were, bracketed. The sublime pleases **without a concept**. There is no purpose to be discovered. And the sublime pleases **universally** and **necessarily**, although, as we shall see, with an important qualification.

## 3

That qualification has to do with the fact that the key faculty in the case of the beautiful is the understanding, in the case of the sublime reason. But the understanding is the more basic faculty. Reason, on the other hand, presupposes a **reflective turn** on the understanding. Where reflection is only weakly developed, we will not find a receptivity to the sublime. Thus Kant gives the example of the peasant in the Alps who considers all those foreigners who come to visit in order to admire their sublimity mere fools.

It is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas. In all the evidence of nature's destructive force (*Gewalt*), and in the large scale of its might, in contrast with which his own is nonexistent, he will see only the hardship, danger, and misery that would confront anyone forced to live in such a place. Thus (as Mr. de Saussure relates) the good and otherwise sensible Savoyard peasant did not hesitate to call anyone a fool who fancies glaciated mountains. He might even have had a point, if Saussure had acted merely from fancy, as most travelers tend to, in exposing himself to the dangers involved in his observations, or in order that he might some day be able to describe them with pathos? In fact, however, his intention was to instruct mankind, and that excellent man got, in addition, the soul-stirring sensation and gave it into the bargain to the readers of his travels. (124-125)

Still, we can demand universality, as the potentiality for reason is to be found in all human beings, albeit often in an undeveloped state. Culture has made us ever more thoughtful and reflective and in reflection we human beings can turn inward and transcend ourselves as beings in the world, as beings of nature. The experience of the sublime is precisely such an experience of **self-transcendence**. First of all and most of the time we experience nature only in limited ways, as Kant's Savoyard peasant does, who is limited by his point of view, by the fact that he has to make his living in this often inhospitable environment, limited by his hopes, fears and desires. But human beings can rise above such limitations of nature. The experience of the sublime is inseparable from such self-transcendence.

## 4

Returning to the text, let me consider briefly the distinction Kant draws between the **mathematically** and the **dynamically sublime**. First the former: *We call sublime*, Kant tells us, *what is absolutely large*. (103) What does Kant mean by "**absolutely large**"? Usually when I call something large or great I compare it to other things of the same or a similar type. The judgment is based on comparison. Something is called large in comparison to other similar objects:

*That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small*. We can easily see here that nothing in nature can be given, however large we may judge it, that could not, when considered in a different relation, be degraded all the way to the infinitely small, nor conversely anything so small that it could not, when compared with still smaller standards, be expanded by our imagination all the way to the magnitude of the world; telescopes have provided us with a wealth of material in support of the first point, microscopes in support of the second. Hence, considered on this basis, nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime. [What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power for estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use the judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small. Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment. (105-106)

The **absolutely large** is thus not something that is objectively large. Rather the term is understood in terms of the capability of the imagination to comprehend. If what confronts the human being, i.e. what he apprehends, is so complex that when our attention passes from one aspect of the phenomenon to another, it loses as much as it gains, then this proves that the imagination's ability to apprehend has been stretched to its limits. The phenomenon confronting me no longer can be grasped as a whole. Once again let me turn to Kant's formulation:

In order for the imagination to take in a quantum intuitively, so that we can then use it as a measure or unity in estimating magnitude by numbers, the imagination must perform two acts: *apprehension (apprehensio)* and *comprehension (comprehensio)*

*aesthetica*). Apprehension involves no problem, for it may progress to infinity. But comprehension becomes more and more difficult the farther apprehension progresses, and it soon reaches its maximum, namely, the aesthetically largest basic measure for an estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has reached the point where the partial presentations of sensible intuition that were first apprehended are already beginning to be extinguished in the imagination, as it proceeds to apprehend further one, the imagination then loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other; and so there is a maximum in comprehension that it cannot exceed. (108)

If the phenomenon confronting me cannot be given to me as a whole, it still can be thought as a whole, and just in this respect reason exhibits itself as of wider scope than the imagination. Perhaps it is well here to turn to Kant's example of the pyramids, which make their strongest impression when the spectator is neither too far removed, nor too close. The reason is that in the former case the whole can be comprehended, in the latter case the whole cannot be apprehended. But for the experience of the sublime there must be **apprehension without comprehension**.

The sublime, Kant tells us, fills us with **respect**. But respect here has its object not in nature, but in the human being himself and in his high destination. In respect to the lower faculties the sublime is simply unpleasant. Only reason finds it pleasant. The result is that the experience of the sublime does not allow for quiet contemplation. What is sublime **moves us**, and the poles of this movement are defined by its reference to imagination and understanding on the one hand, to reason on the other.

Perhaps it should be mentioned here that the discussion of **impure aesthetic judgments**, which played such an important part in the discussion of the beautiful, is mentioned only in passing in Kant's discussion of the sublime — when he discusses the **monstrous** and the **colossal**.

An object is *monstrous* if, by its magnitude, it nullifies the purpose which constitutes its concept. And *colossal* is what we call the mere exhibition of a concept if that concept is almost too large for any exhibition (i. e. if it borders on the relatively monstrous). (109)

An object is called **monstrous** or immense if the concept by which we normally would judge it does not present itself to us, not because there is no such concept, but because the magnitude of the object prevents us from applying it. In this sense we can speak of a monstrous house, bicycle, poem, crime etc. An object is called **colossal** if we arrive at such a concept only with difficulty. Once more think of a colossal house. But the very

fact that Kant gives only a few lines to the impure aesthetic judgment shows his lack of interest in it. This is due to the fact that the sublime cannot finally be reconciled with the application of definite concepts. Since comprehension is necessary for the beautiful as well as for understanding there is no such clash in that case.

## 5

Kant's second division is that of the **dynamically sublime**. Nature, in this case, is confronted as a power capable of annihilating us, as a power inspiring fear. Again we find, however, that nature, to be experienced as sublime, may not simply fill us with fear, but that there must be sufficient distance to allow us to calmly contemplate what lies before us. It is Kant's discussion of this second aspect that is particularly close to Burke's account. However, Kant explicitly rejects Burke's claim that the feeling is linked to the way that, confronted with what threatens annihilation, we feel elated when we recognize that we are in fact not annihilated. This, Kant suggests, takes the embodied self, which can be annihilated, too seriously. Rather, he suggests, the experience of the sublime is tied to the recognition of something in us that transcends nature in such a way that it cannot be annihilated. What presents itself as a threatening abyss to the physical human being becomes a source of delight once the human being recognizes that he is more than just a being of nature. In discovering to human beings their true being as beings of reason, the sublime moves us to an acknowledgement of ourselves as moral agents. And indeed, we can demand universality of the judgment of the sublime, for the same reason that we demand universality of a moral judgment. Both are based on imputing to others the same reason, the same moral nature, that we discover within ourselves.

## 6

Kant's discussion of the sublime, even more than that of the beautiful, seems to have been written with nature, rather than art, in mind. The problem of the sublime in art is indeed rarely raised by him. Only when he speaks of the size of St. Peter or of the pyramids does he speak of the sublime with reference to something made by human beings. And here it is simply size that accomplishes the effect.

Is it even possible for an artist, take for example a painter, to create works that deserve to be called sublime? A painting, it would seem, is of necessity something finite, something bounded, enclosed in a frame. How is it possible to reconcile this boundedness of the painting with the infinity demanded by the sublime? The most often taken approach, to portray the sublime in nature, does not generally lead to sublime painting. The artist, it would seem, cannot hope to catch the sublimity of nature by translating it unto a finite canvas. What he would have to do is to create works that somehow extend an invitation to the observer to transcend the finitude of the pictorial representation. How can the artist do so? Should he turn to the colossal, i. e. paint very large pictures, as Barnett Newman, a painter who self-consciously invoked the category of the sublime did?

For hints of another and in my opinion more convincing answer let me refer just briefly to what are perhaps the two leading landscape painters of the romantic period, at least if we confine ourselves to considerations of the sublime, to Caspar David Friedrich (1774 - 1840) and to J. M. W. Turner (1775 - 1851). In his paintings Friedrich often sets up a dialectic between foreground and background. A sharply defined screen, made up perhaps of some oak trees and a ruined abbey is placed before an atmospheric, difficult to grasp background. Often these paintings find a focus in a figure or figures seen from behind, absorbed in the contemplation of the misty void before them. "Motionless these figures sit, lost as they seem, in their thoughts and waiting for nothing or for all. (*Moonrise Over the Sea, Two Men Looking at the Moon, Cemetery, Cloister Graveyard in the Snow*)."<sup>103</sup> Here it is the dialectic of clearly defined foreground and the immensity of the atmospheric background that figures the dialectic of finite and infinite that helps to define the sublime and communicates a sense of the sublime. In the *Monk by the Sea* it is the horizon line that invites us to extend it beyond the seemingly arbitrary cut introduced by the frame *ad infinitum*. Here too the expanse of the sky, anticipating the color fields that were to become popular in American art of the sixties, is another figure of the infinite.

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<sup>103</sup> Helmut Rehder, "The Infinite Landscape," *Texas Quarterly*, V, no. 3 (Autumn 1962), p. 149.

Turner, almost an exact contemporary, takes a different approach. For him the human element is not nearly as important as for Friedrich. In Turner's paintings we see the atmospheric become abstract and defeat the representational that offers the understanding something that it can hold on to. In his *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* bridge, building, and spectators thus lose their substantiality. In Turner's late paintings his fascination with abstraction dominates his art to a point where all definition is in danger of being lost. In his steamer in a snowstorm the ship is thus barely noticeable. A last element of structure and orientation, almost submerged by the swirling storm, or rather the swirling paint around it. The human being is, as it were, whirled around by this painting. Paint itself here becomes a figure of the infinite. Only the ship remains as a last point of orientation. Would the painter have done better without it? Would it have been "better" had Turner taken the last step that here separates him from a dynamic abstract expressionism? From the point of view of the sublime it is precisely this tension between the finite and the infinite that gives the painting its appeal.

The sublime work of art must be **dialectic**. The painter inevitably creates a bounded, finite object. He cannot begin with the infinite. His evocations of the infinite require the assertion of the finite as a foil. Negation must be preceded by affirmation. Subversion must be preceded by structure. Thus the ship in the Turner is necessary.



## 16. The Creation of the Work of Art: The Aesthetic Idea

### 1

**Aesthetics** is sometimes defined as that branch of philosophy that is concerned with the beautiful. So understood it is quite different from the **philosophy of art**. The two, aesthetics and the philosophy of art, stand indeed in a somewhat problematic relation, for beauty is found not only in works of art, but in nature. That in that part of the *Critique of Judgment* that Kant calls “The Analytic of the Beautiful” he sees no need to draw a sharp distinction between beauty in nature and beauty in art is characteristic of aesthetics, which tends to approach aesthetic phenomena from the spectator's point of view. That such a point of view is quite one-sided should be evident. Kant himself was indeed forced to recognize that the account of the beautiful given in the analytic was incomplete as a philosophy of art. Such incompleteness is bound up with Kant's focus on the experience of the beautiful, rather than on its creation. But in the second part of the "Critique of the Aesthetic Judgment" Kant's focus changes. From the point of view of a philosophy of art it is this second part that contains some of Kant's most interesting observations. Here he discusses the work of art from the point of view of the creator rather than the spectator. In this lecture I would like focus on three key ideas that figure in that discussion:

- 1) on Kant's conception of **art**,
- 2) on what he calls the **aesthetical idea**, and finally
- 3) on his understanding of the **productive** imagination.

I shall save the discussion of genius for the next lecture.

### 2

Let me begin with Kant's definition of **art**:

By right we should not call anything art except a production through freedom, i.e., through a power of choice that bases its acts on reason. (170)

The main point should be familiar from our discussion of Aristotle. Art is here distinguished as a productive faculty from science, which is merely theoretical. It is distinguished from handicraft, the work of the artisan, by aiming at the creation of works

that have their end within themselves. Art is **autotelic**. In this respect it resembles play. Art is free as craft is not. And yet, unlike play art requires something compulsory.

It is advisable, however, to remind ourselves that in all the free arts there is yet a need for something in the order of a constraint, or, as it is called, a *mechanism*. (In poetry, for example, it is correctness and richness of language, as well as prosody and meter.)

Without this the *spirit*, which in art must be *free* and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and evaporate completely. This reminder is needed because some of the more recent educators believe that they promote a free art best if they remove all constraint from it and convert it from labor into mere play. (171)

A new term, which we have not encountered so far in our discussion of the *Critique of Judgement* is introduced here: **spirit**. What spirit names remains rather obscure. It appears to be the source of inspiration, and it is said to be **free**. And yet Kant also warns that it may not be allowed to become altogether free; it must be constrained. This suggests that in the creation of a work of art two activities must come together, one that is rather like **play** — perhaps we can speak of the play of the spirit; the other subjects this play to what Kant calls a **mechanism**. This opposition between spirit and a mechanism that restrains the former's freedom, recalls what was said earlier about the two faculties that had to be in harmony in aesthetic appreciation": the imagination and the understanding.

One consideration that gives a rather new twist to the discussion of the work of art from the creator's point of view is rooted in the fact the production of art is an activity governed by the will. But the will requires reasons. The artist creates having something in mind. His creating is governed by an intention. And yet this intention, if too obvious to the person who is to appreciate the work of art, threatens aesthetic appreciation. The intention must therefore be disguised.

In [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature. ... Nature we say, is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art is called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature...

Therefore, even though the purposiveness in the product of fine art is intentional, it must not seem intentional; i.e. fine art must have the *look* of nature, though we are conscious of it as art. And a product of art appears like nature if, though we find it to agree quite *punctiliously* with the rules that have to be followed for the product to

become what it is intended to be, it does not do so *painstakingly*. In other words, the academic form must not show; there must be no hint that the rule was hovering before the artist's eyes and putting fetters on his mental powers. (173-174)

The artist's freedom must unfold itself within the framework provided by rules. Here we should recall what Kant had said in the discussion of the Third Moment about the merits of adherent or dependent beauty: that it allowed the work of art to become fixed. It now appears that the beauty of the work of art can never be a totally free beauty. All beauty in art is dependent beauty, because all artistic production presupposes a reason, an intention. This is to say that, notwithstanding what Kant had said earlier about musical phantasies and ornament, a truly free beauty is encountered only in nature, if at all. The beautiful in art always involves dependent beauty. As Kant explains:

A natural beauty is a *beautiful thing*; artistic beauty is a *beautiful presentation of a thing*. (179)

Here what matters is that the thing in question be presented beautifully. From this it follows that the beautiful in art must be an adherent beauty, for it must involve a concept of the thing to be presented.

In order to judge a natural beauty to be that, I need not have a prior concept of what kind of thing the object is [meant] to be; i.e. I do not have to know its material purposiveness (its purpose). Rather, I like the mere form of the object when I judge it, on its own account, without knowing the purpose. (179)

This is in accord with what had been said in the "Analytic of the Beautiful." But to continue:

But if the object is given as a product of art, and as such is to be declared beautiful, then we must first base it on a concept of what the thing is [meant] to be, since art always presupposes a purpose in the cause (and its causality). And since the harmony of a thing's manifold with an intrinsic determination of the thing, i.e. with its purpose, is the thing's perfection, it follows that when we judge artistic beauty we shall have to assess the thing's perfection as well, whereas perfection is not at all at issue when we judge natural beauty to be that. (179)

This represents a very significant modification of what Kant had said before. Kant now appears very close to Baumgarten, who after all, in his dissertation was not interested in the beauty of nature, but only in the beauty of poetry, i.e., of works of art. Free beauty is now declared to be impossible in art. And on this point it seems impossible to disagree with Kant.

What makes his position seem somewhat old-fashioned here is that Kant continues to think of art as fundamentally a matter of beautifully representing reality, that is he continues to rely on a theory of **imitation**. This, however, is not necessary to make sense of Kant's central point: I just have to emphasize the word presentation and insist that presentation need not be understood as representation: artificial beauty is the beautiful presentation of some sort of thing. This would allow for abstract art. At the same time it would retain Kant's insistence that art requires a concept. Abstract art, too, is tied to certain concepts, as it has to be, just because it is art. The art character of art inevitably restrains the freedom of the artistic imagination.

## 3

How does Kant understand the **imagination**.

For the imagination ([in its role] as a productive cognitive power) is very mighty when it creates another nature, as it were, out of the material that that actual nature gives it. We use it to entertain ourselves when experience strikes us as overly routine. We may restructure experience; and although in doing so we continue to follow analogical laws, yet we also follow principles which reside higher up, namely in reason... In this process we feel our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical use of the imagination); for although it is under that law that nature lends us material, yet we can process this material into something quite different, namely something which surpasses nature. (182)

Significant is the distinction between two employments of the imagination, one empirical, where it is subject to the laws of association, and another, where it surpasses nature and becomes genuinely productive. The former is more or less identical with Hume's faculty of association. This is a reproductive imagination, derived from sensation and closely tied to memory: I imagine what I have seen before. The productive imagination that gives birth to art is of a very different sort. While it, too, presupposes experience it works it up in ways that are free from the principles of association. It manipulates the material nature has furnished in ways that surpass nature. Think of some surrealist painting! In both cases the imagination is a faculty of **coordination** as opposed to the understanding, which is a faculty of **subordination**. And as the beautiful was analyzed by Kant as a coordinated whole, it cannot surprise that the task of creating beauty is assigned by Kant to the imagination. Coordination implies that there is no

explicit rule. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the imagination is therefore called **blind** (A 78/ B 103). The principles by which the imagination operates are there said to be hidden. Once again we are reminded of the persistent attempts to root the creation of art in a subconscious faculty. Kant seems to be heading in this direction with his doctrine of the productive imagination. The imagination is under no control. It is spontaneous and free. But it is precisely this spontaneous freedom of the imagination that also makes it suspect to Kant. Thus he insists that the imagination be disciplined:

In order [for a work] to be beautiful, it is not strictly necessary that [it] be rich and original in ideas, but it is necessary that the imagination in its freedom be commensurate with the lawfulness of the understanding. For if it is left in lawless freedom, all its riches [in ideas] produce nothing but nonsense, and it is judgment that adapts the imagination to the understanding. (188)

Thus taste, and taste also involves the understanding, appears necessary to furnish the imagination with the necessary discipline. The imagination is chaotic, rich, free, where freedom here is essentially different from the freedom of the autonomous moral being, who places himself under the law of reason.

#### 4

The product of the imagination is called by Kant an **idea**. The term "idea" is already familiar in its relation to reason. God is an idea of reason. What the imagination produces is, however, not an idea of reason, but what Kant calls an **aesthetic idea**. The aesthetic idea shares this with the idea of reason: both strive for something that transcends the limits of experience. Both are alike further in trying to present us with something complete: consider once more Leibniz's idea of the cosmos as a perfect whole — an idea of reason. The aesthetic idea presents us with an analogous completeness. Both are born of dissatisfaction with the accidental. The aesthetic idea thus presents itself as having to be just as it is. Faced with such an idea, one does not want to compare it. All true beauty, according to Kant, is thus beyond comparison. And being beyond comparison it strikes us as having to be just as it is, and not somehow different.

But let me try to be more specific; say I want to paint this tree. I have a more or less clear idea of what I am up to: I want to paint a picture, of this tree, say a water-color. This gives us an idea. The imagination gets hold of this idea, but plays with it, develops

it into an aesthetic idea so rich that it is in principle inexhaustible by concepts. This is the reason why Kant calls the aesthetic idea **unexpoundable**, while the idea of reason is **indemonstrable** (215). In the former case it is impossible to find an adequate concept; in the latter case it is impossible to find an adequate intuition. And yet, the two are related. In its freedom, the imagination surpasses the understanding's reach. The task of trying to understand the work of art is an infinite one. This does not mean that trying to understand it is a meaningless effort. On the contrary, it is precisely when I try to understand a work of art that I become aware of the aesthetic idea as transcending my understanding, as essentially unexpoundable. — I no longer remember who compared a great work of art to an onion, the more layers interpretation peels off, the bigger the onion gets.

The work of art, Kant suggests, is related to the aesthetic idea as an imitation is to what it imitates, or as **ectype** is to **archetype** (par. 51, 191). Works of art are the expressions of such ideas; a classification of the arts can thus be made based on the different modes of expression. But the fundamental structure is in each case the same.

Perhaps this account gives us some idea of why the table of contents leaves us a bit uncertain just where the "Analytic of the Sublime" is supposed to end. Does it include the discussion of the production of art, as the table of contents almost seems to suggest? Presumably not: Book II, it seems, should have ended with par. 29; but should there then not have been a Book III? But there is a similarity between the sublime and the beautiful that now emerges. There is a way in which our attempt to comprehend the beautiful suffers shipwreck on the unexpoundability of the beautiful work of art somewhat in the way imaginative comprehension was said to suffer shipwreck on the infinity of the imaginatively apprehended in the discussion of the sublime. This invites a rethinking of the distinction of the boundary that at first so clearly separated the beautiful from the sublime. The beautiful creations of the genius now appear in some ways rather like the sublime.

## 17. Genius and Taste

### 1

Kant's discussion of **genius** is closely tied to his analysis of the **aesthetic idea** and of the activity of the **imagination**. In turning to the topic of genius Kant is turning to a favorite topic of the day. Once again we note the two sides of Kant's thinking with which by now we should be quite familiar: we sense, on one hand, a need to liberate genius, on the other, a fear of that very liberty, which, Kant feels, must be harnessed if it is not to dissipate itself.

But what is genius? Kant's famous answer:

*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: Genius is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art. (174)

The first thing to be noted here is that genius is not a faculty that belongs to all human beings. It is nature's gift to a few. It is not universal, but particular. This is perhaps the only time in the three critiques where Kant places a great deal of weight on a faculty that is a gift to particular individuals. In par. 49 Kant calls the genius *nature's favorite* and a *rare phenomenon*. (187) This means that unlike the moral person, who is governed by a law he shares with all humanity, the actions of the genius are his alone. He cannot share the secrets of his art. Indeed, he does not even understand them himself. In this respect the genius is rather like the person of taste I discussed before.

A second point that follows is that for Kant the faculty of judging art and the faculty of creating art are not the same: Rather, while the latter can be presupposed to be possessed by all persons, the former is possessed by those blessed by nature with this special gift.

The passage I just read may seem to contradict something Kant said before: Kant speaks of nature giving the rule to art. Is there then a rule the artist can follow after all. Didn't we say that there was no such rule? Kant addresses this question in par. 46.

For every art presupposes rules, which serve as the foundation on which a product, if it is to be called artistic, is thought of as possible in the first place. On the other hand, the concept of fine art does not permit a judgment about the beauty of its product to be

derived from any rule whatsoever that has a *concept* as its determining basis, i.e., the judgment must not be based on a concept of the way in which the product is possible. Thence fine art cannot itself devise the rule by which it is to bring about its product. Since, however, a product can never be called art unless it is preceded by some rule, it must be nature in the subject (and through the attunement of its powers) that gives the rule to art; in other words, fine art is possible only as the product of genius. (175)

It is difficult to understand what "rule" means here. The genius is said not to have created the rule governing his creation: indeed he cannot even be said to really know it.

Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather *as nature* that it gives the rule. That is why, if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he has come by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, and to communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products. (175)

Once more Plato's theory of inspiration comes to mind, according to which the poet or rhapsode sang with a voice that was not his own. The poet was only a vehicle for some higher power that speaks through him. In Kant's case this higher power is called nature. Today we might want to invoke the unconscious,

Although difficult to understand, the view that these passages sketch is nevertheless a familiar one: the artist must, as it were, lose himself; he must become free to listen to the voice of inspiration within himself, a voice over which he has no control, which may or may not speak to him. Every work of art is a gift he receives. All the artist can do to prepare himself for this call is to silence other voices that might prevent him from hearing it.

As I said, the essentials of this view are familiar. Consider once more the painter Paul Klee's famous metaphor of the tree, from which I read you an excerpt once before because it is so representative of inspiration theories.

Let me use a metaphor, the metaphor of a tree. The artist has concerned himself with this variform world, and, let us assume, he has adjusted himself to a certain extent; quite quietly. He is well enough adjusted to bring some order into the fleeting manifestations and experiences of this world. I should like to compare this orientation concerning nature and life, this interwoven and ramified order, to the roots of the tree.

From these roots the sap rises to the artist, to pass through him and through his eyes.



Thus he takes the place of the trunk.

Pressed and moved by the power of the rising sap, he passes the things seen into his works.

Just as the crown of the tree spreads itself visibly to all sides in time and space, so does the work. Nobody would ever ask that the tree should form its crown exactly as its roots. Everyone will understand that there can be no exact mirror view between below and above. It is evident that the different functions in different basic spheres will produce lively variations.

But people will nevertheless try at times to forbid the artist, of all people, to vary from the original, even if the composition demands that he should. He has even been accused of a lack of skill and intentional falsification.

And yet he does nothing but fulfill his function as trunk, and collects and passes on that which has come from below. Neither serving nor governing, only mediating.

He thus occupies a truly modest position. And the beauty of the crown is not he himself, it has only passed through him.<sup>104</sup>

The artist needs to free himself from all impediments that might prevent him from hearing the call of nature. To thus free himself, he imagines other possible worlds. He tells himself:

This world has looked different in the past and will look different again in the future.

With regard to the non-terrestrial, however, he says: completely different forms may have developed on other planets. Such versatility in the natural ways of creation is a good training in form.

It can profoundly move the creator, and versatile himself, he will nurture the freedom of development in his own creative work. Taking this into consideration, one cannot blame him, if he considers the contemporary stage of the visible world he happens to have been born into as accidentally retarded, retarded in time and place, all too retarded in comparison with his deeper vision and quicker emotions.

And is it not true that just the relatively small change of a view through a microscope presents the eye with pictures which we would all declare fantastic and eccentric if, without the intelligence to understand them, we saw them somewhere quite accidentally?

Mr. X, however, would clamor, faced with such forms in a painting: these are supposed to be natural forms? They are nothing but bad craftsmanship.

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<sup>104</sup> Notes or a speech given at the opening of an exhibition of modern art in Jena, 1924, in H. K. Roethel, *Modern German Painting* (New York: Reynal, n. d.)

Is the artist then concerned with microscopy, history, paleontology? Only comparatively, only for the sake of freedom.

For the sake of freedom, which does not lead to specific phases of development which at one stage occurred or will occur in nature, or which might be found replicated on other stars (this might some time be demonstrable).

For the sake of a freedom which only claims a right to the same versatility enjoyed by nature. From example to archetype.

## 2

The danger with placing this much emphasis on genius is that it depends on something like grace. Either there is inspiration or there is not. If not, there is no way of filling the void. This kind of approach demands everything or nothing. And as genius is rare, perhaps usually there will be nothing coming forth. The child will be still-born.

But back to Kant: From what has been said it follows that genius must be **original** and not **imitative**. One cannot learn how to be a genius. In this respect art is unlike science, a claim that you may want to question — which Schopenhauer, for one, did indeed question. Genius can also not be copied. One rather has to become aware of the springs of the genius's creativity and allow these same springs to rise within oneself.

Here is how Kant puts this point:

Since, then, [the artist's] natural endowment must give the rule to [fine] art, what kind of rule is this? It cannot be couched in a formula and serve as a precept, for then a judgment about the beautiful could be determined according to concepts. Rather the rule must be abstracted from what the artist has done, i.e., from the product, which others may use to test their own talent, letting it serve them as their model, not to be *copied* [*Nachmachung*] but to be *imitated* [*Nachahmung*]. How that is possible is difficult to explain. The artist's ideas arouse similar ideas in his apprentice if nature has provided the latter with a similar proportion in his mental powers. That is why the models [*Muster*] of fine art are the only means of transmitting these ideas to posterity. (177-178)

And yet, at this point Kant once more becomes scared of the emphasis he has placed on genius and thus on the anarchic imagination: Does the present account not threaten to reduce art to arbitrariness? To mitigate this implication Kant pulls back and once again places emphasis on the role of concepts.

Even though mechanical and fine art are very different from each other, since the first is based merely on diligence and learning, but the second on genius, yet there is

no fine art that does not have as its essential condition something mechanical, which can be encompassed by rules and complied with, and hence has an element of academic correctness. For something must be thought, as purpose, since otherwise the product cannot be ascribed to any art at all, but would be a mere product of chance. But directing the work to a purpose requires determinate rules that one is not permitted to renounce. Now since originality of talent is one essential component (though to the only one) of the character of genius, shallow heads believe that the best way to show that they are geniuses in first bloom is by renouncing all rules of academic constraint, believing that they will cut a better figure on the back of an ill-tempered than on a trained horse. Genius can only provide rich material for products of fine art; processing this and giving it form requires a talent that is academically trained, so that it may be used in a way that can stand the test of the power of judgment. (178)

Genius, to put the matter differently, must be subject to the controls exerted by good taste. Taste, as we have learned before, is a faculty that gives both understanding and the imagination their due. In this context, where the imagination has been given more than its due, this means that an emphasis must be placed on the understanding. After having opposed genius to taste in par. 48, Kant offers us in the next paragraph the following definition:

Hence genius actually consists in the happy relation — one that no science can teach and that cannot be learned by any diligence — allowing us, first, to discover ideas for a given concept, and second, to hit upon a way of expressing these ideas that enable us to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that these ideas produce. The second talent is properly the one we call spirit. For in order to express what is ineffable in the mental state accompanying a certain presentation and to make it universally communicable — whether the expression consists in language or painting or plastic art — we find an ability [viz., spirit] to apprehend the imagination's rapidly passing play and to unite it in a concept that can be communicated without the constraint of rules (a concept that on that very account is original, while at the same time it reveals a new rule that could not have been inferred from any earlier principles or examples). (185/186)

Art is thus the expression, the language in the widest sense, of such subjective states. Once again we are close to Baumgarten, for whom feeling and sensation were clear, but confused ideas. What Kant calls an aesthetic idea is, as I pointed out last time, close to this formulation. Only that the difference between concept and aesthetic idea is believed by Kant to be one in kind rather than just a matter of degree.

After having thus, as it were, harnessed the imagination, Kant once again permits a freedom to genius that softens this reign.

A certain *boldness* of expression, and in general some deviation from the common rules, is entirely fitting for a genius; it is however not at all worthy of imitation, but in itself always remains a defect that [any] one must try to eliminate, though the genius has, as it were, a privilege to allow the defect to remain [anyway] because the inimitable [element] in the momentum of his spirit would be impaired by timorous caution. (187)

Kant is torn here between two opinions, which are not easily reconciled: on one hand art is the production of genius; thus it would seem that the artist should not take too much care to follow rules, as this might cause his originality to be fettered too much. On the other hand, Kant is afraid of this very freedom and therefore argues that genius must submit to taste.

Taste, like the power of judgment in general, consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it civilized or polished; but at the same time it gives it guidance as to how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thought and hence makes the ideas durable, fit for approval that is both lasting and universal, and [hence] fit for being followed by others and fit for an ever advancing culture. (188)

The idea of a free beauty has definitely been abandoned in the arts. Concepts are necessary to guide the creator as well as the spectator. Beauty in art is dependent beauty. This, however, should not lead us to forget that these concepts only guide or regulate the imagination. The judgment that something is beautiful remains mysterious. There can be no explanation why this painting is beautiful and that one not. In other words, there is still that X, that indeterminate concept, which all determination cannot exhaust. And it is precisely in our attempts to exhaust it that we realize its inexhaustibility and thus recognize beauty.

### 3

Whenever genius was discussed in the early nineteenth century, a number of archetypal figures offered themselves as illustrations. One such figure was Shakespeare. For a contemporary genius one could turn to Goethe. But above all it was perhaps Beethoven who furnished the age with an image of genius. Let me therefore conclude

with two contemporary reactions to Beethoven's music. The first is from Bettina von Arnim's *Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde, Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*.

In music, scholars have always stood before genius like wooden blocks. The scholar can only stand what he knows, and not because he understands it, but because he has gotten used to it, just as a donkey has gotten used to his daily path... Scholarship at best understands what is already familiar, but not what points to the future. It cannot free the **spirit** from the letter, from the law. Every art stands on its own, ready to conquer death, ready to lead man to heaven; but where the philistines watch over her as her masters, she stands meekly, her head shorn. What should have been free will, free life, has become clockwork. And though one may listen to it, believe, and hope, nothing will come of it. The only roads that lead to her are closed to the philistines; they are prayer and a silent heart that confidently trusts in eternal wisdom, even where it cannot understand. We stand before a mountain range that we cannot cross. And yet, only up there, is understanding to be found.

Note how the rhetoric describing genius here is also the rhetoric of the sublime.

Even more telling is the following review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony by the romantic poet, E. T. A. Hoffmann, who was also active as a conductor and composer.

Beethoven's instrumental music opens up an immense unfathomable realm. Rays of fire shoot through the deep night of this realm; we become aware of gigantic shadows, rising, falling, surrounding us, annihilating us, everything in us except the pain of infinite desire, into which that joy which had risen quickly and with rejoicing, falls back and disappears; and only in this pain, devouring, but not destroying love, hope and joy; threatening to disrupt us with a concord of all passions; only here do we continue to live, ecstatic visionaries. The romantic taste is rare, still more rare romantic talent. Perhaps it is because of this that there are so few who are able to play that lyre which opens up the wonderful realm of the infinite.

Beethoven is a purely romantic (and just because of this a truly musical) composer. Perhaps because of this he is less successful in vocal music, which does not permit indefinite longing, but rather presents us with moods, made definite by words, although experienced in the realm of the infinite. This also explains why his instrumental music rarely is popular. The people, who are unable to follow Beethoven do not deny him a high measure of phantasy; but they see in his works only the products of genius, who careless about form and selection, surrenders himself to the fire and the momentary inspirations of his imagination. Nevertheless, he is just as deliberate as Haydn or Mozart. He separates himself from the inner realm of tones and rules it as an absolute monarch.

## 18. Hegel on the Future of Art

### 1

When we turn from Kant to Hegel, we are struck by the fact that Hegel places the beauty of art higher than that of nature.<sup>105</sup> Hegel, indeed, begins his *The Philosophy of Fine Art* by drawing a sharp line between the two:

The present inquiry has for its subject-matter *Aesthetic*. It is a subject co-extensive with the entire *realm of the beautiful*, more specifically described, its province is that of *Art*, or rather, we should say, of *Fine Art*. (382)<sup>106</sup>

Kant in his discussion of free beauty and of the sublime had been thinking first of all of nature. Hegel, on the other hand, does not hesitate at all to place the beauty of art higher than that of nature.

For the beauty of art is a beauty begotten, a new birth of the mind; and to the extent that Spirit and its creations stand higher than Nature and its phenomena, to that extent the beauty of art is more exalted than the beauty of Nature. Indeed, if we regard the matter in its formal aspect, that is to say, according to the way it is there, any chance fancy that passes through one's head, is of higher rank than any product of Nature. (383)

The beautiful is beautiful only in so far as it is born of the Spirit. This seems to hark back to Plato. But unlike Plato, when Hegel is thinking here of spirit, he is first of all thinking of the human spirit.

Having restricted the discussion in this manner, Hegel goes on to ask whether art is indeed worthy of and susceptible of scientific treatment. Is it more than mere **entertainment**. It would seem at first that it is not:

Yet while art prevails on all sides with its pleasing shapes, from the crude decorations of savage tribes up to the splendors of the sacred shrine adorned with every conceivable beauty of design, none the less such shapes themselves appear to fall outside the real purposes of life, and even where the imaginative work of art is not impervious to such serious objects, nay, rather at times even appear to assist them, to the extent at least of removing what is evil to a distance, yet for all that art essentially belongs to the

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<sup>105</sup> For a more complete discussion see the notes for my seminar *Hegel's Introduction to Aesthetics*: <http://karstenharries.commons.yale.edu/>

<sup>106</sup> Trans. F. P. B. Osmaston, "Selections from The Philosophy of Fine Arts," *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*.

*relaxation and recreation* of spiritual life, whereas its substantive interests rather make a call upon its strained energy. (384)

Is art more than pleasing decoration and entertainment? And if just entertainment, perhaps a high-class entertainment, is it worthy of the philosopher's attention? We can of course use art to express moral and other important ideas, but in that case is it not profoundly superfluous?

## 2

Hegel goes on to claim that art is indeed more than just entertainment and worthy of the philosopher's attention, but to do so he has to give up what I have called an **aesthetic** conception of art and embrace an **ontological** approach.

Fine art is not art in the true sense of the term until it is also thus free, and its *highest* function is only then satisfied when it has established itself in a sphere which it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby merely one mode and form through which the *Divine*, the profoundest interests of mankind, and spiritual truths of widest range, are brought home to consciousness and expressed. It is in works of art that nations have deposited the richest intuitions and ideas they possess; and not infrequently fine art supplies a key of interpretation to the wisdom and religion of peoples; in the case of many it is the only one. (388)

Art is placed by Hegel in a common circle with philosophy and religion. The profoundest interests of human beings find expression in art.

With Aristotle, Hegel goes on to argue that art is more philosophical than a mere description of phenomena as they present themselves could ever be.

Now it is just the show and deception of this false and evanescent world which art disengages from the veritable significance of phenomena to which we have referred, implanting in the same a reality of more exalted rank born of mind. The phenomena of art therefore are not merely not appearance and nothing more; we are justified in ascribing to them, as contrasted with the realities of our ordinary life, an actually higher reality and more veritable existence. (389 – 390)

But by tying art in this way to reality and truth, is Hegel not finally forced to subordinate art to philosophy. Is the medium of thought not more adequate to the pursuit of truth than the medium of art? With this question we return to the tension I pointed to in my very first lecture: If

1, art is tied to truth,

and

2, the adequate expression of truth is thought, which communicates itself most perfectly in clear and distinct propositions,

and

3, art is essentially sensuous,  
is art then not necessarily something that is inadequate, measured by what the pursuit of truth demands, something that must be overcome as soon as the true nature of truth and what it demands are recognized?

Art has indeed been recognized to be inadequate to what the pursuit of truth demands:

But however we may explain the fact, it certainly is the case that Art is no longer able to discover that satisfaction of spiritual wants, which previous epochs and nations have sought for in it and exclusively found in it, a satisfaction which, at least on the religious side, was associated with art in the most intimate way. The fair days of Greek art, as also the golden time of the later middle ages, are over. The reflective culture of our life of today makes it inevitable, both relatively to our volitional power and to our judgment, that we adhere strictly to general points of view, and regulate particular matters in consonance with them, so that universal forms, laws, duties, rights, and maxims hold valid as the determining basis of our life and the force within of main importance. (392)

Here I would like to add just as a footnote that the sixteenth century witnesses both the rise of a new aesthetic art, but also a rise of iconoclastic tendencies. Is the spiritual truth of the Christian faith not debased by art? The marriage of art and religion is beginning to come apart. Art becomes autonomous.

There is just a trace of that iconoclastic spirit in Hegel. Consider the following passage:

Of such a type is the Christian conception of truth; and above all it is the prevailing spirit of our modern world, or, more strictly, of our religion and our intellectual culture, which have passed beyond the point at which art is the highest mode under which the absolute is brought home to human consciousness. The type peculiar to art-production and its products fails any longer to satisfy man's highest need. We are beyond the stage of reverence for works of art as divine and objects deserving our worship. The impression they make on us is of a more reflective kind, and the emotions which they arouse require a higher test and a further verification. Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art. (391)



Ages that had not yet awoken to the requirements of truth could find in art a satisfaction denied to us. The thesis that art has lost its highest significance for us moderns is stated even more strongly a bit later:

... the entire spiritual culture of the times is of such a nature that he [the artist] himself stands within a world thus disposed to reflection and the conditions it presupposes, and, do what he may, he cannot release himself either by his wish or his power of decision from their influence, neither can he by means of exceptional education, or a removal from the ordinary conditions of life, conjure up for himself and secure a solitude capable of replacing all that is lost.

In all these respects art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest possibilities, a thing of the past. (392)

### 3

To recognize the force of the thesis let us consider once more the three premises on which it is based:

1. Genuine art transcends our conceptual grasp. On this point Hegel would appear to be in complete agreement with Kant. Like Kant, he insists that man is “born to religion, to thought, to science.” Their acquisition requires therefore “nothing besides birth itself, and training, education, industry, etc.” Artistic genius on the other hand is a gift. In the work of art the spirit incarnates itself so completely that it is impossible to abstract a meaning without doing violence to the integrity of the work of art. I take it that this claim is undeniable. To make art just another way of saying what can also be said differently and more clearly is to make art superfluous.

2. The second claim, which ties art to truth, is more controversial. Here we return to the rivalry of the aesthetic and the ontological approaches. I have spent enough time on the aesthetic approach already. Let me recall here just a few of its main features. The work of art is taken as an occasion to elicit a pleasurable state of mind. It is judged beautiful, sublime, or interesting with respect to the occasioned state of mind, which is what is really enjoyed. There is a sense in which the aesthetic approach is by its very nature self-centered and narcissistic.

I have suggested that the shift from an ontological to an aesthetic conception of art is associated with the emergence of the modern world. In this respect Hegel may on

first consideration seem a conservative, less in tune with the modern world and its art than Kant. And yet, I think it is Hegel rather than Kant, who helps us to understand the shape of the modern world and the place of the aesthetic approach to art within that world. What Hegel lets us understand is precisely why it is that the ontological view of art should no longer have the importance in the modern world that it once possessed. This is not to say that there are not many who continue to be attached to the ontological view. Many still expect truth from art, expect to be edified by it. Hegel helps us to understand why such attempts should so often have yielded Kitsch.

3. The central proposition is the third. Truth demands transparency. Only what can be comprehended is real. At the center of our modern sense of reality is our faith in our ability to grasp and manipulate all that is. Hegel expressed this faith forcefully in his *Heidelberg Inaugural Address*:

Man, since he is spirit, may and should consider himself worthy even of the highest; he cannot think the greatness and power of his spirit great enough; and with this faith nothing will be so stubborn and hard as not to open itself to him. The essence of the universe, hidden and closed at first, has no power which could offer resistance to the courage of knowledge; it must open itself to him and lay its riches and depths before his eyes and open them to his enjoyment.<sup>107</sup>

In order to gain this godlike power, we must raise ourselves above our particular being as these individuals we just happen to be:

In all things other than thought the spirit does not come to this but in this particular manner, even if I have consciousness of this, my sentiment. Willing, one has determinate purposes, a determinate interest. I am indeed free in that this interest is mine, but these purposes always contain something other, or something which for me is another, as passions, inclination, etc. Only in thought has all strangeness become transparent; has disappeared; here the spirit is free in an absolute manner. With this the interest of the idea, and at the same time of philosophy is expressed.<sup>108</sup>

The similarity between Hegel's analysis and the Cartesian program is evident. In the final pages of his *Discourse on Method* Descartes thus claims that his principles had opened up the possibility of finding a

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<sup>107</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 17-19, vol. 17, p. 22.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens, and all other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.<sup>109</sup>

Modern science triumphs in technology.

Hegel calls art an expression of our deepest interests. What are these interests? Like Plato he ties them to our desire to be at one with ourselves:

All that happens in heaven and earth, eternally happens — the life of God and all that happens in time, only strives for this: that the spirit know itself, make itself into an object for itself, find itself, become for itself, and join itself to itself.<sup>110</sup>

The life of the individual is part of this drama of the spirit's homecoming, which is history. Crucial for our own place in that drama is that ours is an age of **reflection** and by the same token an age of **objectivity**. Reflection lets me recognize the impossibility of stopping at any finite point of view. All merely perspectival, merely relative modes of knowing demand to be transcended. To all finite points of view I have to oppose the standpoint of the absolute. This standpoint opens up a new understanding of reality and of truth. Given this absolute standpoint the locus of truth can alone be thought. This lets Hegel say that thought and reflection have overtaken the fine arts.

In this connection Hegel points to the need for science felt in this age. In the sphere of art this means that this is first of all the age of **reflection about art**, the age of aesthetics, criticism, the history of art. Note how fluid the boundary between artist and critic has become. That modern artists so often should have turned into conceptual artists is symptomatic.

It is also this discovery of himself as free spirit that prevents the human individual from resting content with any merely finite content. Modern man has a broken or indifferent relationship to reality, as Hegel says of the romantics. External objects are understood in all their contingency. At the same time we meet with creations of a liberated imagination, a free subjectivity.

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<sup>109</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Dover, 1955), vol. I, p. 119.

<sup>110</sup> Hegel, Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 17, p. 52., vol. 17, p. 52.

Today the artist is no longer bound to a specific content and a manner of representation appropriate only to this subject matter — art has thereby become a free instrument, which, his own subjective skill permitting, the artist can use equally well on any content, whatever it may be.<sup>111</sup>

A new freedom that draws on all that history and nature have to offer goes along with a new rootlessness. More and more art turns into harmless, but also quite insignificant play. Measured by humanity's true interests, art comes to seem increasingly besides the point, superfluous, at best a pleasant diversion.

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<sup>111</sup> Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 13, p. 226.

## 19. Hegel's Determination of the Essence of Art

### 1

Let me begin this lecture by reading you Hegel's statement of three commonly held determinations of the work of art.

- (1) A work of art is no product of Nature. It is brought into being through the agency of man.
- (2) It is created essentially *for* man; and, what is more, it is to a greater or lesser extent delivered from a sensuous medium, and addressed to his *senses*.
- (3) It contains an end bound up with it. (395)

Let us consider the first determination. I have made quite a bit of this, especially in my discussion of Kant. As a creation of man the work of art cannot be simply interpreted as the product of a spontaneous doing. Deliberate doing enters into the creation of a work of art. It is consciously produced. But if it is consciously produced, it must also be possible to say something about the intention of the artist. Something about the work of art must be communicable.

With regard to the first point, that a work of art is a product of human activity, an inference has been drawn from this (a) that such an activity, being the conscious production of an external object, can also be *known* and *divulged*, and learned and reproduced by others. For that which one is able to effect, another — such is the notion — is able to effect or imitate, when he has once simply mastered the way of doing it. In short we have merely to assume an acquaintance with the rules of art-production universally shared, and anybody may then, if he cares to do so, give effect to executive ability of the same type and produce works of art. (395/ 396)

So understood, art would be essentially reproducible. But as Hegel points out, and on this point he and Kant are in full agreement, artistic production cannot be reduced to mechanical activity. He calls it an activity of the soul.

Artistic production is not a formal activity in accordance with a series of definitions; it is as an activity of soul, constrained to work out of its own wealth, and to bring before the mind's eye a wholly other and far richer content, and a more embracing and unique creation than ever can thus be described. (396)

This is essentially the same point we discussed before in terms of talent and genius. Man cannot endow himself with these simply with diligent work. Art is therefore in an important sense a gift.

But just like Kant, Hegel does not want to give too much weight to this point. It is equally indispensable that artistic talent be thoughtfully cultivated. There is a great deal about art that can and should be learned.

First there is the mechanical part of art—I personally learned how much can be taught here in a free hand drawing class taught by Josef Albers. We can call this the craft aspect of art. Very obvious in architecture or sculpture, it is less perhaps evident in poetry.

Secondly it requires the ability to portray *depth of soul and mind*. According to Hegel, music requires this to a far lesser degree than poetry:

For this very reason musical talent declares itself as a rule in very early youth, when the head is still empty and the emotions have barely had a flutter; it has, in fact, attained real distinction at a time in the artist's life when both intelligence and life are practically without experience. (398)

Art is a presentation of our humanity. It presupposes reflective power.

In this context Hegel disputes Kant claim that the work of art should, although the product of artifice, appear as if it were a product of nature.

The work of art is of higher rank than any product of Nature whatever, which has not submitted to this passage through the mind. (399)

Art brings about the **incarnation of the spirit in the sensible**. As artist the human makes what is sensible his own. Art can therefore be understood as a **humanization of the sensible**. The human being reads himself into things. Nature is subjected to a human measure. In this connection we may want to consider in more detail the presupposed humanism.

What is the need that such humanization satisfies? Why is the human being driven to humanize the world around him?

Hegel suggests that human beings are possessed of a desire to overcome the otherness of nature, to overcome that gap that separates him from the world that surrounds him.

The universal and absolute want from which art on its side of essential form arises originates in the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, in other words that he renders explicit to himself, and from his own substance, what he is and all in fact that exists. The objects of Nature exist exclusively in immediacy and once for all. Man, on the contrary, as mind reduplicates himself. He is, to start with, an object of nature as other objects; but

in addition to this, and no less truly, he exists for himself; he observes himself, makes himself present to his imagination and thought, and only in virtue of this active power of self-realization is he actually mind or spirit. (440)

But if the point of art is to overcome the otherness of nature, what is the point of naturalism in art. The art historian Wilhelm Worringer advanced the thesis that art is **abstract** in the beginning. It is only as human beings begin to feel at home in the world because they have appropriated it, secured their place in it, do we find naturalistic art. The return to abstraction by modern art is therefore interpreted by Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy* as a sign of the renewed insecurity of modern man, where the source of this insecurity is now reflection. One problem this theory faces is cave art which is often astonishingly naturalistic. In this connection I recommend to you Werner Herzog's astonishing film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams," a documentary, the prolific German director showing 30,000 year old paintings in a French cave. How do they fit into Worringer's account. Worringer was already aware of this possible objection, but quite rightly he points out that we have enormous difficulty assigning to these representations, mostly of animals, a place in a coherent history of art. Just think of the thousands of years that the history of art has to leap over.

## 2

Hegel then passes on to the second part of his threefold definition. The work of art is produced for the sense-apprehension of man. This, he suggests, has been responsible for the view that the function of art is to arouse feelings, pleasant feelings, i.e. for what I have called the **aesthetic conception** of art. Hegel mentions Moses Mendelssohn, once a very popular philosopher, as a representative of this view. The difficulty with this approach, according to Hegel, is that it does not tell us very much and tends to lose itself in abstractions.

For this reason an inquiry over the nature of the emotions which art ought or ought not to arouse, comes simply to a standstill in the undefined; it is an investigation which deliberately abstracts from genuine content and its concrete substance and notion. Reflection upon feeling is satisfied with the observation of the personal emotional state and its singularity, instead of penetrating and sounding the matter for study, in other words the work of art, and in doing so bidding good-bye to the wholly subjective state and its conditions. (402)

The matter is not helped much when feeling is refined and understood specifically as aesthetic feeling. Once again Hegel insists that there is a deeper significance to art to which only an ontological approach can do justice. Implicit in Hegel's understanding of art is a rejection of any merely formal approach to art. The history of art cannot be reduced to the history of forms. Rather the history of art demands to be placed in the context of the history of ideas and indeed of history in general. With this insistence Hegel becomes the precursor of Max Dvorak, who established art history in this manner, insisting that the history of art is part of the history of spirit. The artwork cannot be isolated from its spiritual, and that means also its historical context. Consider in this connection the case of **forgeries**.

## 3

But even such a historical approach is not sufficient. It tends to lead us away from the particular work of art, a unique sensuous presence, but one that is addressed to mind.

How is the mind related to the sensuous? Hegel here distinguishes three steps:

1. On the lowest level we have **sensation**. In sensation things are given. But usually objects are not simply given. They are given as objects of our interests, of our desire. We want to appropriate the other. Desiring to appropriate we are not free to let things be. Desire wants to annihilate things in their self-subsistency.

2. A second way in which we relate to things is the theoretical attitude. Theoretical contemplation aims at understanding rather than appropriation. It is interested not in the particular in its particularity but in the universal.

3. Our relationship to works of art resembles both and is yet different from both.

The interest of art, therefore, is distinguishable from the practical interest of desire in virtue of the fact that it suffers its object to be in its free independence, whereas desire applies it, even to the point of destruction, to its own uses. The contemplation of art, on the other hand, differs from that of a scientific intelligence in an analogous way in virtue of the fact that it cherishes an interest for the object in its isolated existence, and is not concerned to transform the same into terms of universal thought and notion. (408)

The artwork's aim



is the sensuous presence, which albeit suffered to persist in its sensuousness, is equally entitled to be delivered from the framework of its purely material substance.

Consequently, as compared with the immediately envisaged and incorporated object of Nature, the sensuous presence in the art work is transmuted to mere semblance or show, and the work of art occupies a midway ground, with the directly perceived objective world on one side and the ideality of pure thought on the other. (408-409)

We encounter here the traditional theme, familiar from both Baumgarten and Kant, that the artwork mediates between the sensuous and the spiritual. We could go back to Plato who understands sensible beauty as effecting just such a mediation. Hegel follows Kant, when he understands the creative imagination of the artist as the faculty which achieves this unification.

#### 4

The third determination is that of the end of art. We have already anticipated Hegel's answer to this question when we tied the creation of art to the effort of human beings to recover themselves in an initially alien other.

Hegel begins by looking at some familiar answers to the question. First he considers a view that sees the end of art as **imitation**. He asks quite rightly what the point would be of such an imitation of the object. Would art not necessarily fall infinitely short of what it attempted to imitate, lacking the soul of what it was trying to capture? We are reminded of Plato's criticism of mimetic art. Isn't imitation a pointless skill? Kant gives the example of the imitation of the call of a nightingale, which pleases us much less than the song of the real bird would. Furthermore, if imitation were the main point, would we not have lost sight of beauty? And yet there is a point to theories that emphasize representation. Representation renders visible. It "frames" the represented. In my *The Ethical Function of Architecture* I gave thus a great deal of space to **representation** and **re-presentation**.

But if faithfulness of the copy were our only criterion, what is being copied would not matter. Hegel is right to insist that content is more important than that.

But what is the proper content of art? The common opinion would have it that everything that we can perceive or conceive is a proper object for art. Art here become a way of broadening us, of liberating us from the narrow circle of we have seen and felt.

Already in Aristotle's *Poetics* we encountered the liberating power of the imagination, which opens up realms beyond the real.

But this is still too empty a determination. **Everything goes**, given this determination. For example, I remember some play that had left me utterly bored. I was then told by a colleague that I had missed the point of the play, which was precisely to leave the audience bored. That sort of answer makes criticism rather difficult. Does it have any legitimacy?

Hegel goes on to refine his view by suggesting that art establishes a distance between us and our emotions, objectifies our emotions, and thereby lets us gain hold of them and thus of ourselves. In this connection he speaks of the old custom of wailing women, who were appointed to publicly express the grief at the loss of a husband or wife. Objectifying the grief it communicates it, universalizes it.

Hegel ties this point to Aristotle's emphasis on catharsis or purification. It lifts us from the particular to the universal and essential. In this sense art is **instructive**. It reveals to us the essence of human being.

And yet, when we thus emphasize the moment of instruction, we simply disregard what is also essential to art, that it **delight** us. And thereby we tend to reduce art to a mere means to an end. Art must be more than mere entertainment, but it also must be more than merely a means of instruction. What is then the end of art? Hegel ties this end to truth. Art is placed in the service of truth. I shall return to this point in my next lecture.

## 20. Towards a Philosophy of the History of Art

### 1

Last time I pointed out that the history of art, according to Hegel, has to be placed within the history of ideas and, more broadly, of history. History, as Hegel understands it, is not just a sequence of events, without rhyme or reason. It must rather be understood as having a direction, as progressing, tending towards an end. Hegel's understanding of history is **eschatological**. The eschaton or end is provided by Hegel's understanding of history as the progress of the spirit's becoming truly itself. Let me read you once more the passage from the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that I quoted to you earlier.

All that happens in heaven and on earth — eternally happens — the life of God and all that is done in time, only strives for this: that the spirit know itself, make itself into an object for itself, find itself, become for itself, and join itself to itself.

The life of the individual is part of this drama of the spirit's homecoming. It is as part of this drama that art and its history have to be understood.

Last time I read you a passage in which Hegel sums up his understanding of art part of our attempt to appropriate an initially alien other. Let me reread the relevant lines: as opposed to the objects of nature, man as mind

... *reduplicates* himself. He is, to start with, an object of Nature as other objects; but in addition to this, and no less truly, he exists *for himself*; he observes himself, makes himself present to his imagination and thought, and only in virtue of this active power or self-realization is he actually mind or spirit. (400)

This reduplication of mind aims as the appropriation of the other until it loses its otherness and becomes completely spiritualized. Art is one form that this attempt at appropriation takes. Its goal is finally the overcoming of otherness, the identity of subject or object, the absolute idea, in which spirit becomes objective and transparent to itself.

The driving power of this development is the human power of self-recognition and self-realization.

First, we imagine the natural life on Earth in its finitude as standing on one side; but then secondly, the human consciousness accepts God for its object, in which the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity falls away; then, finally, we advance from God as such to the devotion of the *community*, that is to God as he is alive and present in the

subjective consciousness. These three fundamental modifications present themselves in the world of art in independent evolution. (438)

To understand history as the progress of human self-realization is to understand it also as the **progress of freedom**. Increasingly human beings gain mastery of nature and of themselves.

This understanding of history as the progress of freedom lets Hegel divide history into three great periods: at first only one person is free. Hegel associates this stage with the God-kings of the oriental world. In the Greek and Roman world some are free. Christianity, finally, is said by Hegel to recognize the essential equality of all human beings, to liberate all human beings, leading each individual to recognize himself as possessed of an infinite freedom.

This understanding of history implies also that an understanding of God as an alien other, dwelling without or beyond man, dictating, rather like an oriental despot, his law to human beings, is finally incompatible with Christianity. The essence of Christianity is realized only when the divinity is born within each individual, when Christ ceases to be external. The death of God is demanded by Christianity itself. At this point history fulfills itself. It is in the context of this history that Hegel places and interprets the history of art.

## 2

Earlier we had wondered how art could be treated scientifically.

Inasmuch, however, as we have referred to art as issuing from the absolute Idea itself, and, indeed, have assigned as its end the sensuous presentation of the Absolute itself, it will be incumbent on us to conduct this survey of the entire field in such a way, as at least to disclose generally, how the particular parts originate in the notional concept of the beauty of art. (425)

The goal of art, its ultimate center, is the absolute. But then art, by its very nature, must finally be inadequate to that content. And yet this inadequacy becomes apparent only at a certain moment in the evolution of mankind.

The higher truth consequently is spiritual content which has received the shape adequate to the conception of its essence; and this is which supplies the principle for the division of art. For before the mind can attain to the true notion of its absolute essence, it is constrained to traverse a series of stages rooted in this very notional concept; and to this

course of stages which it unfolds to itself, corresponds a coalescent series, immediately related therewith, of the plastic types of art, under the configuration whereof mind as art-spirit presents to itself the consciousness of itself. (427)

Art, Hegel tells us, is “not the highest form of grasping the spiritually concrete” (427).

Thought is a higher mode of presentment than that of the sensuous concrete. Though abstract in a relative sense; yet it must not be one-sided, but concrete thinking, in order to be true and rational. The extent to which a definite content possesses for its appropriate form sensuous artistic representation, or essentially requires, in virtue of its nature, a higher and more spiritual embodiment is a question of difference exemplified at once if we compare the Greek gods with the God as conceived under Christian ideas. The Greek god is not abstract, but individual, and so is in close association with the natural human form. The Christian God is also, no doubt, a concrete personality, but under the mode of pure spiritual actuality, who is cognized as Spirit and in Spirit. His medium of determinate existence is therefore essentially knowledge of the mind and not external natural shape, by means of which His representation can only be imperfect, and not in the entire depths of his Idea or notional concept. (427)

The content of art is thus not simply the absolute, but the idea as grasped in a particular concrete form. And if that form is inadequate, art will share in that inadequacy.

*Defectiveness of form* arises from *defectiveness of content*. The Chinese, Hindoos, and Egyptians, for example, in their artistic images, sculptured deities and idols, never passed beyond a formless condition, or a definition of shape that was vicious and false, and were unable to master true beauty. And this was so for the reason that their mythological conceptions, the content and thought of their works of art, were still essentially indeterminate, or only determinate in a false sense, did not, in fact, attain to a content which was absolute in itself. (429)

The adequacy of form to content is therefore insufficient to judge the quality of a work of art. We can rank the arts according to the profundity of the ideas expressed.

### 3

In the history of art Hegel accordingly distinguishes three periods, corresponding to the division already made. Although supported by an appeal to history, the division is not based on such an appeal, but has its foundation in Hegel's conceptual reconstruction of history. In the first stage the idea is grasped only in obscure, indefinite form.

1. First, the origin of artistic creation proceeds from the Idea, when, being itself still involved in defective definition and obscurity, or in vicious and untrue determinacy,

it becomes embodied in the shapes of art. As indeterminate it does not as yet possess in itself that individuality that the Ideal demands. Its abstract character and oneness leave its objective presentment still defective and contingent. Consequently, this first type of art is rather a mere search after plastic configuration than a power of genuine representation. (431)

The art form corresponding to this is the **symbolic**.

We may in general describe this form as the symbolic type of art. The abstract Idea possesses in it its external shape outside itself in the purely material substance of Nature, from which the shaping process proceeds, and to which in its expression it is entirely yoked. Natural objects are thus in the first instance left just as they are, while, at the same time the substantive Idea is imposed on them as their significance, so that their function is henceforth to express the same, and they claim to be interpreted, as though the Idea itself was present in them. (431)

This inadequacy of the artwork to what it symbolizes lets Hegel speak of the sublimity of this sort of art:

Hence, on account of the incompatibility of the two sides of ideality and objective form to one another, the relation of the Idea to the other becomes a negative one. The former, being in its nature ideal, is unsatisfied with such an embodiment, and posits itself as its inward or ideally universal substance under a relation of sublimity over and above all this inadequate superfluity of natural form. (432)

The forms provided by art are here experienced as inadequate to what it is trying to express. There is **tension between form and content**. But harmony between form and content has long been thought a mark of the beautiful. Symbolic art must lack beauty in that sense. We call it bizarre, grotesque, deficient in taste, where Hegel is thinking especially of Indian art, e.g. of deities with many hands. But just this lack of beauty invites us to ascend to the spiritual content, which resists both comprehension and, artistic expression.

Hegel's account has to identify oriental art with this first stage, an identification which no doubt does violence to the heterogeneity of primitive and non-western art. But perhaps we should think of symbolic art as a transcultural moment in art.

2. The second stage, the **classical**, is said to solve these difficulties.

In the second type of art, which we propose to call "Classical," the twofold defect of symbolic art is annulled. Now the symbolic configuration is imperfect, because, first, the Idea here only enters into consciousness in abstract determinacy or indeterminateness: and, secondly, by reason of the fact that the coalescence of import

with embodiment can only throughout remain defective, and in its turn also wholly abstract. The classical art-type solves both of these difficulties. It is in fact, the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape which, according to the notional concept, is uniquely appropriate to the Idea itself. The Idea is consequently able to unite in free and completely consonant accord with it. For this reason the classical type of art is the first to present us with the vision and creation of the complete ideal, and to establish the same as realized fact. (432)

Like Kant, Hegel analyzes Greek art as the art of the ideal. If Hegel is right, the humanization of art is necessary. The human being is the only visible phenomenon adequate to Spirit.

But art, in so far as its function is to bring to vision the spiritual in sensuous guise, must advance to such anthropomorphism, inasmuch as Spirit is only adequately presented to perception in its bodily presence. The transmigration of souls is in this respect an abstract conception, and physiology ought to make it one of its fundamental principles, that life has necessarily, in the course of its evolution, to proceed to the human form, for the reason that it is alone the visible phenomenon adequate to the expression of intelligence. (433)

But the synthesis achieved by classical art proves to be an unstable one. This lack of stability has its foundation in the fact that the spirit's essential transcendence over the sensible has not yet been grasped profoundly enough. Such a more profound grasp, Hegel tells us, is introduced only by Christianity. Corresponding to it we have the third type of art.

3. **Romantic** art, accordingly, is art that struggles against its own art character, art that would leave art behind and in this respect has a certain similarity with symbolic art. Both invite to be discussed in terms of sublimity rather than beauty.

As already stated, the spiritual content has here withdrawn from the external world and its immediate unity into its own world. The sensuous externality of form is consequently accepted and represented, as in the symbolic type, as unessential and transient; furthermore the subjective finite spirit and volition is treated in a similar way; a treatment which even includes the idiosyncracies or caprice of individuals, character, action, or the particular features of incident and plot. The aspect of external existence is committed to contingency and handed over to the adventurous action of imagination, whose caprice is just as able to reflect the facts given as they are, as it can change the shapes of the external world into a medley of its own invention and distort them to mere

caricature. For this external element has no longer its notion and significance in its own essential province, as in classical art. (436)

Romantic art inevitably strains against its art character. It will be **dialectic** in a way in which classical art is not. In this respect it resembles symbolic art.

Hence it comes about that the characteristics of symbolic art, its indifference, incompatibility and severance of Idea from configurative expression, are here reproduced once more, if with essential difference. And this difference consists in the fact that in romantic art the Idea, whose defectiveness, in the case of the symbol, brought with it the defect of external form, has to display itself as Spirit and in the medium of soul-life as essentially self-complete. And it is to complete fundamentally this higher perfection that it withdraws itself from the external element. It can, in short, seek and consummate its true reality and manifestation nowhere but in its own domain. (436)

Romantic art is always on the verge of leaving art behind altogether. Characteristic is the turn towards reflection. The work of art becomes an occasion for thought. Romantic art thus lead easily to **concept art**. Hegel of course is not thinking of that. He is thinking of the **ironic, negative** moment of romantic art. Once again the traditional harmony of thought and content is sacrificed to expressive values.

#### 4

Hegel relates his division of the arts to this account of the history of art. In **architecture** he finds an obvious expression of the **symbolic**.

Architecture is in fact the first pioneer on the highway toward the adequate realization of the Godhead. In this service it is put to severe labour with objective nature, that it may disengage it by its effort from the confused growth of finitude and the distortion of contingency. By this means it levels a space for the God, informs His external environment, and builds Him his temple, as a fit place for the concentration of Spirit, and its direction to the absolute objects of intelligent life. It raises an enclosure for the congregation of those assembled, as a defense against the threatening of the tempest, against rain, the hurricane, and savage animals. It in short reveals the will thus to assemble, and although under an external relation, yet in agreement with the principles of art. (439)

You should keep this passage in mind when you come to Heidegger's discussion of the Greek temple in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. The same goes for the following passage:



... the external and inorganic world is purified by architecture, it is coordinated under symmetrical laws, and made cognate with mind, and as a result the temple of God, the house of his community, stands before us. Into this temple, in the second place, the God himself enters in the lightning-flash of individuality which smites its way into the inert mass, permeating the same with its presence. In other words, the infinite and no longer purely symmetrical form belonging to intelligence brings as it were to a focus and informs the shape in which it was most at home. This is the task of sculpture. In so far as it is the inward life of Spirit, to which the art of architecture can merely point the way to, makes its dwelling within the sensuous shape and its external material, and to the extent that these two sides come into plastic communion with one another in such a manner that neither is predominant, sculpture receives as its fundamental type the classical art-form. (439)

What art forms do the greatest justice to the romantic spirit? Hegel mentions painting, music, and poetry. In romantic art we have an increasing move away from the sensuousness of the medium. In this connection Hegel emphasizes the two-dimensional flatness of painting:

The visibility and the making apparent, which belong to painting, possess differences of quality under a more ideal mode — that is, in the specific varieties of color — which liberates art from the objective totality of spatial condition, by being limited to a plane surface.

On the other hand, the content also attains the widest compass of particularity. Whatever can find a place in the human heart, as emotion, idea, and purpose, whatever it is capable of actually shaping — all such diversity may form part of the varied presentation of painting. (442)

**Music** still more decisively leaves matter behind.

Such an inchoate ideality of matter, which no longer appears under the form of space, but as temporal ideality, is sound or tone. We have here the sensuous set down as negated, and its abstract visibility converted into audibility. (443)

The development culminates in **poetry**, which according to Hegel is the properly romantic art form. Poetry is at the same time said to be the soul of all the arts, *the common thread through them all*.

Poetry is, in short, the universal art of the mind, which has become essentially free, and which is not fettered in its realization to an externally sensuous material, but which is creatively active in the space and time belonging to the inner world of ideas and emotion. Yet it is precisely in this its highest phase, that art terminates, by transcending itself; it is

just here that it deserts the medium of a harmonious presentation of mind in sensuous shape and passes from the poetry of the imaginative idea in to the prose of thought. (444)

Hegel warns us not to take such classifications too seriously. There is of course romantic sculpture and architecture; and poetry arches over all these divisions. And yet there is, on his view, a natural affinity between the various periods of history and specific media. Hegel thus construes both the history of art and the division of the arts following the guideline provided by his ontological conception of art as the progressive epiphany of the absolute in a particular sensible shape.

5

How adequate is this construction? Does art progress, as Hegel would have it? Is there a logic to the history of art? For example, if we trace the development from medieval to renaissance art, is that development reversible? If not, why not?

I would agree with Hegel that it is not and that this has something to do with the increase in self-consciousness. That is to say, I find it difficult not to agree with Hegel when he insists that the history of art be interpreted with reference to the increasing freedom and spiritualization of the human being. Hegel thus helps to illuminate the development leading up to modern art. Can all history be interpreted in this way? Does all art fit into Hegel's scheme? I have already suggested that the weakest part of Hegel's construction of the history of art is the account he gives of non-western art. Is there an alternative construction to Hegel's? As we shall see, one such alternative is suggested by Heidegger.

## 21. Tales of the End of Art

### 1

As we have seen, there is a sense, Hegel suggests, in which art in its highest sense may be said to belong into a museum. That is to say, if Hegel is right, the very shape of modernity, as described by Hegel, leaves no place for art in its highest sense. The spiritual situation of the age could then be said to demand the death of art.

Hegel links this death to the authority of reason, which becomes the arbiter of what deserves to be called real or good. On this point Hegel is close to Nietzsche, who in *The Birth of Tragedy* blames the death of tragedy, and tragedy figures here as the paradigm of art in its highest sense, on the Socratic spirit, which is characterized by its confident trust in reason to guide us to the good life. With this art must lose what Hegel calls its highest function. To be sure, art may continue to serve reason, but such service is not essential to the work of reason.

There is to be sure an all important difference. Unlike Nietzsche, Hegel does not mourn the death of art in its highest sense, but would have us understand it as the inevitable consequence of humanity's coming of age.

What matters here isn't Hegel. We would have little reason to be interested in Hegel, had Hegel not given us a profound analysis of certain aspects of our modern world, aspects that do indeed imply the death of art.

### 2

Hegel was neither the first nor the last to speak of the end of art. In our own day Arthur Danto has made a bit of a splash with talk of the end or the death of art. Danto speaks of a "certain gloom" that "had settled upon the art world itself at the time [1984] — it has not altogether dissipated today — so that artists and critics alike expressed themselves with varying degrees of pessimism as to whether art had a future at all."<sup>112</sup> Danto's reflections were prompted in part by the way art itself had come to pose the question its own nature. This "philosophization" of art meant the end of a history, he

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<sup>112</sup> Arthur Danto, "Narratives of the End of Art," *Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Noonday, 1991), p. 331.

suggested.<sup>113</sup> For Danto, too, this end of art does not mean that art, perhaps even great art, is no longer made. What it means is that a history that allowed one to speak of progress in art had come to an end. I shall return to Danto later in this lecture. First I want to pursue Danto's suggestion that Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Vasari were thinkers who long before Hegel had already proclaimed that art had come to an end. Let me take a brief look at each.

## 3

Consider once more what Aristotle had to say about tragedy.

Arising from an improvisatory beginning ... tragedy grew little by little, so the poets developed whatever new part of it had appeared; and passing through many changes, tragedy came to a halt, since it had attained its own nature (*Poetics*, 1449a10-15).

Aristotle's brief remark deserves careful attention. We should note that Aristotle is not speaking here of art as such, not even of poetry, but of a particular poetic genre. To say that tragedy came to a halt is to say that this genre finally found its proper form. Once it had done so there could be no further progress on that front. This genre was now in hand. Aristotle suggests that a similar story can be told about comedy, although, since in the beginning "it was not as yet taken up in a serious way," "its early stages passed unnoticed" and the authors of the changes in its form have remained unknown.<sup>114</sup> Aristotle then is speaking here of the evolution of two literary genres. Both are assumed to have a nature, which once attained should be accepted. All attempts to change that form would by their very nature do violence to what the genre demands. From then on a poet could either simply presuppose that form and attempt to do justice to it as best as he was able to or he could turn to some new or less developed genre. Aristotle does not claim here that tragedy's attainment of its nature must be understood as in any way disabling. Might it not even allow a poet to display his creativity, as, for example the sonnet form does, without having to work on that form? Aristotle does not say here that when tragedy attained its nature, it died. Should we not rather say that it had finally

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>114</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a37-1449b1. Trans. I. Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. The Revised Oxford Translation, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 2316-2340.

come of age? What had come to an end was the evolution of the form of tragedy. But to contribute to the evolution of a genre is one thing, to create a successful work of art quite another.

Perhaps we can liken working in a given genre to playing a game such as chess. That game, too, has a long history. But by now it has arrived at a form that is found so satisfactory that chess players tend to accept the rules of the game as a given. That of course does not mean that playing chess has come to an end. Quite the opposite: the very rigidity of the rules provides a spur that raises the players' imagination and creativity to greater heights.

And why not look at the rules provided by artistic genres in a similar way? This would invite a distinction between creative artists, on the one hand, and innovators that transform some genre, on the other. Often a great artist will be both. Think of Picasso! Or Pollock! But does a great artist have to be both? To answer that question in the affirmative is to imply that once some genre has attained its own nature, it no longer leaves room for great art, that great art can now only come into being by challenging or turning its back on that genre. I have no reason to think that this was Aristotle's position.

Does Aristotle's talk of tragedy attaining its nature and in this sense coming to an end provide us with a good analogy to help us understand that end of art that Danto dates to the 1960's? If so, it would suggest that we look at art, here understood first of all as painting, as a genre comparable to tragedy, which in the work of painters such as Pollock, Rothko, De Kooning, Reinhardt, Newman, and Stella could be said to have finally attained its nature. Clement Greenberg might be thought to tell some such story. A certain kind of painting did indeed attain some sort of end, an end bound up with a certain narrative concerning the essence of art. Given the terms of that narrative there could be no further progress and this art could be said to have ended in the sixties. But did not artists like Duchamp and Warhol demonstrate that the essence of art could not be limited in that way? Did this particular end of art not only mean that artists had finally rid themselves of a straight-jacket?<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> For a fuller discussion see the notes for my "The End and Origin of Art," <http://karstenharries.commons.yale.edu/>

## 4

Aristophanes, too, we have encountered before. In the *Frogs*, as Danto puts it, he complained that Athens “no longer had a tragic poet, and imagined a god taking on the mission of dragging one back from the underworld to save the staggering state.”<sup>116</sup>

Search as you will, you’ll find no poet now  
With grit in him, to wake a word of power.

What Danto thinks is at stake here becomes clear in a review of Anselm Kiefer:

At just that fateful moment, when the Spartans were drawn up outside its walls and the great spring offensive was being drafted, when Athens had been through pestilence, defection, breakdown, humiliation and defeat, leave it to the muddled reactionary mind of Aristophanes to diagnose the difficulties as due to the lack of great art! The decline of Greek art, in a late postmortem by Nietzsche, was attributed to the triumph of reason over myth. True to form, the artist whom Aristophanes has his comic hero in *The Frogs* drag back from the netherworld embodies the belief that myth must trump reason if art is to discharge its redemptive function. Language had better be portentous, exalted, obscure and grand if the Athenian populace is to be led by art into a new moral era.

The Aristophanic charge to art is to produce work that is dense, dark, prophetic, heroic, mythic, runic, arcane, dangerous, reassuring, accusatory, reinforcing, grandiloquent, too compelling for mere reason to deal with, fraught, fearful, bearing signs that the artist is in touch with powers that will make us whole, and is spiritual, oceanic, urgent, romantic and vast. Since Wagner no one has sought more scrupulously to comply with this imperative than Anselm Kiefer, whose sludged and operatic fabrications have moved to tears viewers who felt they saw in them a remorseful Teutonic conscience.<sup>117</sup>

Danto has little patience with those who want to diagnose the difficulties of our culture as having anything to do with a lack of great art. That would attribute to art a power that does not and should not belong to it. The difficulties of our culture, and there are many, demand a more reasoned response. Danto sides with Hegel. He does not look to art for redemption. For diversion perhaps, but not for moral leadership, and certainly not, if such leadership is thought to demand that myth trump reason.

Although Aristophanes is here the target, he also stands for the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The young Nietzsche thought that his call for a rebirth of tragedy had already been answered by Wagner, an artist Danto most definitely does not like, just as

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<sup>116</sup> Danto, *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 309.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

he does not like Kiefer, whom he explicitly likens to Wagner. Danto recognizes that Aristophanes' or Nietzsche's mourning of the death of tragedy presuppose a deep suspicion of enlightenment, of a reason that, Nietzsche charges, leaves no room for tragedy, indeed leaves no room for an art that would be more than entertainment; or perhaps an illustration of or propaganda for pre-given ideas. So understood, as I pointed out, Nietzsche's charge is not all that different from Hegel's understanding of the death of art in its highest sense. Hegel, too, would have us understand this death as inseparably bound up with enlightenment. But as heir of the Enlightenment, he accepts this death as part of humanity's coming of age. To want to undo it would be to want to return to some less advanced stage of spiritual development. Hegel would have understood *The Birth of Tragedy* and its call for a rebirth of tragedy in the modern period as yet another romantic attempt to turn back the clock. No more than Danto, would he have had much patience with Nietzsche's lament that by allowing reason to rule our lives we condemn ourselves to an impoverished, ghostly existence.

## 5

Vasari, too, had a specific understanding of the task of art. Art here was tied to the project of using perspective to create ever more convincing illusions of reality. That project Vasari thought had come to an end in his day. Vasari was thinking of the masters of the Renaissance, Raphael, Leonardo, and especially of Michelangelo. A question here is: should this particular project be taken so seriously that it is taken to circumscribe the very essence of art? Did Vasari have such a reductive understanding of art?

## 6

As already suggested, modern art, according to Danto is governed by another master narrative: key here is said to be the art's concern with the essence of art: modernist art, according to Danto, is marked by "an effort at self-definition which consist in saying Art is X and nothing else."<sup>118</sup> With his Brillo boxes Warhol brought this quest to an end. The question: why is Warhol's Brillo-box art while that in the supermarket is not could no longer be answered by art; it required philosophy. Once again thought has overtaken art.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

But talk of an end of art now has a different meaning, appears in a different key: what has ended here is precisely not what Hegel understood as art in its highest sense, but the project of art's self-definition where that process is also understood as a process of purification whereby art frees itself from everything that does to belong to its essence. And once again we should ask ourselves why that project hold have been taken up with such seriousness.

The narrative that supports Danto's own account of the history and end of art includes and extends the narrative he ascribes to Vasari.

I have found it valuable, if a bit too neat and simple, to see the history of Western art as falling into three main periods, circa 1300, circa 1600, and circa 1900. I cannot speculate over what external event it was that gives rise to Giotto and the internal history of visual representation which generates the progress Vasari brought to general consciousness. I think we know what in general stimulated the shift to multidimensional illusionism around 1600 — namely, the conscious decision by the Church to enlist art in the service of faith by operating at the level of visual rhetoric. The shift to Modernism is more difficult to identify. Though two thoughts have occurred to me. One was that the advent of motion picture technology meant that the capacity for illusion had passed entirely outside the hands of painters, forcing them either to rethink the nature of painting or simply to become outmoded. The Vasarian history continues into the moving picture, the entire narrative construed as the technical conquest of appearances, while painting moves along another, abruptly concerned as it is with what is the essence of painting. The other thought has to do with the sudden perception in the late nineteenth century of the artistic merit of primitive art, and that had to have been connected with the fading of a belief that Western civilization, emblemized by Western art, defined the apex of human attainment — defined as a narrative that was to chart the course for aspiring cultures. Here I give particular credit to Paul Gauguin, and my inclination is to believe that all the strategies of Modernism just short of abstraction are to be found in his own innovation as an artist. Gauguin described himself as a “cerebral” artist and primitive art as rational or — as Picasso would say of the works that so stirred him in the Ethnographic Museum at Trocadéro — “*raisonnable*.”<sup>119</sup>

Danto calls his account “a bit too neat and simple.” And so it is. I have some difficulties with Danto's admittedly much too simple sketch. I certainly would want to add circa 1770 and I suspect that Danto would be receptive to such a proposal. Cannot Hegel's

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 340-341.



philosophy be understood as an attempt to come to terms with that epochal threshold, marked by all sorts of revolutions, including not only the American and the French, but Kant's Copernican revolution, and also a revolution in art which found an eloquent spokesman in Winckelmann, who also defended a version of the end of art thesis, claiming that art could never hope to surpass what the Greeks had achieved long ago, a claim that Hegel was very familiar with and could not dismiss. One key to the narrative that supported the art that came to some sort of end in the 1960's is, I would claim, provided by an approach to art that I have called "the aesthetic approach," and have associated with Baumgarten and Kant. But *to the extent* that the aesthetic approach is indeed a presupposition of modern art, Danto's suggestive remarks on moving pictures — why not also mention photography in this context? — and primitive art leave one dissatisfied. Danto's appeal to the way the moving picture can be understood as continuing the Vasarian narrative of artifice conquering appearances, almost forcing painting, by the camera's very success, to radically change its course and to abruptly concern itself with the essence of painting, does not help us to understand the enormous passion that the modernist narrative, as represented by a critic like Greenberg, generated. Why such concern to purify painting from everything external, to distill its very *essence*? Why should the pursuit of purity have figured so significantly in the progress of modern art? The desire to return to the primitive and archaic, too, has its roots in the Enlightenment and is linked to an attempt to found all authority in reason and nature instead of accepting worn-out inherited patterns. Art, too, sought to return to its very *arche*.

Essence and arche — the pursuit of both would seem to have exhausted itself. Today the very idea of such an essence would seem to generate little interest in the art world. Everything goes.

What Warhol demonstrated was that anything, if a work of art, can be matched by something that looks just like it which is not one, so the difference between art and non-art cannot rest in what they have in common — and that will be everything that strikes the eye. But once it is recognized that we must look for differentiating features at right angles to their surfaces, the entire urgency is drained from the enterprise of producing counter instances, and the analysis of the concept can proceed without examples and without counter examples: we are in the thin unhistorical atmosphere of philosophy. But

once art makers are freed from the task of finding the essence of art, which had been thrust upon art at the inception of Modernism, they too have been liberated from history, and have entered the era of freedom. Art does not end with the end of art history. What happens only is that one set of imperatives has been lifted from its practice as it enters what I think of as its posthistorical phase.<sup>120</sup>

Danto can give such an upbeat ending to his story only because he does not have art end in philosophy, as Hegel seems to suggest, but in liberating itself from philosophy. So understood, postmodernism means that art no longer has a need for master-narratives concerning its essence or for an agenda that would call artists in a certain direction. This is a burden artists have finally shed.

The case with Hegel is quite different. For Hegel, too, there is a sense in which art has come to an end, not in the sense that a particular artistic agenda has been carried out, so that here nothing important was left to be done, not in the sense that all such agendas were finally a thing of the past, but in the sense that art from the side of what Hegel calls its highest vocation had been left behind by the progress of spirit. From this perspective the end of art that Danto has in mind should be understood as the end of an art that itself came after the end of art in Hegel's highest sense. An abyss this separates Danto's talk of the end of art and Hegel's. Hegel offers us a master narrative about art, and it is that narrative that demands the death of art in what once was its highest sense. I find it difficult to simply dismiss the challenge presented by Hegel's thesis of the end of art. Heidegger responds to that challenge. I shall turn to him in my next lecture.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

## 22. Art, Equipment, Thing

### 1

In the last lectures I considered Hegel's philosophy of art. I have tried to show that, given Hegel's understanding of the shape of modernity, art in its highest sense is for us something past. Towards the end of the last lecture, I also suggested that Heidegger questions that conclusion. This is not to say that Heidegger fails to recognize the strength of Hegel's position. Quite the opposite: consider what he has to say about Hegel in the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art."<sup>121</sup>

In the most comprehensive reflection on the nature of art that the West possesses — comprehensive because it stems from metaphysics — namely Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, the following propositions occur:

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth may obtain existence for itself.

One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit.

In all these relationships art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation something past.

The judgment that Hegel passes in these statements cannot be evaded by pointing out that since Hegel's lectures in aesthetics were given for the last time during the winter of 1828-29 at the University of Berlin, we have seen the rise of many new art works and new art movements. Hegel never meant to deny this possibility. But the question remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so. The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, which thought corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about the truth of what is. Until then the judgment remains in force. But for that very reason, the question is necessary whether the truth that the judgment declares is final and conclusive and what follows if it is. (701-702)<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> For a fuller discussion of Heidegger's essay, see Karsten Harries, *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's The Origin of the Work of Art* (New York: Springer, 2009).

<sup>122</sup> Trans. Albert Hofstadter, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*.

The last remark deserves special emphasis. Is the truth of this judgment final? Remember the three propositions that, as I tried to show earlier, underlie Hegel's analysis: 1. Art addresses itself to the senses. 2. Art in its highest sense is an expression of the highest truths, sharing this with religion and with philosophy. 3. The proper vehicle for the expression of these truths are clear and distinct ideas, or, as Hegel puts the point, the prose of thought rather than the imagination of poetry. Given the understanding of reality and the conception of truth that have shaped modernity, we have to find it difficult to grant to art the importance that it once possessed. If Hegel's judgment is not to be conclusive and final, it is necessary to argue that he has exaggerated or misunderstood the role of the spirit, that clear and distinct thinking does not give us adequate access to what matters most to us. If art is to be taken seriously as the servant of truth, we have to challenge Hegel's understanding of truth, have to question the Cartesian and still Hegelian trust in clear and distinct thinking. Just such questioning is at the heart of Heidegger's essay. His inquiry into the origin of the work of art is intended to challenge Hegel.

But the challenge extends far beyond Hegel. Remember in this connection the many Platonic themes in Hegel's discussion. Plato already argued in the *Republic* that the poet has to yield his place of honor to the philosopher. The poet's claims to be the servant of truth cannot be taken too seriously, thrice removed as he is from reality. Challenging the presupposed understanding of truth and what it requires Heidegger attempts to take a step beyond the tradition inaugurated by Plato or by Plato's Socrates. In this respect there is an obvious similarity between "The Origin of the Work of Art" and *The Birth of Tragedy*.

## 2

But let us take a more careful look at the essay, which is as carefully constructed as anything Heidegger has written. Let me begin with the question Heidegger raises near the beginning of the essay. How are we to gain an understanding of the essence of art? Presumably by looking at works of art, asking ourselves what exactly it is that makes them art.

What art is should be inferable from the work. What the work of art is we can come to know only from the nature of art. Anyone can easily see that we are moving in a circle. Ordinary understanding demands that this circle be avoided because it violates logic. What art is can be gathered from a comparative examination of actual art works. But how are we to be certain that we are indeed basing such an examination on art works if we do not know beforehand what art is? And the nature of art can no more be arrived at by a derivation from higher concepts than by a collection of characteristics of actual art works. For such a derivation, too, already has in view the characteristics that must suffice to establish that what we take in advance to be an art work is one in fact. (651)

We have here an example of what Heidegger calls the hermeneutic circle: we have already presupposed what art is when we select certain works as works of art. And similarly any attempt to derive the essence of art from supposedly higher principles must already know what art is in advance. Such circularity is unavoidable.

### 3

Heidegger goes on to make the seemingly obvious observation that whatever works of art may be, undoubtedly they are things:

Works of art are familiar to everyone. Architectural and sculptural works can be installed in public places, in churches, and in dwellings. Art works of the most diverse periods and peoples are housed in collections and exhibitions. If we consider the works in their untouched actuality and do not deceive ourselves, the result is that the works are as naturally present as are things. The picture hangs on the wall like a rifle or a hat. A painting, e.g., the one by Van Gogh that represents a pair of peasant shoes, travels from one exhibition to another. Works of art are shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest. During the First World war Hölderlin's hymns were packed in soldier's knapsacks together with cleaning gear. Beethoven's quartets lie in the storerooms of the publishing house like potatoes in a cellar. (651)

But if works of art are undoubtedly things, they are not just things, they are things of a very special sort, things + something else.

This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature. The work of art is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, *allogoreuei*. The work makes public something other than itself. It manifests something other; it is an **allegory**. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring things together is, in Greek, *sumballein*. The work is a **symbol**. (652)

Heidegger proposes to turn first to an examination of what a thing is, on the thingly aspect of the work of art. What then is a thing? Where should we look? There is a sense in which everything is a thing. On the other hand, we are reluctant to call persons, or even animals or plants mere things. These are of course things, but they are more than that. We arrive at the mere thing only when this "more" has been stripped away.

We thus see ourselves brought back from the widest domain, within which everything is a thing (thing = *res* = *ens* = an entity), including even the highest and last things. "Mere" here means, first, the pure thing, which is simply a thing and nothing more; but then, at the same time, it means that which is only a thing, in an almost pejorative sense. It is mere things, including even use-objects that count as things in the strict sense. What does the thingly character of these things, then, consist in? It is in reference to these that the thingness of things must be determinable. This determination enables us to characterize what it is that is thingly as such. Thus prepared, we are able to characterize the almost palpable reality of works, in which something else inheres. (654)

But do we not get an answer to the question: what is a thing? simply by looking at the answers given to that question by the tradition. Heidegger discusses three such answers:

1. The thing as the bearer of properties

This block of granite, for example, is a mere thing. It is hard, heavy, extended, bulky, shapeless, rough, colored, partly dull, partly shiny. We can take note of all these features in the stone. Thus we acknowledge its characteristics. But still, the traits signify something proper to the stone itself. They are its properties. The thing has them. (654)

This interpretation has a certain obviousness. It has become part of the Western tradition, so much so that the original experience that once was its warrant has been lost sight of.

With this it has become groundless.

The process begins with the appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought. *Hupokeimenon* becomes *subiectum*; *upostasis* becomes *substantia*; *sumbebekos* becomes *accidens*. However, this translation of Greek names into Latin is in no way the innocent process it is considered to this day. Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed rather, a translation of the Greek experience into a different way of thinking. Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word. The rootlessness of Western thought begins with this translation. (655)

To us this understanding of the thing may seem only natural. After all it is mirrored by the subject-predicate structure of the proposition. But just this mirroring raises a question. Does language mirror reality, or

...could it be that even the structure of the thing as thus envisaged is a projection of the framework of the sentence? (655)

But does this understanding of the thing really capture its thingly character? Take the proposition "this rose is red." Consider then the corresponding experience, I see this thing before me as a red rose. I have pushed the thing into a conceptual framework. Have I thereby captured its thingly character? Have I not rather lost sight of it? Heidegger concludes his discussion of this first determination with the suggestion that it constitutes an assault on the thing.

2. But can we not let the thing speak to us more immediately.

Can such an assault perhaps be avoided — and how? Only, certainly, by granting the thing, as it were, a free field to display its thingly character directly. Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must first be set aside. Only then do we yield ourselves to the undisguised presence of the thing. But we do not need first to call or arrange for this situation in which we let things encounter us without mediation. The situation always prevails. In what the senses of sight, hearing, and touch convey, in the sensations of color, sound, roughness, hardness, things move us bodily, in the literal meaning of the word. The thing is the *aistheton*, that which is perceptible by sensations in the senses belonging to sensibility. (657)

But once again doubts arise. Are the things themselves not closer to us than all sensations? As Heidegger points out,

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things — as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e. listen abstractly. (657)

Once again we are forced to recognize that we have done violence to the thing.

3. The third interpretation understands the thing in terms of opposition between form and matter. The thing is formed matter, where the matter or *hule* is identified with the thingly character of the thing. It is a definition that fits the work of art especially well. Works of art have indeed long been discussed as formed matter. Indeed it fits humanly produced work so well that we begin to wonder whether we have not illegitimately read human work into the essence of things. How adequate is the matter-form distinction?

The self-contained block of granite is something material in a definite if unshapely form. Form means here the distribution and arrangement of the material parts in spatial locations, resulting in a particular shape, namely that of a block. But a jug, an ax, a shoe are also matter occurring in a form. Form as shape is not the consequence here of a prior distribution of the matter. The form, on the contrary, determines the arrangement of the matter. Even more, it prescribes in each case the kind and selection of the matter — impermeable for a jug, sufficiently hard for an ax, firm, yet flexible for shoes. The interfusion of form and matter prevailing here is, moreover, controlled beforehand by the purposes served by jug, ax, shoes. (659)

Does the form-matter distinction operate the same way in the two cases? Does it seem more obvious in one than in the other? It would indeed seem that the understanding of things as formed matter if read off such humanly made things as a jug, or any other piece of useful equipment. It is indeed in light of the equipment paradigm that Heidegger proceeds with his discussion.

The matter-form structure, however, by which the being of a piece of equipment is first determined, readily presents itself as the immediately intelligible constitution of every entity, because here man himself as maker participates in the way in which the piece of equipment comes into being. Because equipment takes an intermediate place between mere things and works, the suggestion is that nonequipmental beings — things and works and ultimately everything that is — are to be comprehended with the help of the being of equipment (the matter-form structure). (660)

The interpretation received additional support from the Christian interpretation of God as the master craftsman, which allows every thing to be understood as an *ens creatum*, a created thing. And this interpretation received further support when in modern philosophy the knower is made into a kind of maker. Kant serves as the most obvious example: the knower imposes on the material sensibility the form of his concepts.

But has this third paradigm brought us closer to the thingly character of the thing? Have we once again done violence to the thing? What about the nature of equipment, which guided this third interpretation?

#### 4

In search of the equipmental character of equipment Heidegger turns, rather surprisingly, not to a piece of equipment, say a pair of shoes, but to a painting:



We choose as example a common sort of equipment — a pair of peasant shoes. We do not even need to exhibit the actual pieces of this sort of useful article in order to describe them. Everyone is acquainted with them. But since it is a matter here of direct description, it may be well to facilitate the visual realization of them. We shall choose a well-known painting by Van Gogh, who painted such shoes several times. (663)

The move to the painting seems a slight of hand. Why does he not simply take off one of his own shoes? Does the distance introduced by the painter allow us to see the shoes as we ordinarily do not see them? A commonplace in aesthetics is the view that beauty lifts the veil familiarity has cast over things. It makes them visible as never before? Is this why Heidegger here appeals to a work of art?

Heidegger sees a great deal in the painting; you may well feel too much.

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth*, and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. (664)

Note the strange progress of our discussion. We began by asking about the origin and essence of art. That question led us to inquire into what a thing is. Heidegger's discussion of three different answers traditionally given to this question was designed to show how one of these, the third, gained a certain priority. This then led to an inquiry into the being of equipment. And what reveals to us the being of equipment? A painting. But have we then not learned something about art, even as we were trying to understand the thingly character of the thing?

The equipmental quality of equipment was discovered. But how? Not by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observation of the actual use of shoes occurring here and there; but only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting. This painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be. (665)

The work of art has revealed to us what the shoes are. As Heidegger puts this point:

In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work. "To set" means here: to bring to a stand. Some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining. (666)

Note that this understanding of art harks back to the Platonic. The work of art lets essential being shine forth in the particular, only that Heidegger no longer understands that being in terms of the forms. The work of art has thus been understood, if only in a preliminary way, as the happening of truth. Already we have made a move towards a return to a more ontological conception of art.

What has been accomplished? First of all Heidegger has tried to shake us in our conviction that we already know what art is, and more especially what things are. He points to the violence done to the thing by its traditional interpretations. How then can we get to the thing and to its thingly character? The suggestion is: through art. Art is proposed here as the proper vehicle for phenomenology. Let me conclude with the questions with which Heidegger concludes his discussion of Thing and Work.

The art work opens up in its own way the Being of beings. This opening up, i. e., this deconcealing, i. e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of what is has set itself to work. What is truth itself, that it sometimes comes to pass as art? What is this setting-itself-to-work? (668)

In my next lecture I shall return to these questions.

### 23. The Work of Art as an Establishment of the World

#### 1

Last time I began our discussion of Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Let me recapitulate some of the points made in that lecture: Heidegger begins the essay by stating the obvious: the **work of art** is a **thing**; not just that, but a thing that has been made; a **work**, and not just a work, but one that in a distinctive way points beyond itself; as Heidegger puts it, it is an **allegory** or a **symbol**. Following this outline Heidegger begins his discussion with the question: what is a thing? But that discussion never really gets off the ground. In his search for the essence of the thing Heidegger reviews three different traditional interpretations. The third and most important of these, takes its cues from a particular type of thing, from a piece of **equipment**. It is on this paradigm that the traditional analysis of the thing in terms of **matter and form** is based. But what is the essence of equipment? In his attempt to find an answer to this question, Heidegger turns to a work of art, to Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes. This yields an insight not only into the being of equipment, but at the same time, and somewhat surprisingly, a first determination of the essence of the work of art. The equipmental quality of equipment was discovered by means of the work of art. The work of art reveals what something is, reveals it in its being. As Heidegger puts it:

In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work. (666)

This raises the question of the relationship of art to truth and it is with this question that the first section closes:

What is truth itself, that it sometimes comes to pass as art? What is this setting-itself-to-work? (668)

In a sense our first attempt to approach the essence of the work of art by asking: what is a thing? must be considered a failure: The discussion returns us to pretty much the same question with which we began.

#### 2

The second section thus begins once again by asking: what is art? Where do we encounter art? The answer seems obvious. First of all, it would seem, in museums. But do we encounter them there as they ought to be encountered? Heidegger suggests that

transported into the museum environment works of art are no longer the works they once were.

The Aegina sculptures in the Munich collection, Sophocles' *Antigone* in the best critical edition, are, as the works they are, torn out of their native sphere. However high their quality and power of impression, however good their state of preservation, however certain their interpretation, placing them in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world. But even when we make an effort to cancel or avoid such displacement of works — when, for instance, we visit the temple in Paestum at its own site or the Bamberg cathedral on its own square — the world of the work that stands there has perished. (669)

The work of art, Heidegger suggests here, is encountered as the work it is only as long as its native sphere is preserved. Nor can this native sphere be understood as a **geographical context**; more importantly, even, it refers to a **cultural context**. What Heidegger means here by "world" implies such a context. We shall return to Heidegger's understanding of world in the next lecture. But I should say at least this much here: by world Heidegger does not mean the totality of facts; the term refers rather to a space of meanings. Think of the world of a baseball player. Or, more relevant to the present context, of the world of the Middle Ages.

Having lost their world art works are no longer the works they were. They have become other than what they were. Now they have their place in the modern art world, which includes connoisseurs and collectors, curators and art historians. The aesthetic approach to works of art is part of this world.

Note that there is a tension between two claims Heidegger makes: following the tradition he speaks of the self-subsistence of works of art: at the same time he insists that they belong in a context, that they cease to be the works they were when this context is lost.

But does the work still remain a work if it stands outside all relations? Is it not essential for the work to stand in relations? Yes, of course — except that it remains to ask in what relations it stands.

Where does a work of art belong? The work belongs, as work, uniquely to the realm that is opened up by itself. (670)

This is to say, the work of art itself opens up its proper context, but not apparently in such a way that its continued physical presence is sufficient to assure the preservation

of that context. Or to restate the same point: the work of art, according to Heidegger, opens up its world. Heidegger develops this understanding of the work of art in his much discussed description of a Greek temple, which should be compared to Hegel's discussion of the Greek temple on p. 439.

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from this and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation. (670)

There are difficulties with this passage. Which temple is Heidegger talking about? The already mentioned temple at Paestum? Does every Greek temple then establish the Greek world anew? But would the Greek world then not fall apart. Must we not modify the claim and say that each particular temple opens up the pre-given Greek world in its own distinctive way. And something similar would have to be said about a church like Bamberg cathedral.

But this much at any rate is clear: according to Heidegger the essence of the work of art is not even remotely understood when it is approached in purely aesthetic terms. Art establishes a world.

### 3

But let me take a more careful look at the passage. The temple is said to establish a particular region as a holy precinct. It re-presents the landscape in a way that lets the divine be present. The statue of the god provides that re-presentation with a focus. It lets the god be present in the temple. The statue becomes something like an integrating center. With Baumgarten we could say, the statue of the god provides the region with a theme. Athena, say, is made to preside over this place.

When entering the holy precinct, the everyday world has not simply been left behind. The temple illuminates the everyday. It is this that lets Heidegger say that the temple reveals to a people their world. Thus it fashions the people into a community.

I already touched on the question: what does Heidegger mean by **world**? It should, I pointed out, not be understood as multitude of facts.

To be a work means to set up a world. But what is it to be a world? The answer was hinted at when we referred to the temple. (672)

The world is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen. World is the ever-nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds. A stone is worldless. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings, of the things that are. Her equipment, in its reliability, gives to this world a necessity and nearness of its own. By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits. In a world's worlding is gathered that spaciousness out of which the protective grace of the gods is granted or withheld. Even this doom of the god remaining absent is a way the world worlds. (672 – 673)

Let me approach the concept of "world" in a somewhat different way. Take a hammer, or a spoon, or a pair of shoes. We can ask: what are they good for? They receive their point from certain activities. These activities again are tied to certain regions. Heidegger's means "world" can be defined as the region of all regions. A god may be understood as the theme of a region, God as the theme of the world.

#### 4

So far I have not mentioned the second part of Heidegger's understanding of the work of art: establishing the world, the work of art is also said to present the earth. I shall turn to Heidegger's "earth" in the next lecture. But before I do, let me make an

attempt to translate what Heidegger has to say about the artwork establishing a world into another language. First let me ask: does what Heidegger have to say about the Greek temple fit in with what we know about Greek temples? I think that it does. And although I do not here have the time to substantiate such a claim, let me point to a book like Vincent Scully's, *The Earth, the Temples, and the Gods*. Scully, too, begins with the thought that certain regions seem to demand or invite the building of a temple because their appearance seemed to hint at the powers that preside over human life. Consider, for example, his suggestion that every Minoan palace makes use of the same landscape elements:

first an enclosed valley of varying size in which the palace is set; I should call this a "Natural Megaron"; second, a gently molded or conical hill on axis with the palace to north and south; and lastly a higher, double-peaked or cleft mountain some distance beyond the hill but on the same axis.<sup>123</sup>

Scully goes on to connect the cone with the maternal earth, the horns with the paternal active power. But I am not interested here in the details of his account, but in the type of explanation offered. Landscape elements, Scully suggests, define the space for an architecture and provide an initial focusing. The architecture responds to the landscape. It lets the divinity whose presence is sensed in this particular place become more visibly present.

Let me conclude this lecture with a quite different text, which yet points in the same direction. The traditional church consecration rite establishes the meaning of the church as **House of God** and **Gate of Heaven**. The text which authorizes this understanding is *Genesis*, 28, 11 - 17.

And he (Jacob) came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached heaven; and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by your

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<sup>123</sup> Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods. Greek Sacred Architecture*, revised ed. (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 11.

descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever I go, and will bring you back to this land; for I shall not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said: Surely the Lord is in this place. **This is none other than the house of God and the gate of Heaven.**

We should not the points that are made here: a particular place is experienced as filled with God's presence. It is experienced as the house of God. In this particular place heaven and earth are joined. The place is thus also felt to be the gate to that higher reality. The experience of divine presence is tied to a trust that extends into the future and beyond the individual to his offspring, to coming generations. The world is thus experienced as being in tune with Jacob and his descendants. It is experienced as a meaningful order, as cosmos or a world.

Jacob marks the place by erecting a pillar and pouring over it some oil. This pillar is the archetypal church. Later churches reenact this archetype. Using Heidegger's language we can say: by **setting up his pillar Jacob establishes the world of his people.** According to the Christian consecration rite, whenever a church is built this original establishment is repeated. Every church, say, Bamberg Cathedral, reestablishes the Christian world anew. And can something analogous not be said of every Greek temple?

That such an establishment is not what we today look for in art is evident enough. But I also think that it is difficult to deny that Heidegger's conception of the work of art as establishing a world does justice to what countless generations expected from architecture and, more generally from art.



## 24. Art as a Presentation of the Earth

### 1

Last time I discussed Heidegger's conception of the work of art as an establishment of a world. World here does not mean the totality of facts but a context of meanings. Think of the world of the Middle Ages. Being in a world here names a particular way of relating to persons and things. To say that the work of art establishes a world is to say that it establishes a way of life. So understood art has an ethical function. It establishes a particular ethos. You may want to relate this to Greek tragedy and what Aristotle calls its cathartic function. Heidegger does indeed mention Sophocles' *Antigone* as an example of art in its highest sense, adding that today it no longer is the work that it once was, but belongs to a past we cannot recover.

But Heidegger only mentions *Antigone* in passing in this essay. What invites reflection is that Heidegger should use a work of architecture, a temple, to illustrate the world establishing power of art. That is to say, Heidegger turns to that art form Hegel called "the first pioneer on the highway toward an adequate realization of the Godhead." For Hegel, you will recall, it was characteristic of the first, symbolic phase of art. For Heidegger it becomes characteristic of art as such. It is as if Heidegger were trying to say that in an important sense art never leaves the symbolic phase behind at all: this would mean that the progress of art Hegel outlines is a false progress, a progress that distances art from its essence and lets it lose its former ethical significance.

### 2

But let me return to Heidegger's description of the temple. As I suggested last time, when Heidegger speaks of the **temple as establishing a world**, he gives us what he himself considers only **one side** of the artwork.

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes

visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things **phusis**. It clear and illuminates also that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the **earth**. What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise earth is present as the sheltering agent. (671)

The artwork, more especially the temple, thus has two sides: it establishes a world and presents the earth:

The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground. (671)

When Heidegger speaks of the earth he calls attention to something like the materiality of the artwork. But in its materiality the artwork, say the temple, also reveals the natural order on which it rests.

In fabricating equipment — e.g. an ax — stone is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness. The material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists perishing in the equipmental being of the equipment. By contrast the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness or heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, in to the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.

That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. (674)

But let us consider more closely what Heidegger here means by the earth. I suggested that it has something to do with the materiality of the art object. In presenting the earth, the artist reveals the material he is working with in its materiality. He reveals the marble as marble, the granite as granite, the limewood as limewood. Heidegger here draws a distinction between the way an artist uses his materials and the way a craftsman does. On Heidegger's view the artist affirms his medium:

To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up. That happens in a certain way only where the work miscarries. To be sure, the painter also uses pigments, but in such a way that color is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word — not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word. (675)

To build a temple is, among other things, to re-present the marble. Thus re-presented the marble is revealed as what it is. The function of art has sometimes been reduced to such re-presentation. The painter tries to do nothing more than to reveal paint as paint, canvas as canvas. Note how different such painting is from representational painting that uses paint and canvas as means of pictorial representation. Ideally such representation lets you forget the medium. In this sense it wants to deceive the eye. A mimetic, representational art is not at all what Heidegger has in mind. Consider in this connection a painting by Van Gogh, e.g. of some Sunflowers. No doubt it is a representation. But such a painting also speaks as paint. A kind of contest is enacted between representation and abstraction. Much art of the sixties and seventies sought to return to art this re-presentational function, to make it little more a presentation of what Heidegger calls the earth. I think of a work like Jasper Johns' *Painting with Ruler and Grey*.

But you do not have to turn to such works to illustrate what Heidegger has in mind. Compare McClellan and Connecticut Hall and the different ways in which the bricks present themselves to us in the two buildings. In Connecticut Hall the horizontals in which the bricks were laid have a bit more difficulty keeping to an absolutely straight line. Time has left its mark. The bricks in the two buildings speak a different language. And brick speaks a different language than sandstone. And limewood speaks a different language than oak. Compare medieval sculptures made of the former with sculptures made of the latter. It is this material aspect of the work of art which Heidegger will also term its **thingly** aspect. You will recall that Heidegger began by trying to understand the work of art as a thing, a made thing, a made thing that has a certain meaning. We can say that a successful work of art, according to Heidegger, presents itself to us as a thing. The artist lets the material be the material it is. He lets it speak.

## 3

To say that the artist presents the earth is to say that the artist lets us in some sense understand what the earth is. And yet this is a very peculiar kind of understanding:

A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments. If we try to lay hold of the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing the stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's burden has escaped us. Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelength, it is gone. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction. (674)

The understanding of the earth granted by art challenges the kind of understanding which tries to lay hold of the stone's heaviness by measuring it: an understanding that does not let the matter be, but seeks to master it, to overpower it by subjecting it to human measures. The artwork thus challenges that access to reality that claims that it is clear and distinct reasoning that presents to us things as they are. The artwork teaches us that such reasoning replaces what is with constructions of the human spirit. To be open to the reality of things is to be open to a dimension of things that will always resist human mastery. It is this dimension Heidegger calls the earth. Art recalls us to this dimension.

I have suggested that it is especially in recent years art has at times aimed at little more than such a presentation of the earth. Given Heidegger's understanding of the artwork as the establishment of a world and as a presentation of the earth, there is something deficient about such art. And yet it is easy to understand why just this deficient art should be particularly adequate to the modern age. For consider once more: what is the dominant conception of reality today? I have suggested before that there is a tendency to count only that as real, which can be captured by reason, can be rendered clear and distinct, can be measured for example. And, as Descartes already suggested, when nature has in this sense been subjected to clear and distinct understanding, it can also be manipulated. This conception of reality triumphs in technology. This understanding of reality entails, as Hegel shows, that art in its highest sense lies behind

us. No longer can we take seriously the world establishing power of art. Thus what Heidegger has to say about the Greek temple may indeed reflect how people were once able to respond to sacred architecture, but what is it to us today? The shape of our modern world makes it difficult for us to take seriously the artistic establishment of a world. This is of course also to say that our world-view makes it difficult for us to take seriously what Heidegger has to say in this essay about the world establishing power of the work of art. And yet there is a sense in which this understanding of reality does violence to reality. Heidegger is right to insist that when we subject nature to number, as our science must do, nature understood as *phusis* is in an important sense gone. And Heidegger is not alone when he insists that what is lost here is something important. By presenting the earth, art attempts to undo that loss,.

But once again, given what Heidegger tells us, art reduced to a presentation of the earth, is deficient. The artwork has to be understood as both, a presentation of the earth and the establishment of a world. And in establishing a world the artwork inevitably helps to establish a way of standing in the world, a way of life, a specific ethos. As an establishment of the world the work of art has an ethical function. Think again of the temple.

Earth does refer to the material aspect, to the marble of which the temple is built, to the ground on which it rests, to the sky, and so on. Note that this material aspect is misunderstood when it is understood as an opaque presence. The earth always already moves and claims me, if only obscurely. I suggested thus last time that a certain landscape may move someone in such a way that he feels, in this precise place I have to build a church or a temple. The sacred building is a response to what obscurely move us, an attempt to articulate it, to fix it. Only because the establishment of a world has its ground in the earth does it have its power to reveal to us our own place, our ethos. To the extent that the earth has been covered up by our world-view, we have also covered up the ground of the ethical.

Attempting to articulate the meaning of the earth, the establishment of a world inevitably includes something like violence.

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of a historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing.

World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and earth juts through the world. But the relation between world and earth does not wither away into the empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another. The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there.

The opposition of world and earth is a strife [not a striving, as the trans. has it].  
(676)

Earth and world are thus inescapably in tension.

Heidegger here suggests that in the contemplation of any genuine work of art we are tossed back and forth between what was in the very beginning of the essay, and somewhat misleadingly, called its **symbolic or allegorical** character and its **thingly** character. The work of art is a thing, but a thing that has a meaning.

#### 4

In this connection let me return to Heidegger's description of the opposition of earth and world as a strife:

In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this strife. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife. Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving. The work-being of the work consists of the fighting of the battle between earth and world. It is because the struggle arrives at its high point in the simplicity of intimacy that the unity of the work comes about in the fighting of the battle. (676 –677)

In being the instigation of this striving the work of art recalls us to our own situation, which is constituted by such a striving, even if this is usually covered up.

## 25. Art and Truth

### 1

In my first lecture I suggested that Heidegger and Plato stand in an inverse relationship. Plato's commitment to philosophy and its truth forces him to become a critic of art and especially poetry. Heidegger rejects the presuppositions of this critique. Once more the poets are to be given a privileged place in the Republic. At issue is the relationship of art to truth. How does Heidegger consider that relationship?

Consider once more p. 668:

Art is truth setting itself into work. What is truth itself, that it sometimes comes to pass as art? What is this setting-itself-to-work?

Heidegger thus understands the essence of the work of art as **the setting itself into work of the truth of what is**. Later, on p. 694, he describes art as *the becoming and happening of truth*. Such formulations must remain rather obscure as long as we do not know just how these two terms are to be linked. What necessity joins them? In the past few lectures I have said quite a bit about art, but very little about truth. We therefore have to ask: how does Heidegger understand **the meaning of truth**? It is to this question that I want to turn today.

How do we usually understand the meaning of truth? And is that understanding indeed *stunted*, as Heidegger claims:

How slight and stunted our knowledge of the nature of truth it, is shown by the laxity we permit ourselves in using this basic word. By truth is usually meant this or that particular truth. That means: something true. A cognition articulated in a proposition can be of this sort. However, we call not only a proposition true, but also a thing: true gold in contrast to sham gold. True here means genuine, real gold. What does the expression "real" mean here? To us it is what is in truth. The true is what corresponds to the real, and the real is what is in truth. The circle has closed again. (677)

What do we then mean by truth?

In approaching this question, Heidegger suggests, we should let ourselves be guided by the Greek understanding of the term:

Truth means the nature of the true. We think this nature in recollecting the Greek word *aletheia*. (677)

But do we have to return to the Greeks? Do we not have an adequate theory of truth? Traditionally the meaning of truth has been understood as **correspondence**. As Heidegger himself asks:

But why should we not be satisfied with the nature of truth that has by now been familiar to us for centuries? Truth means today and has long meant the agreement or conformity of knowledge with fact. (678)

But how do the facts that make a proposition true present themselves? Truth as correspondence presupposes that the things have shown or revealed themselves as the things they really are.

However, the fact must show itself to be fact if knowledge and the proposition that forms and expresses knowledge are to be able to conform to the fact; otherwise the fact cannot become binding on the proposition. How can fact show itself if cannot itself stand out of concealedness, if it does not itself stand in the unconcealed? A proposition is true by conforming to the unconcealed, to what is true. Propositional truth is always, and always exclusively, this correctness. The critical concepts of truth which, since Descartes, start out from truth as certainty, are merely variations of the definition of truth as correctness. The nature of truth which is familiar to us — correctness in representation — stands and falls with the unconcealedness of beings. (678)

Truth as **correspondence** presupposes truth as **unconcealment**. But how does this unconcealment take place? How is it to be thought? It is in this connection that Heidegger introduces one of his most notorious notions, that of the **clearing**.

And yet — beyond what is, not away from it but before it, there is still something else that happens. In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting (*Lichtung*). Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighting center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know. (679)

The German *Lichtung* means first of all a forest clearing, an open space in the forest where trees have been cut down. The importance Heidegger attaches to this notion of a clearing is underscored by the title Heidegger gave to the collection of essays in which *The Origin of the Work of Art* first appeared. He called it *Holzwege*, "wood paths." In German the term *Holzweg* has a quite specific meaning. It is a path cut by foresters to allow the trees that have been cut down to be brought out of the forest. A *Holzweg* therefore ends in a clearing. For a hiker to be on a *Holzweg* means that he has lost his



way. Instead of getting where he wanted to go, he suddenly finds himself in some clearing somewhere in the middle of the forest.

You may well find Heidegger's use of the term *Holzweg* or "clearing" outrageously metaphorical. Let me therefore approach it using language that is more familiar to students of philosophy. For a proposition to be recognized as true some object must have presented itself to the subject recognizing the proposition's truth. But an object can present itself as an object only to a subject; furthermore, it has to fall into some conceptual space or categorial framework. But note how the terms categorial framework or space are metaphors. And a metaphor is the line in my diagram, S — O.

You get here a hint of what Heidegger is after when he uses a metaphor like "clearing." One thing he is doing is calling attention to the metaphorical nature of our understanding of consciousness. That understanding is shaped by an analogy on which Plato already relies. Understanding is taken to be like seeing. When we see the object seen it is quite literally at a distance from the seeing eye. Similarly it is suggested that the understood object is at a distance from the understanding subject. And just as the sun illuminates what I see, so the understanding is illuminated by what philosophers have spoken of as the natural light. Heidegger's metaphor of the clearing links the metaphors of distance and light on which traditional philosophy has relied. Thus Heidegger forces you to struggle with what is being said. Is this a less or a more rigorous way of speaking?

But let me return to Heidegger's claim that truth as correspondence presupposes truth as unconcealment. Unconcealment presupposes the clearing:

Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees. And yet, being can be concealed, too, only within the sphere of what is lighted. Each being we encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presence in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealedness. The clearing in which beings stand is at the same time concealment. (680)

Heidegger goes in to distinguish two kinds of concealment.

Beings refuse themselves to us down to that one and seemingly least feature which we touch upon most readily when we can say no more of beings than that they are. Concealment as refusal is not simply and only the limit of knowledge in any given circumstance, but the beginning of the clearing of what is lighted. But concealment, though of another sort, to be sure, also occurs within what is lighted. One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the

latter, a few obstruct many, one denies all. Here concealment is not simple refusal. Rather, a being appears, but it presents itself as other than it is. (680)

What Heidegger here terms refusal is the mark of reality. Compare understanding a circle and understanding a tree. There is a sense in which, when I am given the definition of a circle as a line defined by its equidistance from some point nothing is left out. Nothing refuses itself to me. In this sense I shall never understand a tree. When Heidegger here speaks of refusal he points in the same direction as he did with the concept "earth," which I discussed in the last lecture.

The second kind of concealment is more easily understood. In this case it is one thing that hides another. You may quite literally place yourself before another person, in this sense hide him. That dissembling is essential to understanding is rooted in the way our understanding depends on language. We apply to things labels that are never adequate to a thing in its concrete particularity. No matter how adequate, words conceal even as they reveal. That is the foundation of Heidegger's notorious statement on p. 681:

Truth, in its nature, is untruth. (681)

## 2

Heidegger goes on to relate the interplay of concealment and unconcealment of untruth and truth, to what he discussed before as the strife of world and earth. But instead of developing once more this point, let me approach Heidegger's insistence that language necessarily conceals, and that, since language mediates our understanding of things, we cannot escape such concealment, by reading you a few passages from a piece by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, from his *Lord Chandos Letter*, which is a fictive letter, supposed to have been sent by this young English Lord to Sir Francis Bacon, like Descartes a founding figure of modernity.

The case of Hofmannsthal's fictional Elizabethan Lord is simple: a figure of the Austrian poet, who, when still a teenager, had been celebrated as a master of the German language only to be assailed by Nietzschean doubts concerning the power of language to reveal reality, the young Lord, a postmodernist before his time, writes a letter to his well-intentioned older friend, the scientist and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon in an attempt to explain to this founder of our then just emerging modern world his decision to abandon

all literary activity. At issue is the rift that the young poet's merely aesthetic play with words has opened up between language and reality:

My case in short is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently.

At first I grew by degrees incapable of discussing a loftier or more general subject in terms of which everyone, fluently and without hesitation, is wont to avail himself. I experienced an inexplicable distaste for so much as uttering the words spirit, soul, or body. ... The abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgment — these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi.<sup>124</sup>

Like a corroding rust this inability to use words, because they have lost touch with what they supposedly are about, spreads to ordinary language, which the Lord experiences increasingly as indemonstrable, mendacious, hollow.

My mind compelled me to view all things occurring in such conversations from an uncanny closeness. As once, through a magnifying glass, I had seen a piece of skin on my little finger look like a field full of holes and furrows, so I now perceived human beings and their actions. I no longer succeeded in comprehending them with the simplifying eye of habit. For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed in one idea. Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared back at me and into which I was forced to stare back — whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.<sup>125</sup>

But the void left by this disintegration is not completely mute. As language gains an autonomy that threatens to render it meaningless, a minimal, but intense contact with beings is established. The tearing of language by silence grants epiphanies of presence.

It is not easy for me to indicate wherein these good moments subsist; once again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life. I cannot expect you to understand me without examples, and I must plead your indulgence for their absurdity. A pitcher, a

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<sup>124</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," *Selected Prose*, trans. Mary Hottinger and Tania and James Stern (New York: Pantheon, 1952), 134-135.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant's hut — all these can become the vessel of my revelation.<sup>126</sup>

With "a shudder running from the roots of my hair to the marrow of my heels," the young Lord senses the infinite: "What was it that made me want to break into words which, I know, were I to find them, would force to their knees those cherubim in whom I do not believe?"<sup>127</sup> And so they would! For the words for which the Lord is longing would know nothing of the rift separating reality and language. The words of that language would be nothing other than the things themselves. But this is to say: they would have to be the creative words of that God in whom neither the Lord, nor Hofmannsthal could believe. Nevertheless, the idea of this divine language functions as a measure that renders our language infinitely inadequate and condemns him who refuses to sully the dream of that language to silence.

The letter speaks of the inability of the modern to hold together those different aspects of reality to which Heidegger gestures with his terms "earth" and "world," the latter here represented by the inherited linguistic space. For the young Lord this space has degenerated into a collection of clichés. And writing this fictional letter, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, very much a modern poet, does not fashion a new world; his speaking is little more than a tearing of silence.

What accounts for this? An answer is suggested by the fact that this letter is addressed to Sir Francis Bacon, who, I suggested, stands very much for a culture governed by its will to grasp and control nature. And yet, despite such increased mastery, reality, or, more precisely, that aspect of reality Heidegger calls the earth, has become increasingly concealed, covered up, so that it is all but lost. Presenting the earth, the work of art thus recalls us to Being, to that interplay of concealment and unconcealment, to that strife of earth and world that is truth in its most fundamental sense.

### 3

We are now in a position to see more clearly the connection between truth and art. Truth is unconcealment. But unconcealment presupposes something like a linguistic

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 135 - 136.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

framework; but such frameworks inevitably conceal even as they reveal: unconcealment is inevitably tied to concealment. Truth and untruth inevitably intertwine. It is this conflict or strife that, according to Heidegger, is enacted by every genuine work of art.

Truth, according to Heidegger, is established by human beings. Such establishment can, but need not be the work of the artist:

One essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is truth setting itself into work. Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state. Still another way in which truth comes to shine forth is the nearness of that which is not simply a being, but the being that is most of all. Still another way in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice. Still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker's questioning, which, as the thinking of Being, names Being in its question-worthiness. By contrast, science is not an original happening of truth, but always the cultivation of a domain of truth already opened, specifically by apprehending and confirming that which shows itself to be possibly and necessarily correct within that field. When and insofar as science passes beyond correctness and goes on to a truth, which means that it arrives at the essential disclosure of what is as such, it is philosophy. (686–687)

If all truth depends on human work, the work of the artist, and more especially of the poet, is given a certain primacy by Heidegger. Why should this be so?

According to Heidegger there is no revelation that is not mediated by human work, even if that is usually forgotten. Take a concrete example, the proposition, "this room has four windows." The proposition is true if the room does have in fact four windows. I look and see them. What is presupposed by such a seeing. I see the windows as windows because I have a conceptual space in which these windows have their place. That space is inescapably tied to language. Whatever I see is already mediated by language.

This language is given to me as something already established. It is not something I create, is not my work. In this sense we generally understand things in terms of generally taken for granted frameworks. But if language is in this sense something already established and accepted, must there not also be an establishing discourse? It is this kind of establishing discourse Heidegger terms poetry.

Language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no

openness of what is, and consequently no openness either of that which is not and of the empty.

Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being. (696)

Poetry is understood by Heidegger as *projective saying*. What it projects is the strife between earth and world.

Poetry is thought here in so broad a sense and at the same time in such intimate unity of being with language and word that we must leave open whether art, in all its modes from architecture to poesy, exhausts the nature of poetry. (696)

If you accept Heidegger's understanding of language and poetry, it follows that philosophy, too, is dependent on poetry. Plato's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and poetry has been turned around.

I shall try to conclude our discussion next time.

## 26. Conclusion: Art Matters

### 1

Heidegger concludes his essay on the origin of the work of art with an epilogue that invites the reader to consider what he has read in the light of Hegel's pronouncements on the death of art in its highest sense. In that epilogue Heidegger raises this question:

is art still an essential and necessary way in which truth that is decisive for our historical existence happens, or is art no longer of that character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so. The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, ...  
(702)

It was Hegel, who, as we have seen, denied in the most decisive way that the art of this modern age could still fulfill its traditional ontological function as a privileged way of revealing what mattered most profoundly. From the side of its highest vocation art is for us something past. This, according to Hegel, has its foundation in humanity's coming of age. Along with this coming of age goes a changed understanding of reality and truth. And Heidegger, while he does not interpret history as the triumphant progress of the spirit, finds it difficult to dispute Hegel's judgment as far as the present is concerned. The reason for this, he suggests, has to do with the fact that Hegel's thesis has the support of the entire history of Western metaphysics.

I would like to conclude this course with a reconsideration of Hegel's thesis. Let me introduce this reconsideration with some remarks made, some forty years ago, by the noted art historian Sir Kenneth Clark at Wellesley. They formed the conclusion of his lecture:

I said earlier that **we now** believe [art] should aim at producing a kind of exalted happiness. This really means that art is an end in itself. Now it is an incontrovertible fact of history that the greatest art has always been about something, a means of communicating some truth which is assumed to be more important than the art itself. The truths which art has been able to communicate have been of a kind which could not be put in any other way. They have been ultimate truths, stated symbolically. Science achieved its triumph precisely by disregarding such truths, by not asking unanswerable questions, by sticking to the question 'how.' I confess it looks to me as if we shall have to wait a long time before there is some new belief which requires expression through art rather than through statistics or equations. And until this happens, the visual arts will fall

short of the greatest epochs, the ages of the Parthenon, the Sistine Ceiling, and Chartres Cathedral. I am afraid there is nothing we can do about it. No amount of good will and no expenditure of money can effect that sort of change. We cannot even dimly foresee when it will happen or what form it will take. We can only be thankful for what we have got — a vigorous, popular, decorative art, complementary to our architecture and our science, somewhat monotonous, somewhat prone to charlatanism, but genuinely expressive of our time.<sup>128</sup>

Kenneth Clark's remarks are closely linked to Hegel's claim that art in its highest sense may be a thing of the past, a claim that Heidegger would like to challenge, even as he admits that Hegel may have the last word. The art historian, too, thinks that, for the time being, art has lost its place in the service of truth. Today it has to be content with a more modest role, with that of providing what he terms an *exalted happiness*; art has become a matter of *decoration*. That is to say, Kenneth Clark, too, attributes to modern art only an aesthetic, not an ontological function.

What makes this remark especially interesting is that it is an art historian, rather than a philosopher, who is speaking here. It thus suggests that the history of art supports Hegel's conclusions. With this in mind let me return once more to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Hegel, as we have seen, concludes his account of the progress of art with a discussion of romantic art. Classical art, Hegel suggests, finds the form and content of art in harmony. We can say that classical art is born of respect for the content to which the artist is giving expression. Instead of just subjecting it to his will, the artist's shaping of that content lets it unfold and develop according to its own essence. Romantic art is born of a different attitude. It is precisely the discovery of the human being as essentially a free spirit, a person, which has made it impossible for us moderns to rest content with the sensible. We moderns find it impossible to grant the sensible given the same authority it was granted by our predecessors. Thus Hegel writes that modern, "romantic" art betrays a "broken" or "indifferent" attitude to the external. Incapable of joining nature and spirit, subject and object, in one harmonious whole, art falls apart: on the one hand we have representations of external objects in all their contingency and evanescence: the ideal

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<sup>128</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Blot and the Diagram: An Historian's Reflection on Modern Art*, (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Wellesley College, 1962).



disappears from art; instead art explores the mystery of presence. On the other hand, we find arbitrary productions of the artist's liberated subjectivity. Art explores the mysteries of freedom. Art thus comes to stand between the creative subject and opaque objects.

Hegel's remarks anticipate an often cited programmatic statement by Vassily Kandinsky, who in 1912, many years after Hegel and without reference to him, predicted similarly that art would fall apart and develop along two divergent lines: a movement towards abstraction would be complemented by a new realism. According to Kandinsky, too, traditional art could be understood as the product of a dialogue between the artist and the world. The artist imposes a form on reality, not in order to conquer it, but in order to reveal it. Not only is there no incompatibility between these two aspects of painting, but it is precisely the formal order that helps to reveal the essence of what is represented.

**Form**, I could say, using a language I introduced in an earlier lecture, has a representational function. Abstraction and representation, Kandinsky suggests, are in perfect balance.

The modern artist is said by Kandinsky to reject this balance.

And it seems today that one no longer finds a goal in this ideal, that the lever which holds the balance pans of the scale has disappeared and that both balance pans intend to lead their existence separately, as self-contained units independent of each other....

On the one hand the diverting support in the objective is taken away from the abstract and the observer feels himself floating in the air. One says: art is losing its footing. On the other hand, the diverting idealization in the abstract (the "artistic element") is taken away from the objective, and the observer feels nailed to the floor.

One says: art is losing its ideal. <sup>129</sup>

Kandinsky saw his own art as pointing the way towards a new abstract art, Henri Rousseau's as pointing the way towards a new realism. The art historian Werner Haftmann gives essentially the same account in his influential *Painting in the Twentieth Century*. He marks the two directions by what he calls two symbolic acts of profound significance.

The first act was performed by Duchamp, when he chose an object at random and placed it in a strange environment as an image of the Other, whose accidental, but very material presence invested it with the very unrealistic dignity of a magic thing, a fetish. In this

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<sup>129</sup> Vassily Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form," trans. Kenneth Lindsay, in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 161.

act, the modern experience of the object was defined as the experience of the magical Other. The second act was performed by Malevich, when, in order to define in the most rigorous manner the opposite of the world of natural appearance, he declared a black square on a white ground to be a painting. In this act, the modern experience of form was defined as the experience of a concrete reality, which belongs to the human mind alone, and in which mind represents itself. The two acts, as we have said, have nothing to do with 'art': they were demonstrations, they marked off the frontiers of art as two opposite poles of human experience, the absolute thing and the absolute form — the reality of nature and the reality of man.<sup>130</sup>

In a much noted article Barbara Rose extended this model to an understanding of the Minimal Art of the sixties:

For half a century these works marked the limits of visual art. Now, however, it appears that a new generation of artists, who seem not so much inspired as impressed by Malevich and Duchamp (to the extent that they venerate them) are examining in a new context the implications of their radical decisions. Often the results are a curious synthesis of the two men's works. That such a synthesis should not only be possible, but likely, is clear in retrospect.<sup>131</sup>

We can add that it is clear not only in retrospect. Kandinsky had predicted it quite unequivocally, and so indeed had Hegel. The point becomes obvious when you think through either extreme: either the extreme of representationalism or the extreme of formalism. Take the first: pushed to an extreme representation becomes the literal representation of the represented. Pushed to an extreme, abstraction on the other hand, leaves us with the now merely present paint on the canvas, that is to say, with re-presented materials. **In re-presentation representation and abstraction converge.** What does such re-presentational art mean? In a sense it intends to mean nothing at all. So understood, modern art tends towards **silence**. Yet this movement towards silence still serves something we can call revelation: re-presentation serves the **epiphany of presence**. To the extent that our model does justice to modern art, we can say that it still is informed by an ontological understanding of art, if only in a minimal sense. What is

<sup>130</sup> Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 203.

<sup>131</sup> Barbara Rose, "A B C Art, *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 275.

revealed can no longer be given a definite content. This invites us to understand modern art as the last stage in the progress of ontological art.

## 2

What account for this? What is it about our world that prevents art in a fuller sense? Hegel points to the prestige that we have given to thought, to reflection. Thought has overtaken the fine arts. Heidegger gives what may at first seem to be a different answer: he links the death of art in its highest sense to the progress of **metaphysics**.

What then is metaphysics? What is its essence?

The essence of metaphysics is determined by the question: what is the essence of being? Metaphysics is a determination of the nature of being, an attempt to grasp the essence of what is in such a way that it can no longer elude us. The attempt to secure being leads to a refusal to count as being simply what presents itself to us, but leads the metaphysician to call being what abides, what lasts. This leads Greek metaphysics to oppose the shadowy world that presents itself to our senses to what truly is. Being and becoming are divorced. Becoming is declared an inferior kind of being, mere appearance, dependent in its being on true being. Yet this inferior being is never denied a certain autonomy. Plato thus insists on the resistance offered by sensible matter to the forms. Our experience of temporal reality thus inevitably encounters a certain opacity.

In the Middle Ages this understanding of being allied itself with the Christian understanding of an omnipotent, all-seeing creator God. Everything lies open to his gaze. For God there is no opacity.

Metaphysics enters a third stage, decisive for our situation, with Descartes: the paradigm of knowledge is discovered in the *cogito*, in the certainty with which I know that I am a thinking thing. The knowing subject is made the foundation of the being of reality, which comes to be understood as what can in principle become of clear and distinct knowledge. With this reality is given its measure in the human ability to comprehend. It is this interpretation that is presupposed by modern science and technology.

It should be evident that such an understanding of reality leaves no room for what Heidegger names the earth, for the essential opacity of whatever is real. As Heidegger

understands it, metaphysics, which triumphs in modern science and technology, threatens to become a prison that precludes access to the earth.

Nietzsche would have given a very similar account. Only he would have interpreted the history of metaphysics as an expression of the human will to power. He would have called our attention to the fact that willing power, we human beings inevitably also lack power, and that we experience our lack of power in our vulnerability, our mortality. Willing power, we find it difficult to accept our lack of power, so we seek to overpower nature, including our own nature. At least since Descartes there have been dreams that science and technology would give us ever increasing mastery over our own bodies, over disease — perhaps even over death, although this remains a dream. Unable to accept his lack of power, the human being is unable to accept his subjection to time and turns to reason to deliver him from such subjection. This is the Socratic dream, as Nietzsche describes it in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Put more traditionally, it is the dream that pride would let us dream, pride understood with the *Book of Genesis* as the desire to be like God. Pride is a word for the will to power unable to accept its lack of power. But to really say "yes" to ourselves, we have to learn to forgive ourselves that we finally lack power, that we are not and shall never be like God. Only this "yes" will allow for a genuine self-affirmation. So understood, the history of metaphysics becomes a history that has alienated us human beings from reality, especially from our own reality.

I hope you have begin to see what is at stake when Heidegger returns in the epilogue to *The Origin of the Work of Art* to Hegel's thesis that art in its highest sense lies behind us. At stake is not just art. At stake is rather the shape of modernity, where that shape is interpreted by Heidegger as the product of a history that has its origin in Greek philosophy. If Heidegger is right about this, then nothing less is at stake then our own spiritual health. That health requires first of all that we open ourselves once more to that dimension that Heidegger terms the earth. And this requires art. There is thus a sense in which this course, although called "The History of Esthetics" is necessarily also a course in metaphysics, and also, indeed especially, a course in ethics.