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**Art, Love and Beauty**

**Lecture Notes**

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## 1. Introduction: Art, Love, and Beauty

### 1

Let me begin by saying a few words about how this course relates to another course I have been teaching off and on, called the History of Aesthetics. I shall be offering it again and for the last time in the Fall of 2012. In course critiques and conversations the question kept returning why in that course I had left out certain thinkers. Schopenhauer and especially Nietzsche were most often mentioned. All I could say was that there wasn't enough time: so Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were left out. In this course, on the other hand, I shall spend quite a lot of time on them, as the course syllabus shows. As a matter of fact there is very little overlap between the two courses. Plato of course figured also in the *History of Aesthetics*, but in that course I considered selections from quite a variety of dialogues; this time, on the other hand, I will go rather carefully over just one dialogue, the *Symposium*.

Kant figured in the *History of Aesthetics* as well. But in this course he will be placed in a quite different context. To repeat: everything considered there is little overlap between the two courses. The philosophy of art, you might say, is done now in a different key. There is indeed a sense in which this course calls into question the very idea of aesthetics by exhibiting and challenging certain key assumptions commonly made about art, assumptions that underlie the aesthetic approach. These assumptions turn on the relationship between beauty and art on one side and love on the other. Hence the title of this course.

As these remarks should have made clear, what really led me to teach this course was not so much dissatisfaction with a certain one-sidedness of my History of Aesthetics course, but a desire to develop a critique of what I call the aesthetic approach. I sketched the outline of that critique in three lectures that were subsequently published as *The Broken Frame*.<sup>1</sup> Especially the first lecture, "Light Without Love,"<sup>2</sup> attempts to sketch something like the central argument of this course. But that chapter is all too sketchy. The argument presented there needed to be developed. That argument, I should add, is

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<sup>1</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Broken Frame. Three Lectures* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1989)

also a presupposition of my reflections on architecture. But enough of the background; let me turn to the topic.

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I would like to approach it by turning to two statements by the painter Giorgio de Chirico. You will also find them in *The Broken Frame*. The first is from his "Meditations of a Painter" and dates from 1912.

Let me recount how I had a revelation of a picture that I will show this year at the *Salon d'Autonne*, entitled *Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*. One clear autumnal afternoon I was sitting on a bench in the middle of the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence. It was of course not the first time I had seen this square. I was coming out of a long and painful intestinal illness, and I was in a nearly morbid state of sensitivity. The whole world, down to the marble of the buildings and the fountains, seemed to me to be convalescent. In the middle of the square rises a statue of Dante draped in a long cloak, holding his works, clasped against his body, his laurel-crowned head bent thoughtfully earthward. The statue is in white marble, but time has given it a gray cast, very agreeable to the eye. The autumn sun, warm and unloving, lit the statue and the church façade. Then I had the strange impression that I was looking at all these things for the first time, and the composition of my picture came to the mind's eye. Now, each time I look at this picture I again see that moment. Nevertheless the moment is an enigma to me, for it is inexplicable. And I would like to call the work that sprang from it an enigma.<sup>3</sup>

The painter here tells of how the idea of a work of art, a painting came to him. The account appears very personal, so we should not be too quick to generalize from this account about the nature of artistic inspiration. But with this warning in mind, let us look more carefully at the passage:

1. The painter links his revelation to a peculiar **dislocation** brought about by poor health. The artist appears here as someone who takes leave from the everyday and its ways of seeing and understanding.
2. Note that this dislocation brings with it a **transfiguration** of the familiar, which becomes **mysterious, enigmatic**.

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<sup>2</sup> Karsten Harries, "Light Without Love," [www.tau.ac.il/~rironen/readers/hrries.html](http://www.tau.ac.il/~rironen/readers/hrries.html).

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, "Meditations of a Painter," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1968), p. 397.

3. Transfiguration here means also a transformation of our usual sense of time. De Chirico speaks of a magical, enigmatic **moment** that allows him to see things **as if for the first time**. In this sense the painter's vision is an **original seeing**.

3. The painting **recalls** or **repeats** that original moment.

4. Striking is the way our attention is called to the quality of the **light**, an autumn light that is said to be warm and **unloving**. I want to emphasize this **dissociation of light and love**.

The second statement, dating from the following year, is from "Mystery and Creation." Once again de Chirico attempts to describe the kind of experience that gives rise to art.

I remember one vivid winter's day at Versailles. Silence and calm reigned supreme. Everything gazed at me with mysterious, questioning eyes: And then I realized that every corner of the palace, every column, every window possessed a spirit, an impenetrable soul. I looked at the marble heroes, motionless in the lucid air, beneath the frozen rays of the winter sun, which pours down on us without love, like perfect song. A bird was warbling in a window cage. At that moment I grew aware of the mystery which urges man to create certain strange forms. And the creation seemed more extraordinary than the creators.<sup>4</sup>

Once again the painter describes a remembered aesthetic experience. Several moments of the first description recur. Once again there is

1. The **transfiguration** of the familiar.

2. The apparent **freezing of time** in aesthetic experience, mirroring here the frozen landscape.

3. The **dissociation of light and love**.

4. The association of such loveless light with **artistic perfection**.

5. The paradigm of such perfection is **song**.

But let me return to the crucial simile

I looked at the marble heroes, motionless in the lucid air, beneath the frozen rays of the winter sun, which pours down on us without love, like perfect song.

Is the beautiful object like a sun? In what way? Does beauty illuminate? Does it allow us to see? How are beauty and visibility linked? And why does de Chirico once again emphasize **without love**. As we shall see, when philosophical speculation on the nature of the beautiful begins with the Greeks, the beautiful is indeed likened to **light**, but it is

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, "Meditations of a Painter," in *Theories of Modern Art*, p. 397.

also brought into an intimate relationship to **love**. The *Symposium*, to which we shall turn next time, will help us to become clearer about the relationship of beauty and love. But regardless of how this relationship is to be understood, de Chirico at any rate emphatically disputes that connection by placing aesthetic experience in opposition to love.

To show that this is not at all an idiosyncratic text, let me turn to a third text, to which de Chirico descriptions refer us. For while the quoted texts give the impression of personal recollections, Chirico remembers not only what he experienced on the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence or at Versailles. He also remembers a passage from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. We shall return to Schopenhauer later, but let me cite here already from the third book:

Light is the largest diamond in the crown of beauty, and has the most decided influence on the knowledge of every beautiful object. Its presence generally is an indispensable condition; its favorable arrangement enhances even the beauty of the beautiful.

But above all else, the beautiful in architecture is enhanced by the favor of light, and through it even the most insignificant thing becomes a beautiful object. Now if in the depth of winter, when the whole of nature is frozen and stiff, we see the rays of the setting sun reflected by masses of stone, where they illuminate without warming, and are thus favorable only to the purest kind of knowledge, not to the will, the contemplation of the beautiful effect of light on these masses moves us into a state of pure knowing, as all beauty does.<sup>5</sup> (WWR, I, 203)

Once again we meet with the association of beauty with light. Light is not only necessary for something to be seen. Its favorable arrangement is said to enhance beauty, making what is already beautiful even more so. Beauty once again seems to have something to do with visibility. The more beautiful is also more visible. We shall have plenty of occasions to return to this association of beauty and light, but what I am more interested in here is the way in which Schopenhauer, too, speaks of the winter sun, which illuminates, but does not warm. He himself explains that significance for us.

Yet here, through the faint recollection of the lack of warmth from those rays, in other words, of the absence of the principle of life, a certain transcending of the interest of the will is required.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), vol. 1, p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Beauty is thought here in opposition to the interest of the will. That interest must be left behind. But love, for Schopenhauer, is very much an expression of the interested will. Schopenhauer thus places aesthetic experience and its object, the beautiful, in opposition to the will and to love. De Chirico thus only follows Schopenhauer when he links the beautiful to a loveless light.

Schopenhauer in turn is hardly original when he places the beautiful in opposition to life and its interests. He only develops Kant's famous definition of the **beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction**. And Kant, in turn, looks back to the eighteenth century philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who gave us not only the word "**aesthetics**" as a name for the philosophical inquiry into aesthetic experience, but, also established aesthetics as a discipline, one of the main branches of philosophy. I shall spend quite a bit of time on Baumgarten, Kant, and Schopenhauer, if only to question the approach they helped to articulate. But I mention them here first of all to suggest that De Chirico's divorce of light and love is not at all idiosyncratic, but representative of an **approach to beauty and art that for well over two centuries has helped to shape both the theory and the practice of art**. To give you at least some understanding of the extent to which the latter, too, holds, I shall look to both Alberti's *On Painting*, a text in which a distinctly modern approach to art may be said to delineate itself, long before Baumgarten gave it a philosophical voice, and to two artists, Stella and Judd, who well represent the aesthetic approach; also to the art critic Michael Fried, who has argued in a number of different texts that what I have called here the aesthetic approach is indeed today the only authentic approach to art. That approach would have us think beauty and art in opposition to love. And this approach, as we shall see, is but the other side of a distinctly modern understanding of reality, an understanding that has helped to define the shape of the world we live in. To challenge the aesthetic approach is inevitably also to challenge modernity. This is why this course concludes with some **postmodern reflections**.

And this is why the discussion of the aesthetic approach is framed here as it is: by a discussion of **Plato's *Symposium***, on the one hand, and by a discussion of **Marcuse** and **Nietzsche**, on the other. Nietzsche especially can help us to arrive at a very different understanding of the beautiful than that, which has dominated the aesthetic approach. To bring out more sharply the difference between Nietzsche's understanding of art and that

represented by Kant and Schopenhauer let me read you here a passage from the *Genealogy of Morals*:

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues "without interest," one may laugh a little at their expense: the experience of artists on this ticklish point are more "interesting" and Pygmalion was in any event *not* necessarily an unaesthetic man." Let us think all the more highly of the innocence of our aestheticians, which is reflected in such arguments; let us, for example, credit it to the honor of Kant that he should expatiate on the peculiar properties of the sense of touch with the naiveté of a country parson.<sup>7</sup>

Nietzsche here has his fun with Kant. Beauty, he suggests, is too intimately tied to love to allow us to be convinced by Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested perception. Note that on Kant's understanding there cannot be, by definition, such a thing as erotic, let alone pornographic art, at least if by a work of art we understand an object created to give aesthetic pleasure, i.e. to be beautiful. If it succeeds as art it is illuminated by that loveless light of which de Chirico speaks, or as Kant would put it, experienced as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. If you show that something is art, you have thereby also shown that it is not pornography. Nietzsche would have smiled at such an argument. He would suggest that erotic interest and beauty are far more intimately linked. And I invite you to test his suspicion. Titian, more than perhaps any other painter, helped to establish the nude as an artistic genre. When one looks at one of his nudes, does the pleasure we take in them have nothing to do with erotic interest, with love? Or, if it does, does this mean that we have failed to assume the proper aesthetic stance, as Kant would seem to suggest. Nietzsche would have called this naive. And following Nietzsche, Freud has made such naiveté even more difficult for us moderns. But once again, the insight into the relationship that joins art, love, and beauty did not have to wait for Nietzsche, who could be said to have reasserted what in some sense seems inseparable from our humanity. Edmund Burke stated what must have seemed quite obvious to him, when he linked beauty to love and defined beauty as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love or some passion similar to

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 6, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 347; trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 104.



it."<sup>8</sup> And with this definition he may be thought to have cast a fundamentally Platonic insight into his own language.

But does this mean that de Chirico, Schopenhauer, and Kant are just wrong when they place beauty in opposition to love. **Should we perhaps distinguish two kinds of beauty, one linked, the other divorced from love?** Plato's *Symposium* gives us a first answer to this question. I shall turn to it next time.

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<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 38.

## 2. The Two Faces of Beauty

### 1

If there is one text that has informed all subsequent discussions of love and beauty it is Plato's *Symposium*. So it is only fitting that this course on *Art, Love, and Beauty* should begin with this text. But before I turn to it, I would like to return to my introductory lecture: in that lecture I opposed two very different conceptions of beauty: One of these understands beauty as object of a pure, disinterested contemplation. On that understanding beauty has nothing to do with love, at least if love has something to do with sexual desire. Indeed, the appreciation of beauty and such desire are essentially opposed. But that understanding of beauty is opposed by another, that links beauty to love. This suggests that it may be necessary to distinguish two very different sorts of beauty. The need to draw such a distinction suggests itself already in Plato's *Symposium*.

But before turning to Plato's *Symposium* I would like to introduce our topic by considering briefly three passages from another *Symposium*, this one by another of Socrates' students, by Xenophon, written just a few years after Plato's. The situation is quite similar to that in Plato's dialogue: Socrates and some friends are invited to a symposium given by the wealthy Callias in honor of the beautiful young Autolycus, who had just won an important athletic competition. After some objections they finally accept the invitation. After a while Autolycus arrives with his father. The following passage describes the effect he has on those present.

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>9</sup> (my emphases)

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.

2. Xenophon likens the beautiful to the sudden glow of a **light** at night, which draws all eyes to itself. We encountered this simile already last time: de Chirico's likened "the winter sun which pours down on us without love" to "perfect song." In what sense then is beauty like a light. To return to the Xenophon passage: when the beautiful is likened to light, is Xenophon just repeating the first point? Light illuminates. It renders visible. Is there a sense in which **the beautiful renders visible**? It invites us to look again. Think of a person of striking beauty. And you should note that Xenophon's paradigm of a beautiful object is not a work of art, but a person.

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. The beautiful displaces us. **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.

There are a number of points here that are recalled by the two passages by de Chirico I read you last time. There is of course one important difference: While de Chirico separates love and beauty, Xenophon links them. Beauty is understood as the object of love. As we shall see, in his *Symposium* Plato takes this connection pretty much for granted. On this point at least the modern aesthetic understanding of beauty and the Greek understanding appear to be quite different. But the case is complicated by the following passage; Socrates is here complimenting Callias:

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<sup>9</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 also Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike*. (DuMont Dokumente.

Now, I have always felt an admiration for your character, but at the present time I feel a much keener one, for I see that you are in love with a person who is not marked by dainty elegance or wanton effeminacy, but shows to the world physical strength and stamina, virile courage and sobriety. Setting one's heart on such traits gives an insight into the lover's character. Now, whether there is **one Aphrodite or two, 'Heavenly' and 'Vulgar,'** I do now know; for even Zeus, though considered one and the same, yet has many by-names. I do know, however, that in the case of Aphrodite there are separate altars and temples for the two, and also rituals, those of the 'Vulgar' Aphrodite excelling in looseness, those of the 'Heavenly' in chastity. One might conjecture, also that different types of love come from the different sources, carnal love from the 'Vulgar' Aphrodite, and from the 'Heavenly' spiritual love, love of friendship and of noble conduct.<sup>10</sup> (my emphases)

Either there are two Aphrodites, Socrates suggests here, or Aphrodite appears in two forms. And the same would appear to hold for love. There is a celestial, spiritual love and an earthly carnal love. And if we understand beauty, with Xenophon and Plato, as the object of love, then we should expect a similar doubling of beauty: on one hand a celestial, spiritual beauty, on the other a beauty very much of this world and linked to sexual desire. But note also that Socrates here says he does not know “whether there is **one Aphrodite or two.**” Perhaps what appears as two is more fundamentally one. When, following hints by de Chirico, Schopenhauer, and Kant, I sketched in the first lecture an opposition between beauty and love, beauty was understood very much as spiritual beauty, love, on the other hand, in the second sense, as earthly love. This then would not seem to imply necessarily an opposition between spiritual beauty and spiritual love.

In Xenophon's *Symposium* it would seem to be the Vulgar Aphrodite who triumphs in the end and is given the last word. Towards the end of this symposium Autolycus leaves with his father to take a walk, while a Syracusan entertainer comes in with this announcement:

"Gentlemen, Ariadne will now enter the chamber set apart for her and Dionysus; after that, Dionysus, a little flushed with wine drunk at the banquet of the gods, will come to join her; and then they will disport themselves together."<sup>11</sup> ...

The onlookers viewed a Dionysus truly handsome, an Ariadne truly fair, not presenting a burlesque, but offering genuine kisses with their lips; and they were all raised to a high

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Reihe I: Kunstgeschichte. Deutung, Dokumente, 1962). Grassi invites us to understand this passage as perhaps the first phenomenological description of beauty.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII, 9 – 11, pp. 615 - 617.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 633.

pitch of enthusiasm as they looked on. For they overheard Dionysus asking her if she loved him, and heard her vowing that she did, so that not only Dionysus, but all the bystanders as well would have taken their oaths in confirmation that the youth and the maid surely felt a mutual affection. For theirs was the appearance not of actors who had been taught their poses, but of persons now permitted to satisfy their long-cherished desires. At last, the banqueters, seeing them in each other's embrace and obviously leaving for the bridal couch, those who were unwedded swore that they would take to themselves wives, and those who were already married mounted horse and rode off to their wives that they might enjoy them. As for Socrates and the others who had lingered behind, they went out with Callias to join Lycon and his son in their walk.

So broke up the banquet held that evening.<sup>12</sup>

Note how differently the participants in this *Symposium* respond to the beautiful spectacle they have just witnessed. The pantomime of Ariadne and Dionysus, too, lets them be seized by a divinity, by love, but this time it is very much an earthly love. The heavenly love and the beauty that corresponds to it, lets us be silent, calms us; perhaps, looking ahead to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, we can speak here of an Apollinian beauty.

Dionysian beauty, on the other hand, awakens an earthly love that is very much interested, that spurs us to action; in this case the onlookers are filled with the desire to marry and to make love, where love is now understood very much as the love of a man and a woman. Note that Socrates and Callias alone are not swept up into this Dionysian frenzy. Socrates, who, according to Xenophon, in his defense to the Athenians called himself the freest of all Athenians from bodily appetites, does not fall under the spell of Dionysus, does not go home to his wife Xanthippe; instead, accompanied by Callias, he joins Autolycus and his father Lycon on their walk.

I have turned to Xenophon's *Symposium* to give you a first understanding of the distinction between two kinds of love, linked to two kinds of beauty, which not only frames Xenophon's *Symposium*, but provides a key to Plato's *Symposium*.

## 2

Let me begin by considering briefly the structure of the dialogue. A frame is provided: Apollodorus is relating the story of the symposium given long ago (in 416BC; the date of the telling is about 401BC, two years before the death of Socrates; Athens in the meantime had lost the Peloponnesian War, in which one of the participants in the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 635

dialogue, Alcibiades, had played such a disastrous role, contributing significantly to Athens' final defeat at the hands of Sparta with the ill-fated Syracusan venture). We are thus separated from this symposium about healing **eros**, about love, by a prolonged period of strife, of **eris**. The opposition of eros and eris permeates the dialogue, with its many little squabbles. Eros is presented to us as the power capable of healing strife, eris. And **eris** figures in this dialogue in many forms, as of course does **eros**.

The event was given by Agathon, in honor of the first prize he had just received for a tragedy. The story of what went on is told by a certain Apollodorus to an unnamed Athenian. Apollodorus is retelling a story that he told Glaucon two days earlier. The story itself was related to Apollodorus (the name means gift of Apollo) by Aristodemus, who was at the party and later checked some details with Socrates. The story is thus several times removed from the actual events. This may make us wonder about the accuracy of the account; the story after all, is said to "sound like ancient history"; it also gives it a certain timeless quality. Already at that time this symposium seems to have acquired something like a mythic quality.

Both Apollodorus, the storyteller, and Aristodemus, are historical persons, known to have been ardent admirers of Socrates. Apollodorus, we learn, "makes it his business to know everything he says and does every day" (172 e), while Aristodemus is said to have been one of Socrates' "greatest lovers in those days" (173b). He appears to have followed Socrates rather like a puppy dog. Socrates' other lover in the dialogue is of course Alcibiades, although Agathon, too, flirts with him. Except for Aristophanes all the other speakers in the *Symposium* are thus paired by love: Erixymachus loves Phaedrus, Pausanias loves Agathon. The dialogue is thus not only about love, but the setting is provided by lovers engaged in conversation.

It is interesting to note that the storyteller, Apollodorus, is a rather unpleasant fellow, full of spite. Consider the stranger's description:

You're always the same, Apollodorus, — you're always running down yourself and other people; as far as I can see you believe that, but for Socrates, everybody in the world is wretched, beginning with yourself. I don't know where exactly you got your nickname of fanatic, but you live up to it in your conversation, at any rate; you are in a perpetual passion with everybody, yourself included, except Socrates. (173d-e)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951).

It is odd that this story about love, about **eros** should be told by someone so cantankerous, so full of **eris**. And yet Apollodorus is also filled with eros, where Socrates is of course the object of this love. In the *Phaedo* we learn that when Socrates dies Apollodorus weeps uncontrollably. In him eris and eros appear strangely intertwined.

**Apollodorus** tells us a story he had heard from **Aristodemus**, who tells as part of his story **Socrates'** speech, in which Socrates retells what he had heard from **Diotima** concerning eros. Eros, Socrates, Aristodemus, and Apollodorus are linked by a certain resemblance: The ugly unsandaled Socrates resembles eros, as Diotima will describe him, and Aristodemus is said to be, like Socrates: little and barefoot. A chain of resemblances links Apollodorus to eros.

Aristodemus tells of having met Socrates coming from the baths, for a change wearing sandals, having made himself beautiful in honor of Agathon, so that beauty might match beauty, as he puts it. In a way Socrates has **disguised** himself for the sake of the poet (174 a - d). Socrates then asks Aristodemus to come along and the latter accepts.

"Come on then," he said. "We'll give a new turn to the old saying 'To good man's parties good men flock unasked'; it needs only the smallest change. As a matter of fact, Homer seems to have done actual violence to the proverb and not merely perverted it. His Agamemnon is a pre-eminently good soldier whereas Menelaus is a 'feeble fighter', and yet, when Agamemnon makes a sacrifice and entertains his friends, Menelaus is represented as coming unasked, though his host is the far better man." "I am afraid," I said, "that Homer's description will fit me better than yours, Socrates, a nobody going unasked to a pundit's party." (174b-c)

What is the point of this detail of the uninvited guest?<sup>14</sup> Curious is the banter with Homer: Homer is accused of having done violence to the old proverb. Socrates would correct Homer, only to have Aristodemus side with the poet. The feeble fighter, Menelaus, was of course the husband of Helen, the most beautiful of all earthly women, an earthly Aphrodite. She became the origin of the Trojan War. **Eros resulted in eris**. It is well here to recall why all this came to pass. At the marriage party of Peleus and the goddess Thetis, Achilles was their son, the goddess Eris arrived uninvited, just like Aristodemus. She throws in an apple, marked "for the most beautiful." Hera, Athena,

and Aphrodite begin to quarrel, each claiming it. Zeus calls on Paris, the most handsome mortal, to be the judge, and by promising him Helen, the most beautiful of mortal women, Aphrodite gains the prize. This victory of Aphrodite is thus the beginning of the Trojan War. Once again: eros begets eris, but an eros that from the very beginning appears ruled by eris. But is this perhaps a general effect of eros? Recall how Apollodorus's love of Socrates makes him into a cantankerous fellow, at odds with himself and with others, or how Aristodemus feels worthless and poor next to Socrates. Love lets him become aware of his lowly, imperfect state. Like eros, eris shows us two faces, one destructive, tied to the lower eros, the other constructive, leading us towards greater perfection.

But let me continue with the quote:

"If you take me you must think of some excuse; I won't admit that I've come unasked; I shall say that you asked me." "Let us be going," he said; "two heads will be better than one at deciding what to say." (174c-d)

The last is again a quote. The words are spoken by Diomedes when he picks Odysseus for a spying mission against the Trojan camp (Iliad X). Plato thus likens Agathon's house to the Trojan camp, presided over by Helen, by the earthly Aphrodite. Socrates appears as someone who would challenge her rule.

But let me continue with the introduction: Socrates falls behind, in one of his characteristic trances, and Aristodemus finds himself, without realizing it, alone, split off from his love. In these trances two orders intersect: the vertical dimension of everyday time, which would have us be aware of the proper time to eat, to go to bed, etc, is intersected by a vertical dimension that reaches up to the realm of the forms. This tension between the two dimensions is echoed by the subsequent banter between Socrates and Agathon, the host.

"It would be very nice, Agathon, if wisdom were like water and flowed by contact out of a person who has more into one who has less, just as water can be made to pass through a thread of wool out of the fuller of two cups into the emptier. If that applied to wisdom, I value the privilege of sitting next to you very highly, for I have no doubt that you will fill me with an ample draught of the finest wisdom." (175d-e)

Socrates is of course aware that such a horizontal relationship, an exchange of fluid, is incapable of filling someone with genuine wisdom.

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<sup>14</sup> My reading of the symposium is indebted to conversations with Charles Salman,



When Socrates has settled, they make the usual libations, but the symposiasts, with the exception of Socrates, are too hungover from the preceding day's festivities to embark on another Dionysiac revel. So they decide instead to moderate their drinking, to send away the flute-girls, and to entertain themselves with conversation, agreeing with the proposal of the doctor Erixymachus that they speak in praise of love. Note that just as sobriety is to replace drinking, conversation is to replace music, Socrates' higher beauty is to replace the beauty associated with the flute-girl, the higher is to replace the lower love. However, as we shall see, in the end the agreement is broken, the flute-girls return and with the exception of Socrates everyone gets drunk. As in Xenophon's symposium, the lower Aphrodite is triumphant, but not over Socrates.

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whose dissertation, "The Contrivance of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," 1986, I directed.

### 3. The First Four Speeches

#### 1

Last time I discussed the very deliberate way in which Plato frames the *Symposium*. You should keep in mind that the time of the supposed telling of the story is 401 BC, three years after the end of the Peloponnesian War. The symposium that is the subject of the narrative happened much earlier, in 416, in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, just before Alcibiades led the Athenians into the disastrous Syracusan venture. This celebration of love, of **eros**, thus took place in a time of war or strife, of **eris**. I suggested that the interplay of eros and eris pervades this dialogue.

I left off last time when, after the arrival of Socrates, the hungover symposiasts, following a suggestion by the doctor Erixymachus, decide to moderate their drinking, to send away the flute girl, and to entertain themselves with conversation. All agree with the proposal that they speak in praise of love.

"Nobody will vote against your proposal, Erixymachus," said Socrates. "I certainly shall not, for I declare that love is the only subject that I understand, nor will Agathon and Pausanias, I am sure, nor yet Aristophanes, whose entire business lies with Dionysus and Aphrodite, nor anyone else that I see here." (177d-e)

Socrates and Aristophanes are given here a privileged position, where we may well wonder why Socrates should say that **love is the only subject he understands**, while Aristophanes' **entire business is said to be with Dionysus and Aphrodite**. Note again the two levels of eros that are here suggested, one lower and one higher: one more associated with Apollo and Socrates, the other with Dionysus and Aristophanes. Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollinian and the Dionysian is here anticipated.

The *Symposium* begins on the higher plane. Socrates would seem to be its real hero. In keeping with this is the decision that sobriety should replace drinking, conversation should replace music; Socrates' higher beauty is to replace the beauty associated with the flute girl, the higher the lower love. As we shall see, in the end the agreement is broken, the flute girls return and with the exception of Socrates everyone gets drunk.

With this let us turn to the first four speeches of the *Symposium*. Of these the first three belong together. Pausanias explicitly addresses himself to Phaedrus's speech, while Erixymachus responds to Pausanias. Aristophanes speech is set apart from the others.

## 2

Phaedrus praises Love as the most ancient of all beings, citing in evidence the fact that the poets never attribute to love any parents.

Hesiod tells us that Chaos first came into existence,

but next

Broad-breasted Earth, on whose foundation firm

Creation stands, and Love. (42)

As a matter of fact, Phaedrus appears to have misquoted a famous passage from Hesiod's *Theogony*, which originally spoke of four primal deities:

Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all (4) the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros (Love),...<sup>15</sup>

Phaedrus's account thus begins with a **repression of the split**, that figures in Hesiod's account between **Gaia**, the steadfast seat of the immortals, and the murky depth of **Tartaros**. The Repression of the split is also a **repression of Tartaros**.

But let me continue with Phaedrus's speech:

Now, as Love is the oldest of the gods, so also he confers upon us the greatest benefits, for I would maintain that there can be no greater benefit for a boy than to have a worthy lover from his earliest youth, nor for a lover than to have a worthy object for his affection. (42)

Recall that Phaedrus is loved by Erixymachus. Phaedrus makes a lot of the ennobling quality of love. He speaks of the shame lovers feel before the other when they do something dishonorable. For this reason, he argues, lovers would do well in war; eros can be made to serve eris.

If then one could contrive that a state or an army should entirely consist of lovers and loved, it would be impossible for it to have a better organization than that which it would then enjoy through their avoidance of all dishonour and their mutual emulation; moreover a handful of such men, fighting side by side, would defeat practically the whole world. A lover would rather be seen by all his comrades leaving his post or throwing away his arms than by his beloved; rather than that, he would prefer a thousand times to die. (178e-179a)

Note how the themes of love and war, **eros** and **eris** here intertwine, and how both intertwine with that of **death**. Lovers makes such good soldiers because how they appear

<sup>15</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, ll. 116-121, trans. trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White.

to the beloved is more important to them than their own lives. Love makes us take ourselves less seriously; it lets us be less self-centered; allow us to sacrifice, even our own life, for the beloved. Death therefore means less to one who truly loves. This is illustrated by the story of Alcestis:

Moreover, only lovers will sacrifice their lives for another; this is true of women as well as men. In speaking to Greeks I need no example to support this assertion beyond that provided by Pelias' daughter Alcestis. She was the only person who was willing to die for her husband, though he had a father and mother living. Her heroism in making this sacrifice appeared so noble in the eyes not only of men, but of gods, that they conferred upon her a privilege which has been granted to very few among the many performers of noble deeds. In admiration of her behavior they released her soul from Hades; so highly do even the gods honor the active courage which belongs to love. (179b-c)

By opening himself or herself to the beloved, the lover's self and therefore death come to mean less. And just this is said to be rewarded by the gods with true life. There is a suggestion that it is only when we learn to transcend ourselves in love so that we don't take ourselves too seriously, that we begin to truly live.

Note the contrast drawn by Phaedrus between Alcestis and Orpheus, who contrived to enter Hades alive and ended up losing not only Eurydice, his love, but in the end his own life. But note also the way Phaedrus places Achilles even above Alcestis. Achilles, he insists, revising Aeschylus, was Patroclus' beloved:

The truth is that, while the gods greatly honour the courage of a lover, they admire even more and reward more richly affection shown towards a lover by the beloved, because the lover is possessed and thus comes nearer than the beloved to being divine. That is why they honored Achilles more highly than Alcestis and sent him to the Island of the Blest. (180a-b)

We should note that the almost divine lover is placed here below the fully human beloved who returns the lover's love with affection.

The invocation of Achilles is interesting. We should remember that Phaedrus is the beloved of Erixymachus. By choosing Achilles for his hero, and by rereading Aeschylus as he does, he also praises himself.

But more important is perhaps another point: Once more we are invited to interpret the *Symposium* against the background of the *Iliad*. For the sake of his personal honor Achilles, you may recall, withdraws from the Greek army and sulks, convinced that they need him more than he needs them. Preoccupied with himself, full of pride, he withdraws from the community. In the end it is not the promise of honor, glory, power,

and wealth that leads Achilles back into battle, but the **death** of, Patroclus, according to Phaedrus, his lover. By then of course it was no longer possible for Achilles to die for his lover, as Alcestis was willing to die for her husband. There is a sense, despite what Phaedrus has to say, in which she would seem to be the more obvious heroine. Achilles' return to battle comes too late. **His eros comes too late to triumph over eris.** We should ask ourselves whether this does not cast a light on the dialogue as a whole. Is it not a dialogue where eros comes too late to triumph over eris? Remember that the telling of the story follows the for Athens disastrous end of the Peloponnesian War. Socrates could not do anything about this. Indeed a number of his disciples and admirers, most notably Alcibiades, played an unfortunate part in Athenian politics.

In this connection consider the parallels Plato establishes between Achilles and Socrates. With the *Symposium* Plato is entering into a contest with Homer: **Socrates is Plato's hero, the *Symposium* his *Iliad*.**

### 3

The older Pausanias, the lover of Agathon, is of all the participants in the *Symposium*, the most outspoken defender of pederasty. He begins his speech by disputing Phaedrus's claim that love has a single nature:

We all know that Aphrodite is inseparably linked with Love. If there were a single Aphrodite there would be a single Love, but as there are two Aphrodites, it follows that there must be two loves as well. Now what are the two Aphrodites? One is elder and is the daughter of Uranus and had no mother; her we call the Heavenly Aphrodite. The other is younger and the daughter of Zeus and Dione, and is called the Common Aphrodite. (180d)

Perhaps we should recall here that in the *Theogony* the Heavenly Aphrodite is born when after Cronus sunders Heaven and Earth, by castrating Uranus. Aphrodite is thus born in an act of extreme violence, although once again this violence is repressed by the speaker. Out of the water, from the seed of the genitals, came the heavenly Aphrodite. **Splitting gave birth to love.**

Pausanias's distinction between two kinds of love returns us to the distinction between two kinds of love that we encountered already in Xenophon. Pausanias splits Aphrodite into two Aphrodites, the higher and the lower. He then goes on to describe the two Aphrodites:

There can be no doubt of the common nature of the Love which goes with the Common Aphrodite; it is quite random in the effects which it produces, and it is this love which the baser sort of men feel. Its marks are, first, that it is directed towards women quite as much as young men; second, that it prefers that its objects should be as unintelligent as possible, because its only aim is the satisfaction of its desires, and it takes no account of the manner in which this is achieved. That is why its effect is purely a matter of chance, and quite as often bad as good. (181b)

Note that Pausanias would associate the heterosexual love of Alcestis with the Common Aphrodite. The Heavenly Aphrodite, as he understands her, completely subordinates love to a male logos: here is his characterization of the Heavenly Aphrodite:

But the Heavenly Aphrodite to whom the other love belongs for one thing has no female strain in her, but springs entirely from the male, and for another is older and consequently free from wantonness. Hence those who are inspired by this Love are attracted towards the male sex. (181c)

Pausanias goes on to suggest that the intention of such lovers is to form a lasting attachment and partnership for life. (181d)

Throughout Pausanias's speech one senses a fear of time, also a fear of the anarchic potential of love. Logos is invoked to help us escape from time and chaos. Pausanias thus suggests that there should be laws or codes of behavior to restrain the vulgar sort of lovers. Characteristic of vulgar love is its inconstancy.

The aging Pausanias seems obsessed with the problem of time and that means inevitably also with the body and with sexuality:

The bad man is the common or vulgar lover, who is in love with the body rather than the soul; he is not constant because what he loves is not constant; as soon as the flower of physical beauty, which is what he loves, begins to fade, he is gone "even as a dream", and all his professions and promises are as nothing. But the lover of a noble nature remains its lover for life, because the thing to which he cleaves is constant. (183e)

One wonders whether Pausanias's higher love would involve the body at all.

The next speaker, the doctor Erixymachus, is right to call attention to **Pausanias' repression of the body and thus of divorcing love from sexuality.**

#### 4

Before Erixymachus speaks, however, there is an interlude. The body disturbs the orderly progress of the *Symposium*. Aristophanes, who was supposed to be the next

speaker, was hiccupping. So he asks Erixymachus to either cure his hiccup or to take his place. Erixymachus, the doctor, answers that he will do both.

What is the point of this interlude? First of all it reminds us of the way we humans depend on our bodies. But the interlude also invites us to play with the thought of placing Aristophanes' speech in the third place. There is indeed a parallel between the speeches of Erixymachus and Aristophanes. Both refuse to accept Pausanias' splitting off of love from sexuality. Both understand love as a healing power.

Erixymachus, to be sure, begins by agreeing with Pausanias, although he accuses him of having brought his argument to an inadequate conclusion. There are indeed two kinds of love, but having admitted this, he rather quickly goes on to speak of love in the singular as

a great and wonderful god whose influence extends everywhere, and embraces the world of men and gods alike. (186a-b)

Erixymachus refuses to oppose the two loves as body to spirit; instead he distinguishes the love of a healthy body from that of a diseased body. A good doctor knows that we should not give in to every desire. Although it is said to be under the control of the god of love, medicine appears rather as the art of controlling potentially destructive love.

## 5

With Aristophanes the discussion moves to an altogether higher level. In humorous terms, as befits a comic poet, Aristophanes begins by describing an original state of mankind:

First of all, you must learn the constitution of man and the modifications which it has undergone, for originally it was different from what it is now. In the first place there were three sexes, not, as with us, two, male and female; the third partook of the nature of both and has vanished, though its name survives. The hermaphrodite was a distinct sex both in form as well as in name, with the characteristics of both male and female, but now the name alone remains, and that solely as a term of abuse. Secondly, each human being was a rounded whole, with double back and flanks forming a complete circle; it had four hands and an equal number of legs, and two identically similar faces upon a circular neck, with one head common to the faces, which were turned in opposite direction. (189d-190a)

We should note the symmetry of the genders in Aristophanes's discussion. The privileging of the male has pretty much disappeared.

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.

Their strength and vigour made them very formidable, and their pride was overweening; they attacked the gods, and Homer's story of Ephialtes and Otus attempting to climb up to heaven and set upon the gods is also related of these beings. (190b)

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:

"I think," he said, "that I have found a way by which we can allow the human race to continue to exist and also put an end to their wickedness by making them weaker. I will, cut each of them in two; in this way they will be weaker, and at the same time more profitable to us by being more numerous. They shall walk upright on two legs. If there is any sign of wantonness in them after that, and they will not keep quiet, I will bisect them again, and they shall hop on one leg." (190c-d)

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. The devil had found its way into paradise. And in Adam, too, this lack of perfection manifests itself as **pride**. Both Aristophanes and *Genesis* make a **pride that claims what belongs to the divine source of the fall**. We human dream of a plenitude denied to us.

The similarities between the Aristophanic and the Biblical accounts makes it hardly surprising that they should have been joined. One thinker who did so is the 9th century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena in Book Four of his *The Division of Nature*. The division of human nature into two sexes is here understood as the result of sin. In Jesus Christ this division was overcome, and he thus figures the resurrection to come when human beings shall be neither man nor woman, but simply human, as they were before the fall. We should note the pervasive dialectic: the old, androgynous Adam fell and was split onto two sexes. Thus he was made incomplete, lacking, although once more there must have been some imperfection present from the very beginning, otherwise there would have been no possibility of sin.



This lack of fallen humanity is tied by Eriugena first of all (1) to human **transitoriness**. Simply as temporal, the human being is lacking. We know that someday all that we are and can accomplish will be past, letting us 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, as a fragment. Our understanding of time brings with it a desire for completeness.

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. Mortality and individuality seem inseparably related. The person who tries to hold on to himself as an individual cannot help but fear death.

And finally (3) Eriugena emphasizes the **division of the sexes**. Like all desire, sexual desire shows us human beings to be lacking, incomplete.

Aristophanes, too, would have us understand love as a desire for self-completion.

... love is simply the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole. Originally, as I say, we were whole beings, before our wickedness caused us to be split by Zeus, as the Arcadians have been split apart by the Spartans [the reference is to the punishment inflicted by the Spartans on Mantinea, an event that took place only in 385 BC and thus an anachronism]. We have reason to fear that if we do not behave ourselves in the sight of heaven, we may be split in two again, like dice which are bisected for tallies, and go about like the people presented in profile on tombstones, sawn in two vertically down the line of our noses. (193a)

Aristophanes concludes by suggesting that given our present condition, the way to happiness lies in the individual finding his or her other half, the mate that properly belongs to him or her; and once again Aristophanes refuses to privilege the male, but insists that he is speaking of men and women in general.

Eros is understood here as the desire for the whole. But beauty is understood by Plato as the object of eros. **All earthly beauty thus figures the whole of which we dream** and are yet denied by our fallen state. This understanding of beauty will be developed in Socrates's speech, to which I shall turn next time.

#### 4. Socrates

##### 1

Before turning to the speech of Socrates, let us take a brief look at the speech by Agathon — remember that he had just won an important prize as a tragic poet — and at the banter between Socrates and Agathon that both precedes and follows that speech. After Aristophanes has finished, Socrates flatters Agathon, although there are barbs in his flattery:

'You want to upset me by making me think that the audience has formed great expectations of my eloquence.'

'I should be forgetful indeed, my dear Agathon, if after seeing your courage and high spirit when you appeared upon the platform with the actors just before the production of your play, and faced a crowded audience without the least sign of embarrassment, I now supposed that you were likely to be upset by a handful of people like us.' (194a-b)

Should he have been embarrassed? Agathon retorts that he knew very well the difference between addressing a few wise men and a group of fools. Socrates protests by suggesting that Agathon is wrong to split off the supposedly wise symposiasts from the foolish crowd. After all, they, including Socrates, were part of the audience in the theatre, part of the audience of ordinary people.

'But if you were to meet really wise men, you would probably feel shame before them if you were conscious of doing something discreditable, wouldn't you?'

'Of course I should.' (194c)

Again there is a suggestion of possible wrongdoing by Agathon, whose name means the good. When Socrates wants to pursue the discussion by asking him whether he would feel shame before ordinary people, Phaedrus interrupts and urges Agathon to get on with his speech. Recall that Phaedrus had spoken of the shame that the lovers feel in each other's presence when they do something that appears discreditable.

## 2

Agathon shows himself to be an experienced speaker. He first lays out his intention which is to speak first of the nature of love and then of the gifts love bestows. He opens by taking on Phaedrus:

First of all, Phaedrus, he is the youngest of the gods. He himself provides convincing evidence of the truth of what I say by fleeing before old age, which moves fast as we know; at any rate it advances upon us faster than it should. It is the nature of Love to hate old age (195a-b)

Love is now placed in radical opposition to the terror of fleeting time. And if in Phaedrus' speech already there is a suppression of Tartaros, a suppression of the dark and chaotic side of love that eludes the logos, also of destructive time, that suppression is carried much further by Agathon who now insists that

the ancient disturbances in heaven of which Hesiod and Parmenides tell are to be ascribed to the agency of Necessity and not of Love, if they happened at all. Mutilation, imprisonment, and many other like deeds of violence could never have occurred among the gods if Love had been there; all would have been peace and friendship as it is now, and has been ever since Love assumed dominion over them. (195c)

These words are spoken of course in the midst of the drawn out Peloponnesian War. Agathon shows remarkably little concern for reality. What is unpleasant is simply elided. Of all the gods love is said to be the most happy, the fairest, and the best. There is according to him no love for the old and ugly. He goes on to speak of the self-control and courage of love. Love is then said to excel in every kind of artistic creation. The speech ends with a rhetorical crescendo:

He is easily entreated and of great kindness; contemplated by the wise, admired by the gods; coveted by men who possess him not, the treasure of those who are blessed by his possession; father of Daintiness, Delicacy, Voluptuousness, all Graces, Longing, and Desire; careful of the happiness of good men, careless of the fate of bad; in toil, in fear, in desire, in speech the best pilot, soldier, comrade, saviour; author of order in heaven and earth; loveliest and best of all leaders of song, whom it behoves every man to follow singing his praise, and bearing his part in that melody wherewith he casts a spell over the minds of all gods and all men. (195d-e)

The speech does indeed cast a spell on the symposiasts. There is loud cheering. Note that love as described by Agathon resembles him in many ways, just as Socrates will describe love in a way that make it resemble him. And Socrates, too, suggests that the conclusion speech of the “would have taken anyone's breath away,” and that he was on

“the point of running away for shame.” (198b) He could not hope to match such eloquence. He should not have agreed to participate in this contest, where beautiful appearance rather than the truth counted. Socrates asks Phaedrus whether he has any use for a “plain statement of the truth about Love” and asks permission to ask the celebrated Agathon a few small questions (198c)

## 3

After complimenting Agathon on the beginning of his speech, Socrates asks

Is the nature of Love such that he must be love of something, or can he exist absolutely without an object? (199c)

Socrates forces Agathon to admit that one desires what one lacks, and that love too is of what it lacks. But love is of the beautiful. It follows that love lacks beauty. To the question, do you still think that Love is beautiful, Agathon answers:

“It looks, Socrates, as if I didn't know what I was talking about when I said that.”

“Still, it was a beautiful speech, Agathon...”(201c)

Note that Socrates here recognizes that Agathon's speech answered to a kind of love. But beauty is here divorced from truth and thus from the good. But is what is good not the same as what is beautiful. Agathon, whose name is the good, admits this. But the brief interrogation has forced us to question Agathon's goodness as only apparent. And thus it has also forced us to question the relationship between beauty and appearance.

## 4

Socrates speech differs from all the others in that it purports to be the retelling of a dialogue in which a young Socrates, who is said to have been rather like Agathon, appears a very much in need of the instruction of the wise Diotima. Given the general prioritization of the masculine, this attribution of the deepest insight into love to a woman has special significance. That she is from Arcadia, an archaic part of the Peloponnese that continued to worship the great earth mother Demeter should also be noted; also that she is from Mantinea, that town which the Spartans, which represent the male principle, were earlier said to have split up.

Diotima convinces Socrates that love is neither beautiful nor even a god.

"What can Love be then?" I said. "A mortal?" "Far from it" "Well what?" "He is a great spirit, Socrates; everything that is of the nature of a spirit is half-god and half-man." And what is the function of such a being?" "To interpret and convey messages to the gods from men and to men from gods, prayers and sacrifices from the one and commands and rewards from the other. Being of an intermediate nature, a spirit bridges the gap between them, and prevents the universe from falling into two separate halves. (202d-203a)

Love is described here as a bridge between the human and the divine, between the temporal and the eternal, that prevents the universe from splitting into a purely earthly and a purely spiritual realm, but binds the former to the latter. 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, 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.

"Who are his parents?" I asked. "That is a rather long story," she answered, but I will tell you. On the day Aphrodite was born the gods were feasting, among them Contrivance the son of Invention; and after dinner, seeing that a party was in progress, Poverty came to beg and stood at the door. Now Contrivance was drunk with nectar — wine, I may say, had not yet been discovered — and went out in to the garden of Zeus and was overcome by sleep. So Poverty, thinking to alleviate her wretched condition by bearing a child to Contrivance, lay with him and conceived Love. Since Love was begotten on Aphrodite's birthday, and since he has also an innate passion for the beautiful, and so for the beauty of Aphrodite herself, he became her follower and servant." (203a-c)

As Agathon describes love in a way that forces one to think of him, so does Socrates, or rather Diotima:

He is always poor, and far from being sensitive and beautiful, as most people imagine, he is hard and weather-beaten, shoeless and homeless, always sleeping out for want of a bed, on the ground, on doorsteps, and in the street. So far he takes after his mother and lives in want. But, being also his father's son, he schemes to get for himself whatever is beautiful and good; he is bold and forward and strenuous, always devising tricks like a cunning huntsman; he yearns after knowledge and is full of resource and is a lover of wisdom all his life, a skillful magician, an alchemist, a true sophist. (203c-d)

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

Love is not itself beautiful as young Socrates had thought. On Diotima's 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 alone could allow for genuine completeness.

Much in Diotima's 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 to understand **love in a way that has to lead us beyond time**. Socrates goes on to specifically address the Aristophanic account:

"There is indeed a theory," she continued, "that lovers are people who are in search of the other half of themselves, but according to my view of the matter, my friend, love is not desire either of the half or the whole, unless that half or whole happens to be good."

(205d-e)

Love is a desire for the good. In its most general sense it

embraces every desire for good and for happiness; that is precisely what almighty and all-ensnaring love is. (205d)

Love in its narrower and more usual sense 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 this 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. It is tied to being rather than to becoming. Eros longs to **transcend time**.

But if love is the desire for the perpetual possession of the good, how does it express itself, given the time-bound character of human existence. Diotima points to procreation, which, she says, can be either physical or spiritual. And in this connection Diotima revises what Socrates had said earlier about **beauty being the object of love**:

"The object of love, Socrates, is not as you think, beauty." "What is it then?" Its object is to procreate and bring forth beauty... Now why is procreation the object of love?

Because procreation is the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a mortal being can attain." (206d-e)

Socrates sees in sexual desire the lowest form of eros, which he finds even in the animal world. Here love desires immortality within time. 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. 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, into which even young Socrates could be initiated. Let me now pass on to the **higher mysteries**, and with this passage we seem to pass from a procreative to a contemplative eros.

"The man who would pursue the right way to this goal must begin, when he is young, by applying himself to the contemplation of physical beauty, and, if he is properly directed by his guide, he will first fall in love with one beautiful person and beget noble sentiments in partnership with him. Later he will observe that physical beauty in any person is closely akin to physical beauty in any other, and that, if he is to make beauty of outward form the object of his quest, it is great folly not to acknowledge that the beauty exhibited in all bodies is one and the same; when he has reached this conclusion he will become a lover of all physical beauty... The next stage is for him to reckon beauty of soul more valuable than beauty of body; the result will be that when he encounters a virtuous soul in a body which has little of the bloom of beauty, he will be content to love and cherish it and to bring forth such notions as may serve to make young people better.

(210a-c)

From there he will go on to contemplate the beauty of human institutions, beauty in morals and in the sciences. Having been led this far, the student "catches sight of one unique science whose object is the beauty of which I am about to speak." (210d)

There is tension between this higher 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 a higher love, a love that demands eternity. The experience of the beautiful 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*.

"The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will

suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvelous indeed, the final goal, Socrates, of all his previous efforts. This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes or wanes; ... he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal and all other beautiful things partaking of it, yet in such a manner that, while, they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change. (210e-211b)

Aesthetic experience is given here a description that would seem to apply equally well to mystical experience. It is clear why Plato's metaphysics of beauty had to lead him to an attack on the arts. By taking art too seriously one could short-circuit the demanded ascent.

If love is finally of this absolute beauty it would seem to demand that we leave the love of individual persons and also art behind. Love is served better by the philosopher than by the poet.

"This above all others, my dear Socrates," the woman from Mantinea continued, "is the region where a man's life should be spent, in the contemplation of absolute beauty. Once you have seen that, you will not value it in terms of gold or rich clothing or of the beauty of boys and young men, the sight of whom at present throws you and many people like you into an ecstasy that, provided you could always enjoy the company of your darlings, you would be content to go without food and drink, if that were possible, and to pass your whole life with them in the contemplation of their beauty. What may we suppose to be the felicity of the man who sees absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed, who, instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and color and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone. (211d-e)

At this point it looks as if, even more effectively than Pausanias, Diotima had severed, split off, the higher from the lower love, contemplative from procreative eros. But is this really the case? The very ending of her speech lets us wonder:

Do you not see that in that region alone where he sees beauty with the faculty capable of seeing it, will he be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection, but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved by God, and becoming, if ever man can, immortal himself. (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. Our lot would appear to be a different one. We humans have to place a **procreative eros**, albeit perhaps in a highly



sublimated form, above **contemplative eros**. We return to the earlier insight that the object of love is not beauty, but to give birth in beauty. We should also keep in mind the ending of Aristophanes' speech, which admonished mortals to affirm their fragmented state and the love appropriate to it. The ending of Diotima's speech may be taken to suggest that human beings should not forsake procreation for aesthetic or perhaps mystical contemplation.

## 5. Alcibiades

### 1

In my last lecture I considered the speeches of Agathon and Socrates. The latter represents the high-point of the dialogue. One may indeed wonder why Plato did not end the dialogue on this high philosophical note. Why is Alcibiades introduced as the final speaker?

But let me return to the point where I left off last time. Socrates has finished his speech. There is general applause. Aristophanes is trying to explain that it was his theory that Socrates was referring to when he said

There is indeed a theory," she continued, "that lovers are people who are in search of the other half of themselves, but according to my view of the matter, my friend, love is not desire either of the half or the whole, unless that half or whole happens to be good."  
(205d-e)

This little remark is of interest in that it suggests that Diotima may be no more than Socrates' creation, that she sprang from his head as Athena is said to have sprung from the head of Zeus.

But at this point there is a commotion at the door, a very drunk Alcibiades appears, attended by a flute girl. Drink and music, which had been banished following Erixymachus' suggestion, return. Alcibiades is described in a way that very much suggests descriptions of the drunken Dionysus, attended by flute playing attendants and satyrs. Alcibiades wears a thick wreath of ivy and violets:

‘Good evening, gentlemen. Will you welcome into your company a man who is already drunk, utterly drunk, or shall we just put a garland on Agathon, which is what we came for, and go away? I couldn't be at the celebration yesterday, but I've come now with this wreath to have the pleasure of transferring it from my head to the head of this paragon of beauty and cleverness.’ (212e)

Note that once again we have an uninvited guest. Alcibiades proposes to honor Agathon, this paragon of beauty. Recall that beauty has been discussed as the object of love. So there is a sense in which Alcibiades, too, here takes the place of love, but note also that Socrates, while he admitted the beauty of Agathon's speech, also showed that it was divorced from reality, a beauty of appearance only, without much substance. It is this sort of beauty, a low beauty that Alcibiades wants to honor, the beauty that had just

been honored by all the Athenians. It is not surprising that he is welcomed in and joins the party, trying to take his place next to Agathon.

At first, because the wreath is tilted over his eyes, he cannot see that someone is already sitting next to Agathon:

'Good God. What have we here? Socrates? Lying there in wait for me again? How like you to make sudden appearance just when I least expect to find you. What are you doing here? And why have you taken this place? You ought to be next to Aristophanes or some other actual or would-be buffoon, and instead you have managed to get yourself next to the handsomest person in the room.' (213b-c)

Alcibiades thus finds himself between Agathon and Socrates. He is split between himself, between the two Aphrodites, between two kinds of eros.

Socrates asks Agathon to protect him from the love of Alcibiades, a love that has become burdensome. This suggests that love and strife, **eros** and **eris** are intimately linked in Alcibiades. Alcibiades does indeed suggest that he is at war with Socrates:

'There can be no peace between you and me,' said Alcibiades, 'but I'll settle accounts with you for this presently. For the moment, Agathon, give me some of those ribands to make a wreath for this head, too, for a truly wonderful head it is. Otherwise he might blame me for crowning you and leaving him uncrowned, whose words bring him victory over all men at all times, not merely on single occasions, like yours the day before yesterday.' (913d-e)

Usurping the place of the doctor Erixymachus, Alcibiades appoints himself master of ceremonies. Now everyone has to drink. Erixymachus objects that they should not just drink, and after he and Erixymachus exchange compliments, suggests that Alcibiades, too, should make a speech in honor of Love, and after that each, beginning with Alcibiades, prescribe whatever task they like to their right-hand neighbor. Alcibiades objects that in his drunken state he should not be expected to speak like the others; besides, Socrates would not leave him alone if he praised anyone but him, suggesting that in truth it was not Socrates who needed to fear attacks from him, but he who had to fear being attacked by Socrates. And in an important sense Alcibiades is of course right.

## 2

The speech that follows, too, is a telling of the truth. Alcibiades invites Socrates to stop him, if anything he said was untrue.

From the very beginning we sense that in Alcibiades' relationship to Socrates, **eros** and **eris** very much mingle. Alcibiades resents being in love with Socrates, who calls him to a better life, a higher self, and in this sense prevents him from being at ease with himself. Socrates puts Alcibiades at war with himself, awakens strife or eris, within the self, and here we should remember what had been said at the very beginning by Phaedrus, that love invites **shame**, but shame is inevitably a war within the self. Socrates lets Alcibiades feel ashamed. And shame will play an important part in Alcibiades' speech.

But first let me turn to its beginning:

'I propose to praise Socrates, gentlemen, by using similes. He will perhaps think that I mean to make fun of him, but my object in employing them is truth, not ridicule. I declare that he bears a strong resemblance to those figures of Silenus in statuary's shops represented holding pipes or flutes; they are all hollow inside, and when they are taken apart you see that they contain little figures of gods. I declare also that he is Marsyas the satyr. You can't deny yourself, Socrates, that you have a striking physical likeness to both of these, and you shall hear in a moment how you resemble them in other respects. (215a-b)

The first simile calls attention to a split in Socrates's being: an ugly exterior hides a divine core. The second simile likens Socrates to the flute playing Marsyas. I have already suggested that Socrates substitutes conversation for music as a kind of higher music. As Alcibiades puts this point:

Marsyas needed an instrument in order to charm men by the power which proceeded from his mouth, a power which is still exercised by those who perform his melodies...; his productions alone, whether executed by a skilled male performer or by a wretched flute-girl, are capable, by reason of their divine origin, of throwing men into a trance and thus distinguishing those who yearn to enter by initiation into union with the gods. But you, Socrates are so far superior to Marsyas that you produce the same effect by mere words without any instrument. (215b-c)

This replacement of music by words is called into question in the *Phaedo*. Socrates is here described as having a recurring dream, admonishing him to make music, thus challenging his own interpretation that conversation is a higher music. Has Socrates neglected something important? Such questioning is given greater weight when we remember who Marsyas was: a satyr to whom the invention of the flute was ascribed, who challenged Apollo to a contest, and losing that contest, was flayed alive. The story has a certain similarity with the myth in Aristophanes' speech: remember that the

circlemen were split in half because of their pride, because they aspired to the place of the gods. Marsyas had a similar aspiration. The reader is thus invited to compare Socrates to the circlemen. But the circlemen refused to honor the order of Zeus. Is Socrates such **a transgressor who illegitimately usurps the place of the divine**? That would make him in some sense superhuman, and just because of this not a successful lover. For as Aristophanes' speech has taught us, love requires a certain **symmetry** between the lovers. Socrates relationship to others appears profoundly **asymmetrical**. Remember that not so long after the telling of the *Symposium* Socrates will be put to death, at a time when Athens was celebrating a festival dedicated to Apollo.

## 3

I have already mentioned that the love Alcibiades feels for Socrates is linked to a sense of shame. Alcibiades is

thrown into confusion and dismay by the thought that my life was no better than a slave's  
(215e)

What enslaves here is the world with its pleasures and seductions, the world that celebrates Agathon as their Good, the world of the common Aphrodite.

And even at this moment, I know quite well that, if I were prepared to give ear to him, I should not be able to hold out, but the same thing would happen to me again. He compels me to realize that I am still a mass of imperfections and yet persistently neglect my own true interests by engaging in public life. So against my real inclination I stop up my ears and take refuge in flight, as Odysseus did from the Sirens; otherwise I should sit here beside him till I was an old man. He is the only person in whose presence I experience a sensation of which I might be thought incapable, a sensation of shame;... (216a-b)

Note how Socrates does not just split Alcibiades' being, but, it would seem, splits it into two quite asymmetrical halves. The pain of that split leads Alcibiades to flee.

But Socrates, too, is described as curiously split: on the surface he appears much like the other Athenians:

The Socrates whom you see has a tendency to fall in love with good-looking young men, and is always in their society and in an ecstasy about them. (216d)

But this is said to be only a superficial appearance. Really it make no difference to him whether someone is good looking:

he despises good looks to an almost inconceivable extent. (216e)

This is in keeping with what had been said by Socrates about the ascent to an invisible absolute beauty that has to leave all particular beauty behind and beneath. Still, something does not ring quite true here. Not that we doubt Alcibiades' description. But why, if Socrates really despises good looks, does he concentrate his teaching on beautiful young men. **Is Socrates suppressing the sensuous** in a way that complements that way in which Alcibiades seek to repress the spiritual in him. **Do Alcibiades and Socrates need one another?**

## 4

Alcibiades knows that he loves Socrates, much as his pride would rather claim a self-sufficiency that would make the older Socrates his lover.

you must know that there was no limit to the pride that I felt in my good looks. (217a)

And loving Socrates, Alcibiades attempts to seduce him. He invites Socrates to dine with him,

behaving just like a lover who has designs upon his favorite. (217c)

Although Socrates is in no great hurry to accept the invitation, he finally does and on the second such occasion Alcibiades succeeds in getting him to spend the night. He decides not to *beat around the bush*:

‘The cardinal object of my ambition is to come as near perfection as possible, and I believe that no one can give me such powerful assistance towards this end as you. So the disapproval of wise men, which I should incur if I refused to comply with your wishes, would cause me far more shame than the condemnation of the ignorant multitude if I yielded to you.’ (218c-d)

Socrates reply is ironical and designed to keep Alcibiades at a distance:

You must see in me a beauty which is incomparable and far superior to your own physical good looks, and if, having made this discovery, you are trying to get a share of it by exchanging your beauty for mine, you obviously mean to get much the better of the bargain; you are trying to get true beauty in return for sham; in fact, what you are proposing is to exchange dross for gold. But look more closely, my good friend, and make quite sure that you are not mistaken in your estimate of my worth.’ (218d-e)

Not yet discouraged, Alcibiades gets into Socrates' bed, but Socrates remains unmoved, he might as well have been a father or older brother. The distance that separates Socrates and Alcibiades does not get breached. Neither finds his other half, perhaps because each is too self-sufficient in his own way.

Alcibiades goes on to speak of the courage of Socrates who distinguished himself as a soldier both at Potidaea (432 BC) and Delium (424 BC), reminding us of the Peloponnesian War and of how long it had lasted. We learn once more of Socrates' courage, his self-control, but also of his distance from the other soldiers, his self-sufficiency. The speech concludes with an evocation of the uniqueness of Socrates:

you will never be able to find anyone remotely resembling him either in antiquity or in the present generation, unless you go beyond humanity altogether, and have recourse to the images of Silenus and satyr which I am using myself in this speech. (221c-d)

Alcibiades goes on to suggest that these similes describe not only Socrates, but more especially his discourse. It, too, may strike one at first as ridiculous.

But if a man penetrates and sees the content of Socrates' talk exposed, he will find that there is nothing but sound sense inside, and that his talk is almost the talk of a god, and enshrines countless representations of ideal excellence and is of the widest possible application;... (221e)

Once again the suggestion that Socrates is **almost like a God**: is he perhaps so much like a God that he is **insufficiently human**? The speech concludes with a warning to Agathon: don't be deceived by Socrates's flirtatious, erotic appearance. Inside he is **cold, like a statue**.

As soon as Alcibiades has finished, Socrates flirts with Agathon, suggesting that Alcibiades only spoke **to split Agathon and Socrates apart**, and Agathon agrees that they should prevent this and he decides to move to the other end of the couch, to the right side of Socrates, who proposes to praise him, which delights Agathon. But before he can change places, a crowd of revellers enters, all order is abolished, deep drinking becomes the rule, as Erixymachus, Phaedrus, and some others leave the party.

Alcibiades' speech forces us to ask: does Socrates in any way fail Alcibiades? Socrates claims to know all about love, but is he a good lover himself? Could it be that Socrates is in the end a bad lover and unable to procreate? Is the historical failure of Alcibiades and others like him also the failure of Socrates?

But would Socrates not have betrayed his higher eros, and that absolute beauty that was its goal, if he had given in to Alcibiades's advances? Or has Socrates split off the higher from the lower eros in a way that eros as the bridge between the higher and the lower finally forbids? Throughout Alcibiades' description Socrates appears as strangely like a statue, steadfast, not easily moved. There is a sense in which Socrates does not really belong to the world, does not really engage himself in it. Even while fighting a

war, Socrates remains fundamentally untouched and alone. And that self-sufficiency and loneliness presents itself once more as the dialogue ends. Towards daybreak only Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates remain awake, still drinking, Socrates compelling them to admit that someone who knew how to write a good tragedy should also be able to write a good comedy, and the reverse, thus healing in a way the split between Aristophanes and Agathon. As dawn breaks Aristophanes falls asleep; when it was fully light Agathon followed.

Then Socrates, having put both of his interlocutors to sleep, got up and went away, followed by Aristodemus as usual. He went to the Lyceum and washed, and spent the day as he would any other, and finally towards evening went home to bed. (223d)

The loneliness and self-sufficiency of Socrates are two sides of the same. Both make him rather like the circlemen, both place him at a distance from that neediness from which love issues. Socrates has ascended so far on Diotima's ladder of beauty that he has left the beauty of particular persons and thus love in its ordinary sense behind. But just this renders him ineffective as a pedagogue. He is thus unable to do anything about Alcibiades, just as he is unable to do anything about the ongoing war and the destruction of beautiful Athens. His flirtatious behavior is itself as refusal of a serious personal engagement. Socrates was able to wound Alcibiades's pride, as he was able to wound the Athenians' generally. But he was unable to really bridge the **distance that set him apart**. If he failed Alcibiades, he also failed Athens. And that failure is not just the failure of the one. Socrates, too, would seem to have failed as a lover.

Next time I shall return briefly to the *Symposium* and relate its discussion of love and beauty to the birth of aesthetics.



## 6. The Birth of Aesthetics

### 1

Let me begin by returning to Aristophanes' sketch of the erotic nature of human being. We heard that to punish the prideful self-assertion of the circle-men, Zeus split these proto-humans into two. We are the fragments of this original mankind, seeking our other half in order to recover our own lost unity. **The beauty that draws our love is a figure of this forever-lost plenitude.** Beauty on this view figures what our present condition denies us and which we nevertheless seek. We are haunted by dreams of plenitude, of self-integration.

Let me call attention once more to the role **pride** plays in this account: **pride here means the claim to godlike self-sufficiency**: not content with the limited perfection granted to them, Aristophanes' circle-men aspire to the self-sufficiency of the Olympians, only to become less than they were. The lesson that Aristophanes teaches is that the plenitude of which we dream is denied to us humans. We must learn to accept our fragmentary condition. The temptation to find satisfaction within ourselves should be resisted. We should not try to be as God. The **self-love** that would have us be like God, **has to refuse the gift of love**, whose acceptance alone makes us fully human.

I suggested that **beauty** on Aristophanes' account is **a figure of the perfection and self-sufficiency** associated with the circle-men, a perfection that is denied to us, even as the idea of it haunts us. That is to say, we mortals are haunted by the idea of an unrealizable satisfaction.

On a higher level that idea returns in Diotima's speech. Diotima understands sensible beauty as a figure of an absolute, now definitely timeless, beauty. Gesturing towards this higher beauty, sensible beauty carries something like a promise of a deliverance from time.

The aim of love, according to Diotima, is perpetual possession of the good. But to gain such possession we must find some way of escaping the rule of time. **Love demands eternity.** On its lower levels it seeks **semblances of eternity** by making sure that something of the individual will survive him, children most often, but also reputation, and what we have created, such as works of art. But the longing for self-integration that is love will not finally be content with such temporal counterparts of true

eternity. **It would dwell in timeless contemplation of the beautiful itself.** The question is whether the idea of such a timeless dwelling is not as incompatible with the human condition as that of Aristophanes' circle-men, whether such dwelling is granted to mortals.

I have suggested that on this Platonic view all **beauty in time is figural**, illuminated by an **invisible beauty that transcends time**. The beauty of a person or a work of art is only the figure of a perfection, denied to us by our temporal being, to which we are yet bound by that in us which transcends time, by the spirit. Sensible beauty thus fills us with love, with a longing for eternity that yields to the desire to create something beyond ourselves in this world, something that will outlast us. Eros thus refuses to remain contemplative, it wants to be creative; thus it becomes the desire to make love to a beautiful person so that children will be born. But if for Plato, too, the most obvious form of such creation is procreation, it is not the highest. Following Plato, works of art have thus been understood as figurative children, aesthetic rapture as a sublimated form of sexual fulfillment. Note here the **double aspect of eros**: in time it seeks a satisfaction that at least for a time lets us forget our essentially fleeting, fragmentary being; but the desire for such pleasures serves what human beings most deeply want, to create beyond themselves, to procreate. And to that double aspect of eros corresponds the **double aspect of beauty**: while on one hand absorbed in the passive contemplation of the beautiful we are granted a satisfaction that restores for us, if only for a time, something of the self-sufficiency of the circle-men, on the other, it fills us with the desire to become active, to embrace the beautiful in order to create something beyond ourselves.

I would like to underscore the essentially figural character of the Platonic understanding of beauty: **sensible beauty figures a reality that promises to deliver us from our present, defective state of being**, bearing the utopian promise of future happiness. On the other hand, **in time beauty actually seems to lift the burden of time**, if only for a time. **On the one hand the beautiful points beyond itself; on the other it offers itself to us as a self-sufficient plenitude.** I want to speak thus of the essential ambiguity of the beautiful, an ambiguity that is related to the problematic doubling of love and Aphrodite that figures both in Xenophon's and in Plato's *Symposium*. That the promise of self-sufficiency is for us humans a temptation that we should resist is hinted at

in Diotima's discourse: there is indeed a suggestion that we should spend our lives in the contemplation of absolute beauty:

'This above all others, my dear Socrates,' the woman from Mantinea continued, 'is the region where a man's life should be spent, in the contemplation of absolute beauty. ...What may we suppose to be the felicity of the man who sees absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed, who, instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and colour and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone. (211d-e)

But are human beings granted life in this region? Just as in the *Republic* the philosopher is not allowed to dwell on the plain of truth, but has to return to the cave, so Socrates has to leave his trances and engage himself in the world. Diotima, too, concludes her speech with a suggestion that contemplation of beauty is not enough: but having seen beauty,

he will be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection, but with the truth? And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness he will have the privilege of being beloved by God, and becoming, if ever man can, immortal himself. (212a)

It would seem then that it is not by gazing on beauty's very self that we become worthy of divine friendship, but when filled with what we have glimpsed, we take our place in the world and bring forth and nurture true goodness. As Diotima had said earlier,

'The object of love, Socrates, is not as you think, beauty. ... Its object is to procreate and bring forth beauty... (206e)

But procreation does not deliver us from the rule of time. It does not restore to us that plenitude of being that is figured by the image of the circle-men. The longing for an escape from the tyranny of time, or what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge, that "ill will against time and its 'it was, '" refuses to be content with such figures, i. e., it refuses to be content with Plato's procreative eros. It wants to seize beauty's promise of a plenitude that would rob time of its sting here in time. That is, it would substitute for Plato's procreative his contemplative eros. And recognizing that human beings cannot spend their lives in the region of timeless forms, where absolute beauty is said to dwell, it would bring beauty down to earth. **For Plato's absolute and invisible beauty it thus would substitute a sensible beauty that would so absorb our attention, that in time it would grant us something like the self-sufficient plenitude associated with Aristophanes' circle-men.** That substitution provides the key to what I have called the aesthetic approach. Characteristic of that approach is the splitting off of the

contemplative from the procreative eros, and a bringing down to earth of the former. That desire for plenitude Plato calls eros now is to find satisfaction in the contemplation of beauty very much of this world.

## 2

To make clearer what is at issue here I would now like to turn to the thinker who not only gave us the term "aesthetics," but who can be said to have founded aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, to be placed besides logic, metaphysics, and ethics. He did so first in his dissertation, *Meditationes de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* of 1735, translated as *Reflections on Poetry*.<sup>16</sup> Baumgarten attempted to show how within the philosophical framework established by Descartes, Leibniz, and their successors room could be made for the philosophical study of art, more especially of poetry.

Philosophical aesthetics, as we know it, is thus part of the somewhat questionable legacy left to us by the Enlightenment, which sought to subject everything to the authority of reason and at the same time witnessed the emergence of a distinctly modern approach to art, which we can trace both in the artistic production of the period and in its theorizing. For the time being I only would like to emphasize that there appears to be a **connection with the prestige accorded to reason and the establishment of the aesthetic as a self-sufficient domain.**

Presupposed by such an undertaking is widespread interest in what was to be called aesthetic experience and in objects capable of granting such experience. Note that while with Xenophon and Plato the paradigm of a beautiful object is a human person, now the paradigm comes to be an artifact, a poem or, more generally, a work of art, an object capable of granting aesthetic pleasure, the pleasurable absorption in the beautiful. Note the resemblance between such pleasure and that contemplation of absolute beauty of which Diotima had spoken, although aesthetic experience substitutes for absolute beauty a sensible beauty, very much of this world. In the contemplation of this beauty is sought something like the plenitude that belonged to Aristophanes' circle-men. What kind of experience grants such a sense of plenitude? Or to rephrase the question: what is the structure of aesthetic experience?

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California,

Given his time and place, it was obvious to Baumgarten how he should approach the matter. The general framework is provided by Descartes. It suggests to him the following definition of the experience of aesthetic experience, i. e. of the experience whose object is the beautiful: It is defined as **a perception of perfection that is clear, but not distinct**. Note that this definition of aesthetic experience could also be taken as a definition of love and I invite you to think about their relationship. How is aesthetic experience related to love? — where we should keep in mind the distinction between a contemplative and a procreative eros.

The definition just given 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>17</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 standpoint beyond perspective, the standpoint 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. It follows that if art is not to give up its claim to serve the truth, it must become as much like thought as

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1954),

<sup>17</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),

possible, i.e., it must destroy itself as art. Neo-classicism 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>18</sup>

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 to some extent by his follower 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 my description.

To confine oneself to the clear and distinct is to confine oneself to abstractions from concrete particulars. The discipline that, according to Wolff, deals above all with particulars is history, which is concerned with individuals. As the science of particulars, history has to take its place besides philosophy, if our understanding of reality is not to remain one-sided.

It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who, by applying Wolff's insights into history to art, became the founder of modern aesthetics. 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.

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

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.

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, on the other hand, 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.

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. I shall turn to it next time.

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<sup>18</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* XXIV, trans. Montgomery (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1953).

## 7. Beauty as Sensible Perfection

### 1

Three lectures ago I called your attention to the fact that Socrates, after he proved to Agathon that he did not know what he was speaking about when he praised love, nevertheless calls his speech beautiful. I then raised the question: how is beauty here to be understood? Clear is that while Diotima will link the beautiful and the good, the **beauty** that Socrates ascribes to Agathon's speech is quite explicitly **divorced from the good and from the true**. Agathon's audience enjoys his speech for its **beautiful appearance**, which is appreciated **for its own sake**, not because it makes its audience better in any way. His speech entertains his audience and that is what it, with the exception of Socrates, demands. There is then the suggestion that there are two kinds of beauty, one linked to the true and the good, and the other divorced from it? It is this **divorce of the beautiful from the good and the true** that is, as I shall try to show in this and the following lectures, a defining characteristic of the aesthetic approach. When Socrates calls Agathon's speech beautiful, I want to suggest, he uses the word in what we can call an **aesthetic sense**. As I suggested in the first lecture, my goal in this course is to understand and to question this aesthetic approach. To do so we must also understand the significance and the presuppositions of this divorce of the beautiful from the good.

### 2

Baumgarten's *Meditations on Poetry* help put his problem into focus. In a way all that I have to say about Baumgarten could be understood as an unfolding of the definition of our experience of the beautiful, or of what we can call aesthetic experience, that I gave you last time: aesthetic experience is defined by Baumgarten as **a perception of perfection that is clear, but not distinct**. In my last lecture I spent some time on what Baumgarten means by a perception that is clear, but not distinct. Sensation provides the paradigm. You should ask yourself how Baumgarten's understanding of the beautiful as **sensed perfection** related to the Socratic understanding of the beautiful as the object of love, where you should keep in mind the distinction between a contemplative and a procreative eros, between a love that wants to return the self to a state of wholeness resembling that of Aristophanes' circlemen and another that wants to give birth.



But let me return to Baumgarten's account. To understand aesthetic experience as **a perception of perfection that is clear, but not distinct** is to place it in opposition to the clear and distinct perception demanded by scientific understanding. The split between two kinds of perception is crucial here. To that split corresponds the distinction between two kinds of discourse, one aiming at what Baumgarten calls **intensive**, the other at **extensive clarity**.

But as I pointed out towards the end of the last lecture, what has been said so far may supply us with a necessary, but certainly not with a necessary and sufficient condition of successful poetic discourse. What is missing 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.

### 3

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>19</sup>

In this sense the different steps of a proof in geometry 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.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of perfection refers thus to **a manifold united by a common theme**. The simple is thus never beautiful, a point Aristotle had already made in his *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 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>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle, Hemmerden, 1779), par. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Metaphysica*, par. 640.

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.<sup>22</sup>

Where then is beauty located, in the perceiver or in the thing perceived? It would seem in neither: it resides in the way the perceived presents itself to the perceiver. 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 Baumgarten's understanding of the work of art are spelled out by his discussion of 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.

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:

Par. 68 ... 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.

This is to say that whatever the metaphysicians have said about the world is by analogy true of the poem. Aesthetics can thus appropriate the propositions of metaphysics — where Baumgarten is thinking above all of Leibniz and Wolff — if it understands them “by analogy.” 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 in its essence the point is one which is made already in 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.

But let me return to the word **perfection**. It leads to the very center of the problematic divorce of the beautiful from the true and the good. To speak of beauty as *perfection* is to insist on the self-sufficiency of the beautiful. The aesthetic object, and more especially, the successful work of art is autonomous: its point is not to refer beyond itself, to express some edifying thought or to represent some cherished object or person. To praise it for being true or to condemn it for being false is to have missed what matters: that it present itself to us as an **absorbing presence**. Presenting itself to us as being just as it should be, a beautiful work of art delivers us from the sense of arbitrariness and contingency that is so much part of our everyday life, that again and again lets us wonder: why this and not that? Absorbed in a work of art, we no longer face different possibilities. But this is to say also that we no longer face the future. In time, the artwork's perfection lifts the burden of time, allowing us to exist, if only for a time, in a seemingly timeless present. Thus it answers to Plato's eros.

#### 4

From Baumgarten's understanding of beauty as sensible perfection we can derive the following four characteristics of the aesthetic object, or more specifically the work of art:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

1. Perfection, as Baumgarten, following Leibniz, understands it, entails **self-sufficiency**.<sup>23</sup> Ideally the work of art should not point beyond itself. Its point is not to describe a reality external to it. Nor is it to make statements about the world. If it succeeds, it does so, not as a representation, but as a presentation. The step from Baumgarten's understanding of the poem as a perfect whole to MacLeish's dictum, the poem should not mean, but be, is small.
2. The perfection of the artwork demands once more that it be experienced as a **whole**.
3. The perfection of the artwork demands of the spectator that he leave it as it presents itself to him. All he could do to it would only destroy its perfection. The proper response to art is rapt surrender, **absorption in its presence**. Such absorption satisfies because it grants us a sense of being at one with ourselves denied by our engagement in the world. Aesthetic experience thus quiets care, fear, and hope.
4. To the artwork's perfection corresponds the **self-sufficiency of aesthetic experience**, which needs no justification, but is sought for its own sake.

## 5

What matters to me here is not Baumgarten, but an attitude that, I have claimed, continues to shape the way both artists and theoreticians approach art. In later lectures that point will be developed, but to show some of the implications of this understanding of the aesthetic object, let me here take a brief look at poetry.

That a poem should be a complete whole has of course become something of a commonplace. In the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* we read

Unity is the most fundamental and comprehensive aesthetic criterion, upon which all others depend.<sup>24</sup>

Almost equally common is another: metaphor has been said to be  
the life principle of poetry, the poet's chief test and glory.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Just as the metaphysician discovers in God the origin and organizing center or *focus perfectionis* of all that is, so the aesthete discovers the artwork's origin and organizing center or *focus perfectionis* in its theme. See Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, par. 94.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Harter Fogle, "Unity," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1974), p. 880.

<sup>25</sup> C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (London: J. Cape, 1947), p. 17.

We would like to hold on to both claims, and yet there is tension between them, at least given the standard understanding of metaphor. That standard understanding is found in Aristotle's *Poetics*:

Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.<sup>26</sup>

On this view **metaphor is an improper naming**.<sup>27</sup> This impropriety invites a movement of interpretation that comes to rest only when metaphorical has been replaced with more proper speech. This not to say that such replacement is always or indeed ever possible or that interpretation will ever come to rest. What metaphor names may transcend clear and distinct understanding. In that case our understanding would be condemned to remain confused. Proper speech would be denied to human beings. But regardless of whether we think human beings capable of proper speech or not, as long as we understand metaphor as improper naming we place its telos beyond poetry. On such a view, and it is, it would seem, the standard view, metaphor has to open the work of art to a dimension that transcends it; thus it has to militate against our experience of the work of art as a self-sufficient presence, as a self-sufficient whole.

Given a commitment to the aesthetic approach we may thus well want to agree with Jonathan Culler when he denies that the power of literature lies in metaphor and claims that, on the contrary,

it is precisely literature's resistance to metaphor, resistance to replacement operations, which is the source of its power.<sup>28</sup>

Resistance here cannot mean immunity. Poetic language is metaphorical. And yet, the demand that the poem be a self-sufficient whole, that poetry be autotelic, implies the demand that it struggle against metaphor. This struggle, I want to claim, is made unavoidable by a commitment to unity as the most fundamental and comprehensive aesthetic criterion.

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 21, 1457b7-8, trans. I. Bywater

<sup>27</sup> See Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1978, pp. 73-90. Reprinted in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), pp. 71-88 and "The Many Uses of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1978, pp. 167-174. Reprinted in *On Metaphor*, pp. 165-172.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Commentary," *New Literary History* 6 (Autumn 1974), p. 229/

Note, however, that resistance to metaphor here means resistance to metaphor, as Aristotle understood it. In more recent criticism one meets with the repeated suggestion that in modern poetry at least metaphor does not function as Aristotle suggests. C. Day “: thus disputes Aristotle's claim that a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars, insisting instead that in poetry, at least, metaphor joins dissimilars not so much to let us perceive in the some previously hidden similarity but **to create something altogether new**, a new presence. “*We find poetic truth struck out by the collision rather than the collusion of images.*”<sup>29</sup> I would underscore the “we.” We moderns: for the phenomenon described would seem to apply especially to modern poetry. What would be examples of such metaphors of collision. Consider e. g. D. H. Lawrence's description of Bavarian gentians as *torches of darkness* spreading the *smoking blueness of Plato's gloom*. Or Ezra Pound calling faces in the crowd in a subway station: *Petals on a wet black bough*. Or take these two lines from *Liebesgedicht* by the German poet Karl Krolow:

Dein Nacken — hörst du — ist aus Luft  
 Die wie eine Taube durch die Maschen des blauen Laubes schlüpft.  
 Your neck — do you hear — is of air,  
 That like a dove, slips through the mesh of blue leaves.

What is the source of the undeniable strength of these metaphors? The problem becomes particularly acute, when lines are taken out of context and translated into another language. The German lines resist translation. The impossibility of translation points to the fact that the strength of the metaphor depends on the way the collision of images is balanced by the collusion of the pattern in which these images find expression. The flow and texture of the words themselves lets us accept the poet's broken metaphors. Such metaphors could be said to be **weapons directed against the usual referentiality of language**. When successful, they lend words a presence denied to them by our ordinary speaking. Ortega y Gasset has said of such metaphor: between the real things it lets emerge imaginary reefs, a crop of floating islands.<sup>30</sup> Metaphors of collision let ordinary sensibility suffer shipwreck on these imaginary reefs. Many a modern poem succeeds as

<sup>29</sup> C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (London: J. Cape, 1947), p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (Garden City.N.J.: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 30-31.

the sites of this shipwreck. And only this shipwreck lends them the kind of presence on which the aesthetic approach insists.

6

Perhaps this brief digression gives you some idea of how the idea of the aesthetic object as understood by Baumgarten can be made concrete and put to work in criticism. But let me return to Baumgarten. By now his 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 the texture of 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. **Art settles for fictions** that compensate us for the deficiency of reality.

## 8. The Aesthetic Experience

### 1

In the last two lectures I gave you a first characterization of what we can call the **aesthetic approach** and its understanding of the beautiful by taking a look at Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry*. Baumgarten, we saw, understands the beautiful as **sensible perfection**. Implied by such perfection is the **self-sufficient presence** of the aesthetic object: the object that pleases just because it is beautiful. We all are familiar with beautiful objects. Think of flowers; or of landscapes; or of persons. This is to make the obvious point that not all aesthetic objects are works of art. But given this understanding of an aesthetic object it is easy to come up with a definition of the work of art: Works of art are **objects created to have aesthetic appeal**. That according to this definition is their primary function. But this definition also raises the question: to what extent can works of art, think of paintings or sculptures or works of architecture, be adequately understood as aesthetic objects. It seems obvious that such an approach does not begin to do justice to a medieval altarpiece or to Chartres Cathedral. Nor does it do justice to an African sculpture. Nor does it do justice to a Cantata by Bach. **Can the aesthetic function of art be considered the function of art as it figures in histories of art?** To claim that art creates objects with an eye to aesthetic appeal is to say also that art remains true to its essence only when it presents itself as **art for art's sake**. And if, as I have claimed, the aesthetic approach is presupposed by aesthetics, must a self-critical philosophy of art not question aesthetics so understood? This is one reason to take a careful look at Baumgarten, who may be said to have inaugurated philosophical aesthetics, at Kant, whose *Critique of Judgment* is perhaps the most thoughtful articulation approach, and at Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, which allows us to understand what lies behind that divorce of beauty from love that governs the aesthetic approach.

### 2

Let me reiterate once more: **"aesthetics" should not be understood as just a synonym for "philosophy of art."** To be sure, that is how these terms are often used today, but such synonymy is of rather recent origin. When we call and understand the



philosophy of art first of all as aesthetics we are the heirs of a quite specific approach to art, one that, even though it has a long prehistory, going back to the Renaissance and indeed to antiquity, triumphed only in the eighteenth century over an older approach that would not grant autonomy to art, but assigned it a religious, a social, or an ethical function.<sup>31</sup> Again, think, of a medieval or a baroque altarpiece.

Granted, however, that the best medieval art was art for God's and not for art's sake: can't we distinguish the religious aspect of this art from what lets it have aesthetic appeal? Is the latter not the proper concern for someone interested in such an object, say a church or a cult figure, as a work of art? But what here defines propriety? An understanding of works of art as aesthetic objects?

To be sure, all things can have aesthetic significance. As Panofsky points out,

It is possible to experience every object, natural or manmade, aesthetically. We do this, when we just look at it (or listen to it) without relating it, intellectually or emotionally, to anything outside of itself. When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with the various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of view of an ornithologist, he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. When a man at a horse race watches the animal on which he has put his money, he will associate its performance with his desire that it may win. Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically.<sup>32</sup>

Aesthetic beholding may be defined in terms of such **absorption** in what it beholds. No longer do our usual cares and concerns dominate our sight; we are free to attend to what lies before our eyes. Some patterns, shapes, and colors invite such surrender more than others. The form of a vase, the geometric ornament circling a plate, an orchid or a seashell may draw our attention by their beauty. That we judge just these objects to be beautiful will no doubt have something to do with our particular background and experiences. But it would also seem that what arouses aesthetic interest is not adequately explained in terms of the inevitably different prejudices and interests that different individuals bring to what they perceive. Often strength of pattern or form will assert itself regardless of cultural or individual differences. Psychologists have thus been able to show that there is considerable cross-cultural agreement about aesthetic preferences of

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<sup>31</sup> See Karsten Harries, *The Broken Frame. Three Lectures* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), p. 11.

this sort. Textiles and pottery produced by different cultures can teach us that craftsmen have always looked beyond what utility demanded to configurations of shape and color possessing such strength. Such work suggests that a concern for beauty, more precisely for beauty understood as what is aesthetically pleasing, is part of all human experience. But generally this would seem to be only a secondary concern, hardly sufficient to lead to the creation of art for art's or for beauty's sake. The primary concern is to make an urn, a sacred image, a festive garment. Thus the primary concern of the sculptor who carved a Virgin with Child standing on some altar was not to create an aesthetic object. Serving religion, art here attempts to address man's deepest concerns. The beauty of the image serves this attempt. Later I shall have more to say about the nature of this service. Here I only want to suggest that the aesthetic approach to art, which insists that art be for art's or for beauty's sake and makes self-sufficient presence constitutive of both, can hardly be considered the norm by which the production of what we generally call art has been or should be judged. As Panofsky points out, Poussin's assertion that "*la fin de l'art est la delectation*," was revolutionary in its time.<sup>33</sup> The key to this revolution is provided by what I have called the aesthetic approach to art, by the insistence that the end of art is **aesthetic delight**.

### 3

But how are we to understand this delight? For an answer let me turn to the famous explanation of the beautiful Kant offers to sum up the discussion 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)<sup>34</sup>

Compare this formulation with both Baumgarten's and Plato's. Let me recall to you Baumgarten's definition of taste:

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.

"Taste" Baumgarten understands as the faculty of judging sensually.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Both Baumgarten and Kant understand the beautiful as the object of a judgment of taste. But Kant offers a different interpretation of such a judgment. According to Baumgarten the judgment of beauty is a confused or sensual recognition of perfection. Kant, on the other hand, suggests that we call an object beautiful when it occasions a particular kind of pleasure: Kant speaks of an **entirely disinterested satisfaction**.

What does Kant mean by "a liking *devoid of all interest*." He offers an explanation at the beginning of par. 2:

Interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's existence. Hence such a liking always refers at once to our power of desire, either as the basis that determines it, or at any rate as necessarily connected with that determining basis. (45)

Interest is interest in existence. When I am interested I care, I am concerned. Human beings are interested being precisely because they are **needy beings**. Note that by understanding the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction, Kant places aesthetic experience in opposition to that neediness that governs our everyday being. He also would seem to place it in opposition to eros, which, as we learned from Plato, is born of human neediness. I trust this makes clear the opposition between the Kantian understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction and the Platonic understanding of the beautiful as an object of eros. **Kant places beauty in opposition to love.**

I mentioned that Kant, too, understands human being as essentially a being in need. Kant distinguishes two very different aspects of that need, corresponding to his dualistic understanding of the human being, a conception that harks back to the Platonic. As an embodied sensual being man is in need of what fulfills his bodily appetites and desires. Sexual desire and hunger are paramount among these. As a rational being the human being is interested in what allows him to become a free autonomous moral agent, where we should keep in mind the similarity between this goal of autonomy and the idea of self-sufficiency associated with the circle-men. To put the same point differently: as a natural being the human being is interested in **pleasure**, understood as what satisfies a natural need, as a rational being the human being is interested in the **good** and in whatever promotes it.

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<sup>34</sup> Page references in text to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis : Hackett, 1987).

## 4

In the first moment Kant is primarily concerned to distinguish the beautiful from the agreeable or the pleasant” (I prefer the latter as a translation of the German *angenehm*, because of the way it relates to pleasure) and that implies the divorce of beauty from love, at least if love is understood as linked to desire. Pleasure, as Kant understands it, submerges us in our embodied, natural being. Interest in the pleasant is an interest that seeks to **appropriate**, to **enjoy**. Thus it is also an interest in the **existence** of what when appropriated will give rise to pleasure. Only real bread will satisfy our hunger; only a real person will satisfy sexual desire. The person who seeks pleasure wants to be stimulated, he wants to be acted on, or, as Kant puts it, he wants to be **pathologically conditioned**. On Kant's understanding, there is a sense in which we **suffer** our pleasures. On this view **love is rightly understood as a passion**, i. e., as something we suffer. In our pleasures we are not free, but passive. Thus when I call something pleasant I consider it desirable, refer it to a need that wants to be satisfied. This neediness means that in pleasure we are not truly autonomous.

But how can Kant say that the judgment of beauty is disinterested? Are we not interested in the existence of the beautiful? Why, otherwise, would we collect works of art, pay for museums, etc.? Kant would of course admit this, but he would ask us first of all to distinguish our desire that there be aesthetic objects, including works of art, i. e. objects created to occasion that disinterested delight granted by the beautiful, from that delight itself. But could the same not be said of good food. Must we not distinguish our interest that there be good food from our enjoyment of such food? In what sense is the latter interested? At issue for Kant is our relationship to the object. He insists that in aesthetic experience the existence of the object is bracketed. This is not at all the case when we enjoy food. We don't let the food be what it is. We eat it up.

What do I mean here by "bracketed." First of all that the aesthetic object has been removed from the world of our daily concerns, where cares, hopes, and fears always let us look ahead. To say that the aesthetic judgment is disinterested is to say that it does not demand the other as existing, as an object to be appropriated, but only as an object of contemplation, only for its appearance. Before I can enjoy an object aesthetically, I have to free myself from it, that is to say, I may not look at it as an object of desire. When a

painting does not enable me to assume this detached position, there is no genuinely aesthetic experience, where the failure may be due to the painting or to my failure to assume the proper aesthetic attitude. Suppose you are looking at one of those Dutch still lifes showing, say a ham, a tankard of red wine, and some fruit. If in looking at such a picture your hunger is aroused you will not have a proper aesthetic experience. Or suppose you look at a landscape painting, and you discover that what is portrayed is a valley in which you once spent many happy hours. Once more you become interested in the picture in a way incompatible with a pure aesthetic experience. Or consider the case where the painting of a nude awakens sexual desire. On Kant's view, whatever pleasures you may derive from such a painting, yours is not an aesthetic appreciation.

## 5

Kant's understanding of the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction anticipates Edward Bullough's claim that "**psychical distance**" is a defining characteristic of the aesthetic experience.<sup>35</sup> The suggestion is that in the aesthetic experience we free ourselves from our everyday involvement with things. The Panofsky quote with which I began already made that point. We do not need what we judge beautiful, and precisely because we do not need it, we are free to let it be the thing it happens to be. Having left behind our everyday involvement with things, it is as if I now saw the beautiful thing for the first time. (Recall the passages by de Chirico I read you in the very first lecture.)

Precisely because we do not need what we now experience we feel free as never before. There is no coercion in aesthetic experience, according to Kant, but only the free harmonious play of imagination and understanding. The aesthetic object occasions such a free play in me. It is that free play that grants what Kant calls an entirely disinterested satisfaction. And it is such satisfaction that lets me judge an object beautiful.

Aesthetic experience, so understood, leaves the object undisturbed. Or, to put this point differently, only the appearance of the object has aesthetic significance; its material, actual existence is significant only as an occasion for the aesthetic experience. If, your musical memory and imagination were strong enough to hear or even to perform one of

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Bullough, "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 5 (1912), pp. 87-117.

Beethoven's quartets in your head, so that you could reproduce the music's beautiful appearance, you would not need the actual performance. Similarly, if your memory and imagination were strong enough to reproduce the beautiful appearance of one of Raphael's paintings, you would not need the actual painting. The judgment of beauty would be the same. What matters is only the presence of a beautiful form.

## 6

Last time I offered you a fourfold characterization of the aesthetic object drawn from Baumgarten's understanding of the beautiful as sensible perfection. Let me conclude this lecture by recalling the third and fourth points of that characterization and by relating them to Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. First the third:

3. The perfection of the artwork demands of the spectator that he leave it as it presents itself to him. All he could do to it would only destroy its perfection. The proper response to art is rapt surrender, **absorption in its presence**. Such absorption satisfies because it grants us a sense of being at one with ourselves denied by our engagement in the world. Aesthetic experience thus quiets care, fear, and hope.

Kant does not speak of perfection, but, as we have seen, when Kant, understands the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction, he, too, understands aesthetic experience as openness to and absorption in a beautiful presence that quiets care, fear, and hope. That we should expect such similarity becomes evident when we consider what appreciation of something perfect demands: since what is perfect presents itself as being just as it should be, it demands to be left alone. It can be admired, we may allow ourselves to become absorbed in its perfection, but any attempt to appropriate it can only destroy it. The encounter with whatever is perfect pulls us thus out of our usual engagement in the world, lets us become disinterested, lets us dwell in the present.

4. To the artwork's perfection corresponds the **self-sufficiency of aesthetic experience**, which needs no justification, but is sought for its own sake.

Kant, too, understands the aesthetic experience as a satisfaction that needs no justification. If only for a time, we are allowed to escape from that neediness that defines human being; if only for a time we are allowed to enjoy something resembling the plenitude of Aristophanes' circlemen.

## 9. Free and Dependent Beauty

### 1

In my last lecture I focused on Kant's analysis of the beautiful as object of an **entirely disinterested satisfaction**. What does Kant mean by **interest**? As we saw, Kant links interest to need. Human beings are interested because their being is a being in need. Indeed, we human beings are in need in two quite distinct senses, corresponding to our dual nature: as beings who belong to nature, we have bodily needs; on the other hand we also belong to reason. Last time I had quite a bit to say about the former. But what about the latter? What are our needs as beings of reason?

As beings of reason, Kant holds, human beings have an interest in the good. If we can call the confusion of the beautiful with the pleasant on the part of some artist **the hedonistic fallacy**, a fallacy of course only if we accept the claim that the proper task of art is to provide occasions for what Kant calls an entirely disinterested satisfaction, we can refer to the confusion of the beautiful with the good the **moralistic fallacy**. We praise a work of art because it accords with our understanding of what ought to be, because it edifies. Think of the art of Norman Rockwell or of Tom Kinkade, the recently deceased, self-styled painter light. Such art paints a picture, rather rosier than the world we live in, of a gentler and kinder America. Reality is confronted with its idealized image. That image calls us to what is taken to be a better life. It thus may be said to edify, where to edify art need not oppose to reality a more positive image; it can also do the reverse. Think of representations of hell. They admonish us to change our ways lest we end up like those unfortunate souls we see being boiled by a bunch of nasty devils. In all these cases the work of art serves and is measured by an understanding of the good.

The confusion of aesthetic and moral categories, of the beautiful and the good — if indeed it is a confusion — is familiar from Winckelmann, the leading theorist of neo-classicism. Winckelmann speaks of the **quiet grandeur and noble simplicity** of the Greek soul, finding its expression in the work of art. The greatness of Greek art is here sought in its ability to translate a noble ideal into readily apprehended images. The general idea was very much part of neo-classicism, the dominant approach to art when Kant wrote his *Critique of Judgment*. Classicists thus tended to identify their fight for

linearism, as opposed to a more painterly approach, and for simplicity with a fight for morality and against irrationalism in general. The appeal of thick paint was suspect as being in part a visceral appeal, an appeal not just to the eye and the intellect, but to the body, with its passions and emotions. In this connection, it is interesting to note how often paint has been understood as a figure of the erotic. In this connection you might wish to consider Jackson Pollock's use of paint; or, on the other side, Marcel Duchamp's critique of Courbet for his fascination with the materiality of paint. Or, to remain closer to Kant's period, Ingres understood himself as both the defender of linearism and the classical tradition, and of morality. According to this view, the work of art ought to be rooted in an understanding of a state of affairs that ought to be. Thus it has a teaching function. Tolstoy has presented us with what has become perhaps the best known statement of such a moralistic view of art (*What is Art?*). But moralistic criteria are also very much behind Plato's famous critique of the poets in the *Republic*. And, as we have seen, Socrates in his speech explicitly joins the beautiful to the good. In the *Symposium* such beauty is opposed to the beauty of Agathon's speech.

One consequence of the moralistic fallacy is that the aesthetic experience is now subordinated to another concern: the point of the work of art, on this view, is not at all to provide for a disinterested satisfaction, but precisely to strengthen our interest in the good, to become an incentive for action. It hopes to lead us to the kind of life demanded by the moral ideal. On this view the work of art should have a message; furthermore it should be possible to state this message, to detach it from the work of art. The moralistic conception of art threatens thus to reduce art to **propaganda**, where we may well wonder whether **religious art** has not often or perhaps always had such a propagandistic function.

Kant's definition of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction invites us to oppose the intent of the propagandist to the requirements of beauty. If Kant is right, propaganda must fail as propaganda, i. e., as something that would arouse our interest, precisely to the extent it succeeds as art. This reminds me of the now legendary ads for Piel's beer that in the fifties became so popular with television viewers that the New York Times gave the times when they were aired. . The success of the ads was apparently not at all reflected in rising sales — just the opposite. The company, if I remember correctly, went bankrupt. Perhaps we should take this as empirical evidence in support of Kant.



## 2

The second moment develops the distinction between the beautiful and the good further: Once more let me read you Kant's explanation:

*Beautiful* is what without a concept, is liked universally. (34)

The aesthetic judgment is not bound by a rule. To tell someone he ought to find something beautiful because it manifests certain admirable moral ideas is to do violence to the requirements of beauty. We can indeed generalize and say that to tell someone that he ought to find a certain object beautiful because it follows a certain rule or exhibits a certain concept is to have misunderstood the essence of the beautiful. I might for instance try to convince you of the beauty of a certain façade by demonstrating to you how all its proportions are based on the golden section, or of the beauty of a poem by demonstrating that it is a perfect sonnet. Such proofs, if Kant is right, can never succeed. If they could succeed, this would mean that art could be produced by following a recipe. To generalize: you cannot say: you should judge the manifold a, b, c, d beautiful because it is governed by A, say, because it expresses a lofty ideal of heroism. As Kant puts this point:

If we judge objects merely in terms of concepts, then we lose all presentation of beauty. This is why there can be no rule by which someone could be compelled to acknowledge that something is beautiful (59).

And yet, if this is admitted, must it not mean that everyone has his own taste? But just this Kant refuses to admit. This would make the judgment of beauty too much like a judgment of what is pleasant. In the latter case, Kant is quite willing to admit that everyone has his own taste. If you like some bitter fruit I find distasteful, well, that just shows, *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

Hence about the agreeable the fundamental principle holds: *Everyone has his own taste* (of sense) (55)

But the case is different with the beautiful. Here we expect agreement, even though we cannot demonstrate to the other, why he should agree.

The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* everyone's agreement (since only a logically universal judgment can do that, because it can adduce reasons); it merely *requires* this agreement from everyone, as an instance of the rule, an instance regarding which it expects confirmation not from concepts, but from the agreement of others. (60)

What gives us a right to expect such agreement? In answer Kant points to the faculties that are involved in our delight in the beautiful. Kant suggests that these faculties are the imagination and the understanding, which are joined in a free play. But these are the very faculties that, according to the analysis provided in the first *Critique*, are conditions of the very possibility of experience. Every human being thus possesses the faculties necessary for the appreciation of beauty. Note that a sharp eye or good hearing are not in this sense universal.

## 3

But let me return to the point that we cannot judge some manifold a, b, c, d, beautiful because it exhibits some concept A., for it is precisely on this point Kant attempts to distinguish his own position from that of Baumgarten. Consider the beginning of the third moment:

a purpose is the object of a concept in so far as we regard this concept as the object's cause (the real basis of its possibility); and the causality that a *concept* has with respect to its *object* is purposiveness (*forma finalis*). (64-65)

Take a bicycle. It is an object that has as its cause the concept "bicycle." The object strikes us as something intended. The concept functions as the object's **final cause**. The bicycle is **purposive**.

Objective purposiveness is either external, i. e. the *utility*, or internal, i. e. the *perfection* of the object. In the case of the bicycle the **purposiveness** is external. Internal perfection can be illustrated by the example I gave earlier of a proof in geometry. Of internal perfection Kant has this to say:

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, provided that it is perfection *thought confusedly*. (73)

The reference is of course to Baumgarten and his followers. At the heart of Kant's objection is his conviction that such a confused judgment of perfection finally does not make sense.

Indeed, the judgment is called aesthetic precisely because the basis determining it is not a concept, but the feeling (of the inner sense) of that accordance in the play of the mental powers, insofar as it can only be sensed. If, on the other hand, we wished to call

confused concepts and the objective judgment based on them aesthetic, then we would have an understanding that judges by sense [*sinnlich*], or a sense that presents its objects by means of concepts, both of which are contradictory (75).

Kant thus rejects Baumgarten's understanding of taste as an *analogon rationis*. He has to reject it because of his division between sensibility, on the one hand, the understanding and reason, on the other. For Baumgarten, and more generally for the rationalists, as for the British empiricists, percepts and concepts can be placed on a continuum. For the former percepts are confused concepts, for the latter concepts are pale percepts. If Kant is right, there is no such continuum. Understanding and sensibility have to be recognized as fundamentally distinct.

But this different understanding of sensibility and understanding is perhaps not even the main reason for disagreeing with Baumgarten. Kant objects to the identification of the judgment of beauty with a judgment of perfection in that the latter suggests that whenever we judge something to be beautiful we refer what is judged to be beautiful to some dominant theme (our A) with respect to which its perfection is recognized. Kant suggests that this simply does not correspond to the way we understand beautiful objects. Think of a beautiful landscape, say a meadow strewn with daffodils. Where is here the theme? Or of a beautiful carpet. If I were to find the theme that adequately accounts for the work being the way it is, then, Kant suggests, the mind would no longer be free. The more a work of art strikes me as accounted for by certain rules or principles, the less room it leaves for that free play. To call a work academic is to make a legitimate criticism. The work of art should please in being seen, for its own sake, not because I can understand it as the product of some recipe or program. That might give a work a certain conceptual interest, but that should not be confused with aesthetic delight.

Crucial in this connection is the distinction between **free** and merely **accessory** or **dependent beauty** that dominates much of the discussion of the Third Moment. At first it seems to add rather little to what has so far been discussed:

There are two kinds of beauty, free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) and merely accessory beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be. Accessory beauty does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept. (76)

Free beauty alone is pure. What are examples of such pure beauties?

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 a plant, pays no regard 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 collection 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 beauties themselves [and] belong to no object determined by concepts as to its purpose, but we like them freely and on their own account. [I don't like this translation of *Schaltiere*. The German includes not only crustaceans, but mussels and clams and Kant was no doubt thinking first of all of seashells, which played such an important part in the art of the rococo, i.e. the art of Kant's time.] Thus designs *a la grecque*, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper, etc., mean nothing on their own; they represent 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. (77)

The quotation raises all sorts of questions. Why, for example, does Kant call attention the reproductive function of the flower, only to dismiss it, almost as if he wanted to hint that beauty here serves a reproductive eros, despite the divorce of beauty from love demanded by his account?

And does ornamental foliage really mean nothing on its own? Think of an oak leaf ornament.

And can we really consider all music with words free beauties? Think of a set of variations on a theme by Haydn.

Interesting is that Kant thinks first of all of nature when he is thinking of free beauty. Baumgarten was of course thinking of a poem, i.e., a work of art when thinking of beauty. Kant himself recognizes that most works of art will not be free beauties. Think of a portrait or a landscape painting. Here we do demand a certain faithfulness of representation, i.e. something like perfection. That is to say, Baumgarten's account works much better for works of art than it does for natural beauties. Kant's account of free beauty, on the other hand, applies first of all to nature. Kant indeed has some difficulty coming up with any examples of manmade free beauties. The examples he does come up with are, however, significant: **ornament** and **music**. To the extent that we hold up free beauty as an ideal in art we invite a turn towards **abstraction**.

And something else is important to note in this connection: Free beauty does not invite an analysis in terms of patterns of **subordination**, where one part, we can call it the theme, is dominant. Beauty is found in patterns of **coordination**. This shift from **subordination** to **coordination** reflects a shift in aesthetic sensibility that you can also

trace in the stylistic change of architecture from the late baroque to neo-classicism, as well as in the other arts.

In Kant's mention of music without a theme we sense once more the rejection of Baumgarten. With his emphasis on freedom Kant appears to look forward to a very different kind of aesthetic. Compare for example this passage from Ferruccio Busoni's *A New Esthetic of Music* with what Kant has to say:

Such lust of liberation filled Beethoven, the romantic revolutionary, that he ascended one short step on the way leading music back to its loftier self: — a short step in the great task, a wide step in his own path. 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 lesser 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 his First Symphony.<sup>36</sup>

In Kant's conception of free beauty we sense the beginnings of a romantic sense of freedom of which there is no trace in Baumgarten. In this connection we should keep in mind that this aesthetic freedom is very different from the freedom of the moral person, which is understood by Kant to demand obedience to the moral law we bear within ourselves. The freedom of which Busoni speaks is not bound to any law; it would oppose all restraints predetermined structures would impose. Freedom here would return to the spontaneous productivity of nature.

#### 4

Kant, however, does not point just to the future, he points equally to the past. The resulting tension comes to the fore in those unexpected pages on the Ideal of Beauty, where Kant seems to desert the banner of free beauty and has some very positive things to say about dependent beauty, words that appear to move him into the vicinity of Winckelmann's neo-classicism.

Kant begins by reiterating that

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<sup>36</sup> *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover, 1962)

There can be no objective rule of taste, no rule of taste that determines by concepts what is beautiful. (79)

And yet there are objects that have met with

the broadest possible agreement among all ages” and peoples. (79)

Such objects are taken as exemplary, as a model. The highest such model Kant calls the **archetype of taste**. This highest model, he continues,

is a mere idea, an idea which everyone must generate within himself and by which he must judge any object of taste, any example of someone’s judging by taste, and even the taste of everyone [else]. (79)

To this idea corresponds the ideal, **the representation of an individual being, regarded as adequate to the idea**. That this ideal cannot be the product of concepts is evident.

Kant therefore insists that it be an ideal of the imagination. But how are we to arrive at such an ideal? How are we to bridge the abyss that separates concepts and percepts? The faculty charged with establishing such a bridge is said to be the imagination. But this faculty is now beginning to look a bit like Baumgarten’s clear and confused judgments, which Kant accuses of confusing understanding and sensibility.

Kant goes on to point out that the very concept of a free beauty prevents us from looking for an ideal there. We can look for the ideal only where we meet with objective purposiveness, i. e. with perfection in Baumgarten’s sense. That is to say, we can look for the ideal of beauty only where we have a normal idea of what the thing in question is supposed to be. Our judgment of the beauty of a horse is governed by such an idea. So is our judgment of the beauty of a person. But in addition to this normal or aesthetic standard idea we have in the latter case

the *rational idea*, which makes the purposes of humanity, insofar as they cannot be presented in sensibility the principle for judging his figure, which reveals these purposes, as their effect in appearance. (81)

Kant claims that because man is the only being that bears the purpose of his existence within himself, he alone is the proper vehicle for the expression of the ideal.

Note how in this conception of the ideal the beautiful and the good, which Kant had taken such pains to separate, are once again brought together. We are back with Winckelmann and the quiet grandeur and the noble simplicity of the Greek soul. Kant admits that from a purely aesthetic point of view such art must be said to be impure, but he also points out that taste gains as a result in as much as it becomes fixed. Thus rules may be prescribed after all, provided that we keep in mind that these are not rules for

taste, but rules for the unification of taste with reason. And art, it turns out, according to Kant, has a lot to do with reason, not just with beauty. And although Kant is quick to point out that by this admixture neither the moral nor the aesthetic sphere gains, he yet immediately weakens such claims by saying that due to this wedding of the two realms, they are brought into a harmony and thus our whole faculty, that is the whole human being gains.

You will, however, have noted, that Kant does not understand the beautiful as sensible perfection; indeed on just this point he disagrees with Baumgarten and takes him to task. In my next lecture I shall turn to this disagreement and consider what is at issue.

## 10. 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>37</sup> If I had more time, I would love to 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 which belong to **self-preservation** are opposed to the passions which 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)

To these passions are opposed those that belong to society:

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<sup>37</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).



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. **The sublime has nothing to do with love of some other.**

## 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 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 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 fundamental 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, albeit 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.

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.

## 5

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>38</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.

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

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<sup>38</sup> Helmut Rehder, "The Infinite Landscape," *Texas Quarterly*, V, no. 3 (Autumn 1962), p. 149.

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.



## 11. Art, Beauty, and Genius

### 1

**Aesthetics** is sometimes defined as that branch of philosophy that is concerned with the beautiful, or with experience of 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, as should be evident, is found not only in **works of art**, but in **nature**. That in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, that is the "Critique of the Aesthetical Judgment," Kant sees no need to separate beauty in nature from beauty in art is characteristic of aesthetics, which tends to approach aesthetic phenomena from the **spectator's point of view**. But the spectator is passive, receptive. That such a point of view should tend to divorce beauty from procreative love is to be expected. That it is quite one-sided is also 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 Aesthetical 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 four key ideas that figure in that discussion:

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

### 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 — Aristotle already makes what is essentially the same point. 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. Works of art are **autotelic**. In this respect art 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 Judgment* is introduced here: **spirit (Geist)**. What spirit names is 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 spirit'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 that 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 adherent beauty, because all artistic production presupposes a reason, and intention. This is to say that, notwithstanding what Kant had said earlier about musical fantasies and ornament, a **truly free beauty is encountered only in nature** (if indeed it is encountered there, for when we look, e.g. at a beautiful glower, say a daffodil, we see it as such, that is we presuppose what Kant called the aesthetic standard idea of a daffodil. Cf, par. 17, p. 81.) Certainly the beautiful in art always involves adherent beauty. As Kant explains:

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

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 was 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 by Kant to be impossible in art. And on this point it seems impossible not to disagree with him. What makes his position seem somewhat old-fashioned is that Kant thinks of painting as a representational art. He continues to rely on a theory of **imitation**. This, however, is not necessary to make sense of Kant's central point: so let us take the quotation literally: artificial beauty is the beautiful **presentation** of a 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)

Baumgarten had thus spoken of heterocosmic and utopian fictions, fictions that explore possible worlds and fictions that venture into the impossible. 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. In both cases the imagination is a faculty of **coordination** as opposed to the understanding, which is a faculty of **subordination**: the latter subsumes a manifold under a concept. 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 — 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 **imagination**. The productive imagination is not under our conscious control. It is free: Think of dreaming. But it is precisely this 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 needed discipline**. The imagination is chaotic, rich, free, where its “lawless freedom” is essentially different from the freedom of the autonomous moral being, who places himself under the law of reason.

#### 4

Kant calls the product of the imagination an **idea**. The term "idea" is already familiar in its relation to reason: God, e.g. is an idea of reason. What the imagination produces is, however, not an idea of reason, but what Kant calls an **aesthetical idea**. The aesthetical 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: take Leibniz's idea of the cosmos as a perfect whole — an idea of reason. The aesthetical idea presents us with an analogous completeness. Both betray a dissatisfaction with the accidental. The aesthetical 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; it should not be 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 watercolor. This gives me a first concept of what the envisioned work is to be. The imagination gets

hold of this concept, but plays with it, develops it into an aesthetical 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 **impossible to find an adequate intuition**. And yet, the two are related. In its freedom, the imagination surpasses the understanding's reach. There is this something sublime about all aesthetical ideas. 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 aesthetical idea as transcending my understanding, as essentially unexpoundable. In this way the idea of reason and the aesthetical idea complement one another.

Perhaps this account gives us some idea of why the table of contents leaves us quite uncertain as to 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 seems to suggest? There is a way in which our attempt to comprehend the beautiful suffers shipwreck on the beautiful somewhat in the way imaginative comprehension was said to suffer shipwreck on the infinity of what is imaginatively apprehended in the discussion of the sublime. This invites a rethinking of the distinction of the boundary that at first so clearly seemed to separate the beautiful from the sublime. Beauty now appears in some ways rather like the sublime.

## 5

Kant's discussion of **genius** is closely tied to his analysis of the **aesthetical idea** and of the activity of the **imagination**. In turning to the problem 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. One senses 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 a *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.

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 latter 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 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)

The view that these passages sketch is 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.

6

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 — that Schopenhauer did in fact 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. And yet, at this point Kant seems to become 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.

For ([in every art] something must be thought, as purpose, since otherwise the product could not 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 not the only one) of the character of genius, shallow minds 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 of a training horse. Genius can only provide rich *material* for products of fine art; processing this material 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 power of judgment. (178)

Genius 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. When the imagination has been given more than its due, this means that an emphasis must be placed on the understanding.

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 rule, 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 creation. (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 of genius 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 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 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 adherent 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 is not. In other words, there is still that mysterious something that gives every great work of art its unique, special aura, which all determination cannot exhaust. And it is precisely in our attempts to exhaust it, that we realize its inexhaustibility and thus recognize its inimitable beauty.

## 12. The Terror of Time

### 1

Today I want to discuss what I call the **terror of time**. From the very beginning it has been operating in the background of much that has been discussed in this course. But first the obvious question:

What do I mean here by “the terror of time”? Perhaps I can explain it most simply by returning once more to the story of the **fall**, according to which man lost his place in paradise because he ate of the tree of knowledge, but not of the tree of life. In their present condition, human beings are not only **vulnerable and mortal**, they **know about their mortality**. We know that all we are now, all that we can still be and will ever achieve some day be will be past. Time will take away all that we can establish or build. What point is there then to our existence? And the more developed our sense of history, of time's passing, the more pronounced this terror is likely to be. There is a deep need in human beings to defeat the terror of time. Let me cite here a passage from Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* that points in essentially the same direction:

The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but joy wants eternity." Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure. ... The mere anticipation of the inevitable end, present in every instant, introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations and renders pleasure itself painful. This primary frustration in the instinctual structure of man becomes the inexhaustible source of all other frustrations — and of their social effectiveness. Man learns that "it cannot last any way," that every pleasure is short, that for all finite things the hour of their birth is the hour of their death— that it couldn't be otherwise.<sup>39</sup>

### 2

The terror of time is a strong undercurrent in Plato's *Symposium*. Consider the understanding of beauty Plato gives us there: **Beauty** was defined as **the object of eros**. And what was eros? Human beings, according to Plato, are ruled by eros **because they exist in time**, yet belong to and desire being, in search of eternity. Or, if you wish, we are beings who have fallen from our true home into time and now dream of our true home. Eros is nothing other than this desire for being, this desire to escape from the

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<sup>39</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 231.

terror of time and to return to a home time cannot ravage. But is there such a home? Or are there only finally unsatisfactory surrogates. Think back to Diotima's discussion of eros. On its lower levels eros pursues immortality by making sure that something of the individual will survive him in time, **children**, for example in whose memory we may continue to live, as we continue to live when we have acquired fame, or through works of art or architecture. The higher mysteries of eros lead beyond time, to the eternal forms. especially of course to a vision of **absolute beauty**, where the end of Diotima's speech suggests that much as we may want to dwell in the presence of that beauty, such dwelling is denied to us mortals. We, it appears, have to settle for what is second best. The best the gods kept for themselves.

Defined as the object of eros, **beauty** is placed **in opposition to destructive time**. Whenever we see something beautiful, according to Plato, we are reminded of the fact that part of us, but only part, belongs to being rather than to becoming. Time has no power of the human spirit.

It is not surprising that given this Platonic understanding of eros, the language of beauty should turn out to be a language of the spirit; for Plato this meant: the **language of geometry**. Let me read you here a passage from Plato's *Philebus*, which has been cited repeatedly by modern artists who have found in it a succinct expression of what they were striving for:

I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures, which are formed by turning lathes and rulers and measures of angles -- for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally or absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colors, which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures; now do you understand my meaning?<sup>40</sup>

The passage deserves careful attention. First of all our attention is drawn to the kind of beauty Plato considers deficient: 1) the beauty of animals or pictures. Their beauty is contrasted with the beauty of simple inorganic forms, beauty that is created not by the body, but by the spirit. Indeed, in creating such beauty the body is likely to prove a hindrance. Try to draw a straight line with your free hand.

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<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Philebus* 51c–d, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

Especially in the twentieth century this Platonism has surfaced again and again. It came indeed close to evolving into the aesthetic of the modern movement. Mondrian deserves special mention in this connection, as do Gropius and Mies van der Rohe among architects. Let me read you here, a statement from Le Corbusier and Ozenfant's programmatic essay *Purism*:

Nothing is worthwhile which is not general, nothing is worthwhile which is not transmittable. We have attempted to establish an aesthetic that is rational and therefore human.<sup>41</sup>

What is worthwhile in art here is equated with what is general, rational, and can be understood by everyone. This presupposes that there is a universal language of art, a language that is essentially geometric. Note the equation here of what is human with what is rational. But let me continue with the essay:

It is true that plastic art has to address itself more directly to the senses than pure mathematics which acts only by symbols, these symbols sufficing to trigger in the mind consequences of a superior order; in plastic art, the senses should be strongly moved in order to predispose the mind to the release into play of subjective reactions without which there is no art. But there is no art worth having without this excitement of an intellectual order— architecture is the art which up to now has most strongly induced the states of this category. The reason for this is that everything in architecture is expressed by order and economy.<sup>42</sup>

The presupposition is that the spirit provides a timelessly valid vocabulary on which the artist can draw to generate an art that will have not only a personal or regional, but a truly universal and **timeless significance**. Beauty defeats the power of time. It should be clear that so understood, what we can call **perennial Platonism** demands a downgrading of the individual. What matters is not the individual, but the universal.

### 3

The philosopher who most explicitly addressed that terror and understood art as a reply to it was Schopenhauer. His influence in the second half of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century, especially on painters and poets, can hardly be exaggerated.

Central to Schopenhauer is the very thought expressed by Marcuse: **pleasure and an understanding of time that subordinates the present to the future are**

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<sup>41</sup> Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, "Purism," *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (Engelwood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 60.

**incompatible.** This incompatibility offers the key to Schopenhauer's pessimism. Pleasure is tied by Schopenhauer to the idea of **satisfaction**. We are satisfied when we are **entire, complete, at one with ourselves**. Recall the circlemen of Aristophanes. But are we not denied such pleasure by our temporality? Desire, care, anticipation, hope, and fear — they all betray a **lack** that appears to be inseparable from human existence. Schopenhauer sees dissatisfaction as part of the essence of the will, the hungry will as he calls it. It therefore shows itself in all phenomena of the will. Suffering and pain are not the "privilege" of human beings. Human beings are, however unique in that they are beings of reason and as such beings concerned for their being, also for their possible lack of being. The human being is essentially a being in dread of death, and thus a being whose life is in the face of the terror of time.

Man alone carries about with him in abstract concepts the certainty of his own death. (I, 281)<sup>43</sup>

Philosophy, religion, and **art**, are interpreted by Schopenhauer as responses to this dread. It is the last that is our primary concern here.

That art and aesthetic experience should be so interpreted should no longer surprise us after Kant's discussion of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction and Schopenhauer thinks of himself as following very much in the footsteps of Kant. Let me read you here once more a passage from the *World as Will and Representation* I read you in the very first lecture, when I suggested how much the painter De Chirico's understanding of art owed to Schopenhauer:

Light is the largest diamond in the crown of beauty, and has the most decided influence on the knowledge of every beautiful object. Its presence generally is an indispensable condition; its favorable arrangement enhances even the beauty of the. But above all else, the beautiful in architecture is enhanced by the favor of light, and through it even the most insignificant thing becomes a beautiful object. Now if in the depth of winter, when the whole of nature is frozen and stiff, we see the rays of the setting sun, reflected by masses of stone, when they illuminate without warming and are thus favorable only to the purest kind of knowledge, not to the will, the contemplation of the beautiful effect of light on these masses moves us into a state of pure knowing, as all beauty does. (I, 203)

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> References in the text are to Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968),

Normally the sun is both, a source of **life** and a source of **illumination**. But the winter sun, which illuminates without warming, answers only to our knowledge, not to our will. This cold light has thus the power of transporting us, of negating the will in us. Our normal attitude to things is bracketed. The voices of the everyday are silenced. As was already apparent in our discussions of Kant, such a bracketing is central to the aesthetic experience. In Schopenhauer's words, in such experience

we relinquish the ordinary way of considering thing and  
let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object  
actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building or anything  
else. We lose ourselves entirely to this object, to use a pregnant expression;... (I, 178)

In aesthetic experience the human being exploits that distance from himself as desiring, which is part of his intellectual nature, and makes him a being that not only desires, but knows. For a time the will within him is negated. The human being is **no longer interested**. He asks nothing of the world and precisely because of this is open to it as never before. Schopenhauer's debt to Kant here requires no comment. Or think once more of what has been called **aesthetic distance**. I used the example of a fog that lets us see a familiar tree as never before. Or think of the late afternoon sun lighting up Sterling Library against a dark sky. Let me quote here a passage from Kandinsky's *The Effect of Color*:

On the average man, only impressions caused by familiar objects will be superficial. A first encounter with any phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world; every object is new to him. [As we learn about things] the whole world becomes gradually disenchanted. The adult realizes that trees give shade, that horses run fast and automobiles still faster, that dogs bite, that the moon is distant, that the figure in the mirror is not real.<sup>44</sup>

Familiarity negates **mystery**. Recall in this connection what deChirico had said about mystery. Mystery and **novelty** are inextricably linked. The task of art, on Kandinsky's view, is to reawaken this mystery of the presencing of things, which is hidden by our everyday involvement with things and the interest that guides it.

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<sup>44</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, "The Effect of Color," 1911, in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 153.

Schopenhauer, too, sees the essence of the aesthetic attitude in the complete freedom from interest. In it the will has been quieted. We can make essentially the same point by saying that the aesthetic attitude is marked by its **objectivity**. It is indeed in this that Schopenhauer seeks the essence of **genius**. Rather remarkably the power of genius appears here first of all as a power of concentrated, detached observation. It follows that for Schopenhauer spectator and creator are essentially the same:

The work of art is merely a means of facilitating that knowledge in which this [aesthetic] pleasure consists. (I, 195)

Most of us lack the power to sustain such objectivity. For this reason, Schopenhauer suggests that we are soon finished with everything. We look for something, and when we have found it, we are done with it. Indeed, we often even look at art in this way. We go to a museum to see some masterpiece. Having seen it we check it off on our mental list of things to have seen and are done with it. How much time do people spend with pictures in a museum?

This divorce of aesthetic experience from everyday interest suggests that there is a tension between the demands of art and those of everyday life, a tension that can lead the genius out of the world of the normal and taken for granted into madness. Schopenhauer cites a number of authors in support of his view, including Plato and his **myth of the cave**. Those who have left the cave and seen the sun, do not function well on their return to the cave's darkness. Art implies a leave-taking from the normal, from common sense. Given the sense of the many, what the artist has to offer may often seem nonsense.

Why does the aesthetic experience please? Why do we take pleasure in the beautiful? By now the answer should be obvious. Schopenhauer sees the human being as desiring satisfaction, yet denied such satisfaction by his own being which forever lets him look for fulfillment in the future, beyond the present. The **temporality of aesthetic experience** is very different from the **temporality of everyday life**. It allows us to exist in the present, at one with ourselves. In time it gives us a fleeting deliverance from the burden of time, a **semblance of redemption**.

No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow. Therefore, so long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of our desires, with its constant

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hopes and fears, so long as we are the subjects of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace. Essentially it is all the same whether we pursue or flee, fear harm or aspire to enjoyment; care for the constantly demanding will, no matter in what form, continually fills and moves consciousness; but without peace and calm, true well-being is absolutely impossible. Thus the subject of willing is constantly lying on the revolving wheel of Ixion, is always drawing water in the sieve of the Danaids, and is the eternally thirsting Tantalus. (I, 196)

Art delivers us, if only for a time, from that contradiction between what we are and what we want that is part of our being.

When, however, an external cause or inward opposition suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them in so far as they are merely representations, and not motives. Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us. It is the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing. The wheel of Ixion stands still. (I, 196)

Art provides relief from the burden of life.



### 13. Beauty and Redemption

#### 1

In my last lecture I suggested that according to Schopenhauer art delivers us, if only for a time, from that contradiction between what we are and what we want that is part of our being. Let me read you once more the passage I quoted at the end of the last lecture."

When, however, an external cause or inward opposition **suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing**, and snatches knowledge from the **thralldom of the will**, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them in so far as they are merely representations, and not motives. Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us. It is the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. **We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing.** The wheel of Ixion stands still. (I, 196, my emphases)

Our subjection to the will is here understood as a kind of enslavement. Note such phrases as:

**thralldom of the will**

or

**We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing.**

To our everyday existence Schopenhauer here opposes another state. Just as the sabbath releases us from the routines of our working days, so art releases us from that state of dissatisfaction that is our lot as long as we are subject to the will. Note how Schopenhauer here in his discussion of aesthetic experience interprets it very much in religious categories: aesthetic experience figures a state of redemption. The difficulty with art, on Schopenhauer's view, is of course that it only figures it. Artists are very much persons who suffer like the rest of us; indeed perhaps even more intensely, because they experience more keenly the contrast between the plenitude of the aesthetic experience and the suffering and pain that are inevitably part of ordinary experience. Consider in this connection the end of the third book.

[The artist] is captivated by the consideration of the spectacle of the will's objectification. He sticks to this, and does not get tired of contemplating it, and of repeating it in his descriptions. Meanwhile, he himself pays the cost of producing that play; in other words, he himself is the will objectifying itself and remaining in constant suffering. That pure, true, and profound knowledge of the inner nature of the world now becomes for him an end in itself; at it he stops. Therefore it does not become for him a quieter of the will, as we shall see in the following book in the case of the saint who has attained resignation; it **does not deliver him from life for ever**,, but **only for a few moments**. For him it is not the way out of life, but only **an occasional consolation** in it, until his power, enhanced by this contemplation, finally becomes tired of the spectacle, and seizes the serious side of things. The St. Cecilia of Raphael can be regarded as a symbol, of this transition. Therefore we will now in the following book turn to the serious side. (I, 267, my emphases)

Note that the artist is here compared to the saint and found deficient. What art has to offer is not true redemption, but only an **Ersatz-redemption**. But it is precisely because it figures true redemption that Schopenhauer is so interested in it. But if I am interested in art because it figures true redemption, it follows that I don't at all remain disinterested when I experience a work of art. Quite to the contrary, I am interested in it precisely because **it points the way towards salvation**. Note the ending to the passage I read: "The St. Cecilia of Raphael," according to Schopenhauer, "**can be regarded as a symbol**" of the transition from the fleeting and therefore false redemption provided by aesthetic experience towards true redemption. But this understanding of the work of art as a symbol is at odds with the self-sufficiency I claimed is demanded of the aesthetic object by the aesthetic approach, and I included Schopenhauer among the representatives of that approach. I shall have to return to this tension between the self-sufficiency demanded by the aesthetic approach and the edification that Schopenhauer looks for and finds in Raphael's St. Cecilia. In this connection you should recall the not altogether unrelated tension between Kant's discussion of free beauty and what this understanding of beauty demands of the aesthetic object and the turn towards the ideal and thus towards an art that edifies that Kant takes in the third moment. The art that means most to Schopenhauer, too, would appear to be not an art that is the object of an entirely disinterested perception, but an art that points towards an ideal, although Schopenhauer's ideal is not at all that of Kant, **not of the moral person**, but of the **saint** in whom the will has turned.

## 2

In developing his understanding of the saint Schopenhauer returns to the Greek distinction between two kinds of love, or rather to its Christian version, which opposes **eros**, as the lower love, to **agape**, as the higher, truly Christian love. The saint, according to Schopenhauer is selfless, he is filled with agape, not with selfish eros. Schopenhauer takes pains to distinguish his position from Kant's:

Pure affection (**agape, caritas**) is of its nature sympathy or compassion. The suffering alleviated by it, to which every unsatisfied desire belongs, may be great or small. We shall therefore have no hesitation in saying that the mere concept is as unfruitful for genuine virtue as it is for genuine art; that all true and pure affection is sympathy or compassion, and all love that is not sympathy is selfishness. All this will be in direct contradiction to Kant, who recognized all true goodness and all virtue as such, only if they have derived from abstract reflection, and in fact from the concepts of duty and the categorical imperative, and who declares felt sympathy to be weakness, and by no means virtue.

**Selfishness is eros, sympathy or compassion is agape.** (375 - 376)

Schopenhauer's opposition between selfish, life-affirming eros and self-less life-denying agape is all too simple and must be questioned. Can we not imagine a self-less, but life affirming love, a love that is willing, if necessary to even sacrifice the individual self so that the community may continue to live and flourish? Schopenhauer here leaves no room for such a love. And is it not possible to ask whether the self-denial of Schopenhauer's saint may not in fact be an expression of a high degree of selfishness?

But let us consider his saint in a bit more detail. In paragraph 68 Schopenhauer sketches for us something like a ladder that invites comparison with the ladder Diotima sketches in Plato's *Symposium*.

If the veil of Maya, the *principium individuationis*, is lifted from the eyes of a man to such an extent that he no longer makes the egoistical distinction between himself and the person of others, but takes as much interest in the sufferings of other individuals as in his own, and thus is not only benevolent and charitable in the highest degree, but even ready to sacrifice his own individuality whenever several others can be saved thereby, then it follows automatically that such a man, recognizing in all beings his own true and innermost self, must also regard the endless sufferings of all that lives as his own, and thus take upon himself the pain of the whole world. (379)

Schopenhauer, too, appeals here to the willingness to sacrifice oneself to save others. But we should note that such a sacrifice makes sense only when we think life worthwhile, and that suffering is not so essential to life that it does not make sense to

alleviate it. Note the difference between what Schopenhauer has in mind and the willingness of Alcestis to sacrifice herself for her husband. Alcestis is willing to sacrifice herself so that the person she loves may live. Her love is highly selective. Schopenhauer would have to say that hers is not yet genuine *agape*, which does not permit such distinctions. It extends to all human beings, and indeed beyond human beings to all sentient beings. But I continue with the discussion of par. 68:

Wherever he looks he sees suffering humanity and the suffering animal world, and a world that passes away. Now all this lies just as near to him as only his own person lies to the egoist. Now how could he, with such knowledge of the world, affirm this very life through constant acts of the will, and precisely in this way bind himself more and more firmly to it, press himself to it more and more closely. (I, 378)

Agape brings with it an enormous expansion of one's ego-boundaries, to the point that one quite literally loses one's self. At this point selfish acts become impossible.

that knowledge of the whole, of the inner nature of the thing-in-itself, which has been described, becomes the *quieter* of all and every willing. The will now turns away from life; it shudders at he pleasures in which it recognizes the affirmation of life. Man attains to the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete willlessness. (I. 379)

And now the end, the high point of this journey, the state of redemption, of the saint:

Thus he resorts to fasting, and even to self-castigation and self-torture, in order that, by constant privation and suffering, he may more and more break down and kill the will that he recognizes and abhors as the source of his own suffering existence and of the world's. Finally, if death comes, which breaks up the phenomenon of this will, the essence of such will having long expired through the free denial of itself except for the feeble residue which appears as the vitality of this body, then it is most welcome, and is cheerfully accepted as a longed-for deliverance. (382)

Note how the suffering individual self seems to motivate this movement of renunciation, which, as Nietzsche will point out, remains an all too selfish one. Schopenhauer's saint requires a highly developed will. This asceticism, Schopenhauer claims, is the true message, not only of Indian wisdom, but also of Christianity. Schopenhauer, too, appeals to the story of the fall, which he interprets in his own way:

The sinner was Adam, but we all existed in him; Adam became miserable, and in him we have all become miserable. The doctrine of original sin (affirmation of the will) and of salvation (denial of the will) is really the great truth which constitutes the kernel of Christianity, while the rest is in the main only clothing and covering, or something

accessory. Accordingly, we should interpret Jesus Christ always in the universal, as the symbol of personification of the denial of the will to live, but not in the individual... (405)

Christ for Schopenhauer is a paradigm of the person in whom the will has turned, a personification of the ideal. Redeemed himself, he opens for us the road to redemption. And just as Christianity draws on art to strengthen its message of redemption, so does Schopenhauer. It is significant that at the very end of the fourth book he returns to Raphael and Correggio, as artists who have succeeded in finding visual expression for the Schopenhauerian ideal:

But we now turn our glance from our own needy and perplexed nature to those who have overcome the world, in whom the will, having reached complete self-knowledge, has found itself again in everything, and then freely denied itself, and who then merely wait to see the last trace of the will vanish with the body that is animated by that trace. Then, instead of the restless pressure and effort; instead of the constant transition from desire to apprehension and from joy to sorrow; instead of the never-satisfied and never-denying hope that constituted the life-dream of the man who wills, we see that peace that is higher than all reason, that ocean-like calmness of spirit, that deep tranquility, that unshakable confidence and serenity, whose mere reflection in the countenance, as depicted by Raphael and Correggio, is *a complete and certain gospel*. (I, 411)

Raphael and Correggio succeeded in creating works of art that are more than that, that as representations of the ideal as Schopenhauer envisions it, deserve to be called a complete and certain gospel. Art in its highest sense does more than to offer us a temporary escape from the suffering that is part of ordinary life. Art in its highest sense edifies. **It edifies by speaking to us of and by calling us and pointing the way to redemption.**

### 3

It is just this ideal that provoked the ire of Nietzsche. Nietzsche had no sympathy with Schopenhauer's saints and no sympathy either for an art serving ideals of redemption, especially not for the art of Wagner, an art that as Nietzsche saw it, had succumbed to the Schopenhauerian ideal of redemption.

Listen to how Nietzsche interprets the story of the *Ring* in *The Wagner Case*.

I shall still relate the story of the Ring. It belongs here. It, too, is a story of redemption: only this time it is Wagner who is redeemed. —

Half of his life, Wagner believed in the Revolution as much as ever a Frenchman believed in it. He searched for it in the runic writing of myth, he believed that in Siegfried he had found the typical revolutionary.<sup>45</sup>

On this interpretation, Wagner, too, wanted to create, not a work of art for art's sake, but wanted to project an ideal, only an ideal very much of this world, an ideal to be realized by overthrowing the established order, established morality, by a moral and political, more precisely a socialist revolution.

Siegfried continues as he has begun: he merely follows his first impulse, he merely overthrows everything traditional, all reverence, all *fear*. Whatever displeases him he stabs to death. Without the least respect he tackles the old deities. But his main enterprise aims *to emancipate woman* — "to redeem Brunhilde." Siegfried and Brunhilde; the sacrament of free love; the rise of the golden age; the twilight of the gods of the old morality — *all ill has been abolished*.

The ideal that is upheld here is very much linked to an affirmation of a worldly love, of love rather than agape, an ideal not at all to the liking of Schopenhauer.

But Wagner lost faith in this ideal. The failure of the revolution of 1848 contributed to that disenchantment. Where this disenchantment is inseparable from a receptiveness to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy. Here is how Nietzsche puts the matter:

The ship struck a reef; Wagner was stuck. The reef was Schopenhauer's philosophy; Wagner was stranded on a *contrary* world-view. What had he transposed into music? Optimism. Wagner was ashamed. Even an optimism for which Schopenhauer had coined an evil epithet — *infamous* optimism. He was ashamed a second time. He reflected for a long while, his situation seemed desperate. — Finally, a way out dawned on him: the reef on which he was shipwrecked — what if he interpreted it as the *goal*, as the secret intent, as the true significance of his voyage... So he translated the *Ring* into Schopenhauer's terms. Everything goes wrong, everything perishes, the new world is as bad as the old: the *nothing*, the Indian Circe beckons.<sup>46</sup>

Wagner now begins to rethink his leading characters. Siegfried comes to be of less interest to him. Wotan becomes more interesting, this corrupt god who finally tires of his own power, well on the road to Schopenhauerian redemption. And Brunhilde, too, is changed by the Schopenhauerian wand:

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<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Case of Wagner," 4, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans, Walter Kaufmann, p. 619.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

Brunhilde was initially supposed to take her farewell with a song in honor of free love, putting off the world with the hope for a socialist utopia in which "all turns out well" but now gets something else to do. She has to study Schopenhauer first; she has to transpose the Fourth Book of *The World as Will and Representation* into verse. *Wagner was redeemed.*<sup>47</sup>

What Nietzsche means here when he writes that Wagner was redeemed is of course not that Wagner had turned into a Schopenhauerian saint. But just as Schopenhauer, while in his personal life far from the saint he so praises, is the philosopher of redemption for a godless age, so, for Nietzsche, Wagner becomes the artist of redemption for a godless age. Schopenhauer freed Wagner to become truly himself. In this sense Nietzsche can say:

In all seriousness, this was a redemption. The benefit Schopenhauer conferred on Wagner is immeasurable. Only the philosopher of decadence gave to the artist of decadence — himself.

Schopenhauerian redemption is here linked to **decadence**. Schopenhauer came to be understood by Nietzsche as the paradigmatic philosopher of decadence, and this goes especially for his understanding of art. For us there is a problem here: what is the connection between Schopenhauer's aesthetics and the phenomenon Nietzsche calls decadence. And if, as I have argued, Schopenhauer's aesthetics is a characteristic expression of what I have called the aesthetic approach, must we consider that approach in its entirety decadent? I shall have to return to this question. But first I have to take up another question that I raised earlier in this lecture only to leave it unanswered: I spoke of the tension between the self-sufficiency demanded of the work of art by the aesthetic approach and the edification that Schopenhauer looks for and finds in Raphael's St. Cecilia and that Wagner hoped to provide with the *Ring*. How are the two related? I shall begin with this question next time.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 620.

## 14. The Beautiful and the Sacred

### 1

In my last lecture I spoke of the tension between **the self-sufficiency demanded of the work of art** by Schopenhauer's aesthetic approach and the **edification** that he looks for and finds in Raphael's St. Cecilia and that Wagner hoped to provide with the *Ring*. How are the two related? Let me begin by returning to the former. I suggested before, that to demand self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object is to claim that the aesthetic object should not engage our interest, say, because it is a sign of some reality that lies outside it, or because it provides an accurate representation of some person or landscape, or because it signifies a higher reality. Schopenhauer's rejection of allegory in the visual arts is quite in keeping with this demand: if what counts in aesthetic experience is that we become absorbed in the presence of the art work, concepts can only get in the way; from this the rejection of **allegory** follows:

if starting from the concept is objectionable in art, then we shall not be able to approve, when a work of art is intentionally and avowedly chosen to express a concept; this is the case in *allegory*. An allegory is a work of art signifying something different from what it depicts... Here, therefore the picture or statue is supposed to achieve what a written work achieves far more perfectly. (I, 237)

Not that painters have not been able to paint beautiful allegories. But they succeeded, not because, but despite the fact that they were painting allegories.

Allegories in plastic and pictorial art are consequently nothing but hieroglyphics; the artistic value they may have as expressions of perception does not belong to them as allegories but otherwise. That the *Night* of Correggio, the *Genius of Fame* of Annibale Carracci, and the *Goddesses of the Seasons* of Poussin are very beautiful pictures is to be kept quite apart from the fact that they are allegories. (I, 237)

Schopenhauer is quite aware that with his rejection of allegory he is quite opposed to Winckelmann and neo-classicism. Here is what Winckelmann had written:

Painting reaches up to things which are not sensible; these are its highest goal.... The painter who thinks further than his palette reaches, desires a store-house of learning from which he can take significant and sensible signs for things that are themselves not



sensible. The brush which the artist holds should be steeped in understanding ... He should leave more to thought than he shows the eye.<sup>48</sup>

Winckelmann thought himself a Platonist, but Plato's forms have become mere concepts. With such emphasis on abstract concepts Winckelmann blurs the distinction between **artist** and **philosopher**. The **mechanical** part was distinguished from the **ideal** part. The former requires a manual skill that can be taught, the latter talent: the talent of the philosopher. The difficulty with such a view of art is that it tends to render art superfluous. Art becomes concept art, the artist a frustrated philosopher. And here it is interesting to consider the affinity between much recent art and the neo-classicism envisioned by Winckelmann.

Interestingly, Schopenhauer does not extend his critique of allegory to poetry. Here indeed it is desirable. That it is so, has to do with the very different medium:

But allegory has an entirely different relation to poetry from that which it has to plastic and pictorial art; and although it is objectionable in the latter, it is quite admissible and very effective in the former. For in plastic and pictorial art allegory leads away from what is given in perception, from the real object of all art, to abstract thoughts; but in poetry the direction is reversed. Here the concept is what is given in words, and the first aim is to lead from this to the perceptive, the depiction of which must be undertaken by the imagination of the hearer. (I, 240)

The passage points to the fact that given the understanding of the aesthetic object I have developed it is most easily illustrated by a painting or a sculpture, indeed, as we shall see, by an abstract painting or sculpture. By its very medium the poet is at a disadvantage. Words first of all signify concepts. The poet has to subvert that signification. Allegory can be a means of such subversion, although in poetry, too, allegory can lead to something merely conceptual. As I distinguished before between two kinds of metaphor, we should perhaps distinguish between two kinds of allegory, and between two ways of reading allegories. Strong allegories cannot be dissolved by conceptual analysis.

And yet when Schopenhauer celebrates Raphael's St. Cecilia as a symbol of the transition to saintly world-resignation, is he not himself looking to art for more than that momentary relief from suffering that on his analysis is the gift of whatever is beautiful?

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<sup>48</sup> Johann J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung d griechischen Weisheit in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (Dresden und Leipzig, 1756), p. 40.

## 2

But let me return to Schopenhauer's analysis of aesthetic experience:

Knowledge of the beautiful always supposes, simultaneously and inseparably, a pure knowing subject and a known Idea as object. But yet, the source of aesthetic enjoyment will lie sometimes rather in the apprehension of the known Idea, sometimes rather the bliss and peace of mind of pure knowledge from all willing and thus from all individuality and the pain that results therefrom. (I, 212)

What Schopenhauer is saying here is that aesthetic experience reveals the essence of things, what, following Plato, he calls the Platonic idea. But with this we once more link the beautiful and the true. Remember that for Kant all pure beauty occasions that disinterested pleasure that we take in the harmonious interplay of imagination and understanding. The second alternative sketched by Schopenhauer would seem to correspond closely to what Kant has in mind. But what about the first? If art gives us insight into the essence of things and finally into the essence of the world, how can it leave us disinterested, especially if that essence is, as Schopenhauer insists, such that all our hope for happiness in the world is shattered?

Schopenhauer uses his distinction of these two aspects of the aesthetic experience as a key for his classification of the arts:

And in fact, this predominance of the one or the other constituent element of aesthetic enjoyment will depend on whether the intuitively grasped aesthetic contemplation (in real life or through the medium of art) of natural beauty in the inorganic and vegetable kingdoms and of the works of architecture, the enjoyment of pure, willless knowing will predominate, because the Ideas here apprehended are only low grades of the will's objectivity, and therefore are not phenomena of deep significance and suggestive content. On the other hand, if animals and human beings are the objects of aesthetic contemplation or presentation, the enjoyment will consist rather in the objective apprehension of these Ideas that are the most distinct revelations of the will. For these exhibit the greatest variety of forms, a wealth and deep significance of phenomena; they reveal to us most completely the essence of the will, whether in its violence, its terribleness, its satisfaction, or its being broken (this last in tragic situations), finally even in its change or self-surrender which is the particular theme of Christian painting. (I, 212-213)

We are back with a painting like Raphael's St. Cecilia. Schopenhauer appreciates this painting because it **reveals the real possibility of salvation**, of turning the will against itself so that we escape its tyrannical rule. Art is placed here in the service of **truth**, and not just in the service of truth, but of **the truth that alone saves**. The

aesthetic function of art, i.e. its ability to provide a momentary escape from the burden of life, now gives way to an ontological function: art gives us insight into the essence of the world; but it does more than that: it points out the way towards **salvation**. That such an art cannot leave us disinterested is evident.

### 3

Schopenhauer's attribution of an ontological function to art would seem to constitute a significant departure from the aesthetic approach as I have developed it. Schopenhauer is finally unable to accept the reduction of the beautiful to an absorbing presence. No matter how low the level of objectification we are dealing with, there is always a content, always an at least minimal revelation of the essence of the will and of the tensions associated with it:

Now if we consider architecture merely as a fine art and apart from its provision for useful purposes, in which it serves the will and not pure knowledge, and thus is no longer art in our sense, we can assign it no purpose other than that of bringing to clearer perceptiveness some of those Ideas that are the lowest grades of the will's objectivity. Such ideas are gravity, cohesion, rigidity, hardness, those universal qualities of stone, those first, simplest, and dullest visibilities of the will, the fundamental bass-notes of nature; and along with these, light, which is in many respects their opposite. Even at this low stage of the will's objectivity, we see its inner nature revealing itself in discord; for, properly speaking, the conflict between gravity and rigidity is the sole aesthetic material of architecture; its problem is to make this conflict appear with perfect distinctness in many different ways. (I, 214)

Compare this with what the painter Piet Mondrian has to say in *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*:

The laws which in the culture of art have become more and more determinate are the great hidden laws of nature which art establishes in its own fashion. It is necessary to stress the fact that these laws are more or less hidden behind the superficial aspect of nature.

First and foremost there is the fundamental law of dynamic equilibrium. The first aim in painting should be universal expression. What is needed in a picture to realize this is an equivalence of vertical and horizontal expressions. This I feel I did not

accomplish in such early works as my 1911 "Tree" paintings. In those the vertical emphasis predominated. A "gothic" expression was the result.<sup>49</sup> (1943)

It is interesting to compare these remarks with what Schopenhauer has to say about architecture. Given what he has to say about the "conflict between gravity and rigidity" being "the sole aesthetic material of architecture" it is not surprising that he too should have found his architectural paradigm in the Greek temple.

The sole theme of architecture here stated, namely support and load, is so very simple, that, on this very account, this art, in so far as it is a *fine* art (but not in so far as it serves useful ends), has been perfect and complete in essential matters since the best Greek period. (II, 416)

For architecture "to aspire to the ideal is to imitate the ancients" (II, 416). In a way that anticipates Mondrian's self-critique, Schopenhauer, too, criticizes the Gothic look. By letting the vertical dominate over the horizontal Gothic architecture fails to do justice to the tragic essence of reality:

if we try to discover an analogous fundamental idea in Gothic architecture it will have to be that the entire subjugation and conquest of gravity by rigidity are there to be exhibited. For according to this the horizontal line, which is that of the load, has almost entirely vanished, and the action of gravity appears only indirectly, disguised in arches and vaults; whereas the vertical line, which is that of the support, alone prevails, and renders palpable to the senses the victorious action of rigidity in excessively high buttresses, towers, turrets, and spires without number, rising unencumbered. (II, 417)

Gothic architecture is optimistic, as opposed to the tragic cast of the Greek temple. But its optimism, according to Schopenhauer, is false. And Schopenhauer criticizes Gothic architecture finally because it is not true to nature, because of its dishonesty.

Now if we attributed this meaning and fundamental idea to Gothic architecture, and thereby tried to set it up as the equally justified antithesis to ancient architecture, it would have to be remembered that the conflict between rigidity and gravity, so openly and naively displayed by ancient architecture, is an actual and true one established by nature. (II, 417)

Schopenhauer was writing at a time when the Gothic paradigm was opposed to the classical one. By the time of the second volume, from which I just quoted, Neogothic architecture had developed into the most popular architectural style, a development Schopenhauer could not approve:

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<sup>49</sup> Piet Mondrian, "Statement, ca. 1943," in *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, comp. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press,

In the interest of good taste, I am bound to wish that great wealth be devoted to what is objectively, i.e. actually, good and right, to what in itself is beautiful, not to that whose value rests merely on the association of ideas. Now when I see how this unbelieving age so diligently finishes the Gothic churches left uncompleted by the believing Middle Ages, it seems to me as if it were desired to embalm a Christianity that has expired. (II, 418)

Instead of pointing the way towards genuine redemption, such architecture blocks that way by suggesting that we can rise above our natural condition, that the consequences of the fall can be undone, that life can be redeemed. Schopenhauer considers this a vain hope. The very idea of a happy life is a contradiction in terms. Established Christianity not only has expired, but, according to Schopenhauer, it deserved to expire, because, by holding out the impossible promise of redemption, it covered up its own true essence, which calls for the negation of the will and thus of life.

#### 4

But let me return to the point with which I began, to Schopenhauer's distinction between a subjective and an objective pole of aesthetic experience. It is attention to the latter that permits Schopenhauer to attribute a revelatory function to art. Attention to that pole allows Schopenhauer to develop his classification of the arts. I am not particularly happy with that classification, obvious as it may seem at first, which places architecture as dealing with the essence of the inorganic at the bottom, tragedy as dealing with the highest grade of the will's objectification, with the suffering human being, at the top. I should, however, mention that there is for Schopenhauer one art that falls outside this classificatory scheme, music.

Music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas. For this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence. (527)

Music is the truly metaphysical art, metaphysical in that it reveals the essence of the will; thus it becomes the privileged language of Schopenhauer's secular gospel.

Now the nature of man consists in the fact that his will strives, is satisfied, strives anew, and so on and on; in fact his happiness and well-being consist only in the transition from desire to satisfaction, and from this to a fresh desire, such transition going forward rapidly. For the nonappearance of satisfaction is suffering, the empty longing for a new

desire is languor, boredom. Thus corresponding to this, the nature of melody is a constant digression and deviation from the keynote in a thousand ways, not only to the harmonious intervals, the third and dominant, but to every tone, to the dissonant seventh, and to the extreme intervals; yet there always follows a final return to the keynote. In all these ways, melody expresses the many different forms of the will's efforts, but also its satisfaction by ultimately finding again a harmonious interval, and still more the keynote. The invention of melody, the disclosure in it of all the deepest secrets of human willing and feeling, is the work of genius, whose effect is more apparent here than anywhere else, is far removed from all reflection and conscious intention, and might be called an inspiration. (260)

We should note that the will means endless striving, while music ends. It is composed towards the end. In that way music hints at the possibility of a homecoming. Of course as it comes home it ends. But it is precisely this coming to a harmonious end that figures redemption.

## 15. Towards Aesthetic Autonomy

### 1

Let me begin by summing up some of the key points of the preceding lectures. Recall the Platonic view of beauty, as expressed in Diotima's speech. On that view all beauty in time is illuminated by a higher, absolute beauty that transcends time; the beauty of a person or some natural object or a work of art is only the figure of a perfection denied to us by our temporal being, a perfection to which we are yet tied by that in us which transcends time, by the spirit. Sensible beauty therefore fills us with love, with a longing for eternity that yields to the desire to create something that will outlast us, where for Plato, too, as we saw, the most natural expression of this desire is procreation.

I would like to underscore once more the essentially **figural nature of beauty** on this Platonic view: what we usually call beautiful gestures towards a higher, invisible beauty, towards a perfection denied to us. Translated into Christian terms, this becomes the view that beauty gestures towards the perfection associated with **paradise**. It is this figural quality that lets the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain say that beauty would "like to believe that paradise is not lost," that beauty "has the flavor of the terrestrial paradise, because it restores, for a moment, the peace and simultaneous delight of the intellect and the senses."<sup>50</sup>

There is, however, a crucial difference between this and the Platonic view: the beauty of paradise is not thought against the earth and time. The idea of paradise implies the transfiguration of both. Whether such a transfiguration makes sense or whether the thought of paradise is, as Schopenhauer would have us consider it, a contradiction in terms, is a question I shall bracket for the time being. What I want to focus on instead is the essentially **ambiguous** quality of the beautiful on this view. To use Maritain's language: on one hand **beauty is a figure of paradise**; as such it awakens more than it stills longing and love. On the other it **has itself the savor of paradise**; as such it does not so much awaken desire and longing, as it stills them. And just because of this second aspect the artwork can usurp the place of paradise. For a thinker like Maritain such usurpation would of course be illegitimate, a deflection from man's true vocation.

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<sup>50</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner's, 1962), p. 24.

To translate into a different vocabulary: on the one hand beauty figures a reality that promises to deliver us from our present, defective state of being. So understood, beauty bears the utopian promise of future happiness. On the other hand: in time it actually seems to lift the burden of time, if only for a time. On the one hand the beautiful points beyond itself; on the other it offers itself to us as a self-sufficient plenitude. In these lectures I have associated the latter with what I called the aesthetic approach; the aesthetic object offers itself as a beautiful presence that for a time lifts us out of the everyday with its cares and concerns, lifting the burden of time, if only for a time. Note that for a religious thinker like Maritain, just this must render the aesthetic approach profoundly questionable. Such a usurpation of the place assigned to paradise, of a plenitude that is denied to us by our present fallen state, represents a deflection from our true vocation.

## 2

Maritain thinks that the course of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance art was governed by this deflection. Once more let me read from *Art and Scholasticism*:

When on visiting an art gallery one passes from the rooms of the primitives to those in which the glories of oil painting and of a much more considerable material science are displayed, the foot takes a step on the floor, but the soul takes a deep fall. It had been taking the air of the everlasting hills — it now finds itself on the floor of a theater — a magnificent theater. With the sixteenth century the lie installed itself in painting.<sup>51</sup>

Maritain speaks of the theater, but what he is really thinking of is the **turn to perspective**, which allowed painters to paint such convincing illusions that allowed the observer to forget that they were illusions, inviting them to lose themselves in the contemplation of works of art that no longer needed to be referred to any reality outside themselves. The rise of perspective and the understanding of the painting as a self-sufficient object that I have taken to be a characteristic of the aesthetic approach belong together. For this reason Alberti's *On Painting*, which offered a clear statement of principles governing the new approach belongs into this context.

Of special interest in this connection are Alberti's comments on the use of **gold** in painting. Here we should keep in mind that gold backgrounds are one of the most characteristic aspects of medieval painting.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 52.



There are some who use much gold in their *istoria*. They think it gives majesty. I do not praise it. Even though one should paint Virgil's Dido, whose quiver was of gold, her golden hair knotted with gold, and her purple robe girdled with pure gold, the reins of the horse end everything of gold, I should not wish gold to be used for there is more admiration for the painter who imitates the rays of gold with colors. (85)<sup>52</sup>

Illusion is preferred over reality. But let me continue with Alberti:

Again we see in a plane panel with a gold ground that some planes shine when they should be dark and are dark when they ought to be light. I say, I would not censure the other curved ornaments joined to the painting such as columns, carved bases, capitals and frontispieces even if they were of the most pure and massy gold. (85)

Only in the frame is gold allowed. It is excluded from the picture. And indeed, the gold backgrounds of medieval painting do tend to disrupt pictorial illusion. What then was their function?

The gold background denies the illusion of experiencing the picture as a window through which we see. It also denies us a sense of a specific space or time. Gold here has a metaphorical power. It hints at the eternal, spiritual significance of what is portrayed. It invites us to look at what is portrayed from a spiritual perspective, as a figure of a higher reality. I am using the term perspective here deliberately: Alberti's perspective is a human perspective: it secularizes. The spiritual perspective of the medievals is more literally a **per-spective**: that is to say: it would have us look through the mundane to its spiritual significance.<sup>53</sup> Thus it helps to establish **the visible as a figure of the sacred**. Everything sensible is experienced as the sign of something higher. Art makes these signs more perspicuous.

Alberti's perspective implies a rejection of this spiritual perspective and of the presupposed world-view. Art comes to be pursued increasingly not for God's, but for art's sake. To return once more to Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*: Here is his account of where that approach inaugurated by the Renaissance had to lead:

After three centuries of infidelity, Art, the prodigal, would fain have become the ultimate end of man, his Bread and Wine, the consubstantial mirror of beatific Beauty. In reality it has only squandered its substance. And the poet hungering for beatitude, who asked of Art the mystic fullness which God alone can give could find his only outlet in *Sîge*

<sup>52</sup> References in text are to Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven and Londo: Yale University Press, 1966).

<sup>53</sup> See Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), pp. 15, 35-37.

*l'abime*. Rimbaud's silence denotes perhaps the end of an age-old apostasy. At all events it clearly indicates that it is folly to try to find in art the words of eternal life and rest for the human heart; and that the artist, if he is not to shatter his art or his soul, must simply be, as artist, what art would have him be, a good workman.<sup>54</sup>

Maritain insists here that **ever since the Renaissance art has attempted to usurp the place of the sacred**. It claimed the dignity of an ultimate end, the status of the sacrament: art for art's sake as the sacrament of godless modernity. That again and again modern art has approached the **limit of silence** — Maritain mentions Rimbaud, but it would be easy to come up with other names, Mallarmé, for example, or Malevich — is read by Maritain as a possible sign that the aesthetic approach is coming to an end, and for Maritain that approach involves in its very essence the illegitimate substitution of the beautiful for the sacred.

### 3

In Alberti's *On Painting* we find the following remark:

I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain. (64)

Next time I shall look at this passage in more detail. Here I want to call your attention to just one part of the quote: “What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the fountain”. Painting is like mirroring. But the artist does not just re-present what is reflected in the mirror, but he embraces it, where we should recall that just this was denied to Narcissus, who vainly tried to embrace himself. The artist may thus be said to succeed where Narcissus failed. The offspring of that **successful self-embrace** is the work of art. Art allows the self-centered narcissistic eros to become procreative after all.

The painter's embrace of what appears in the mirror subjects this appearance to a distinctly human order. But let me fill this out by looking in a bit more detail at Alberti's method.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Maritain, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> For a fuller account of that method, see Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001). “Alberti and Perspective Construction,” pp. 64-77.

Alberti invites us to consider the painting as if it were a window through which we look at what lies beyond. This gives you the crucial mathematical rule from which much of his method can be deduced:

Let us add the axiom of the mathematicians where it is proved that if a straight line cuts the two sides of a triangle, and if this line which forms a triangle is parallel to a side of the first and greater triangle, certainly the lesser triangle will be proportional to the greater. (52)

But let us turn now to his perspective construction:

First of all about where I draw. In inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which will be considered an open window through which I see what I want to paint.

Here I determine as it pleases me the size of the man in the picture. I divide the length of this man into three parts. These parts to me are proportional to that measurement called a *braccio*, for in measuring the average man, it is seen that he is about three *braccia*.

With these *braccia* I divide the baseline of the rectangle into as many parts as it will receive. To me this base line of the quadrangle is proportional to the nearest transverse and equidistant quantity on the pavement.

Then, within this quadrangle, where it seems best to me, I make a point which occupies that place where the central ray strikes. For this is called the centric point.

This point is properly placed when it is no higher from the base line of the quadrangle than the height of the man I have to paint there.

The centric point being located as I said, I draw straight lines from it to each division placed on the base line of the quadrangle. These drawn lines, (extended) as if to infinity, demonstrate to me how each transverse quantity is to be altered. (56)

Alberti then discusses briefly a false construction common in his day. Imagine that you are supposed to represent a pavement in your picture with square tiles. Where are the horizontals to be drawn? A common construction in his day was to make the distance between each pair of horizontals  $2/3$  of the preceding. But this gives you no correct perspective. Alberti admonishes his reader:

Know that a painted thing can never appear truthful where there is not a definite distance for seeing it. (57)

Note that what the artist should strive for is not truth, but the **appearance of truth**.

A correct perspective implies a definite point of view. How does Alberti then draw the transverse lines:

I take a small space in which I draw a straight line and this I divide into parts similar to those into which I divided the base line of the quadrangle. Then placing a point at a

height equal to that of the centric point. Then I establish as I wish the distance of the eye from the picture. Here I draw, as the mathematicians say, a perpendicular cutting whatever lines it finds... The succession of this perpendicular line with the others gives me the succession of transverse quantities. In this fashion I find described all the parallels, that is the squared *braccia* of the pavement in the painting. (57)

To check whether you have done the construction correctly there is an easy test:

If one straight line contains the diagonal of several quadrangles described in the picture, it is an indication to me whether they are drawn correctly enough. (57)

This of course provides an alternative construction. Note that in a painting of this sort the **pavement** gives you a recipe for deciding just where the observer should stand.

The science of perspective provides the artist with a mathematical form into which he has to fit whatever he wishes to represent, if such representation is to present convincing illusions. This science determines a priori how things in objective space must appear to the eye, where a single, stationary eye is assumed by Alberti's construction. In this sense the science of perspective may be said to exhibit the logic of visual appearance, given a particular point of view. To understand that logic is also to understand that whatever we see is no more than appearance, dependent on the perceiving subject's specific point of view. The objects themselves disclose themselves as they are, as opposed to how they appear, not to the eye, but only to the mind, which is capable of transcending the limitations of perspective. Inseparable from Alberti's insight is thus a dissociation of the visible and the real. **Its very medium cuts painting off from a pursuit of reality as it is.** It settles for appearances. With this recognition beauty is severed from truth. Art is relegated to the realm of appearance. Sight is incapable of granting us objective understanding. This **dissociation of the visible and the real** is equally a presupposition of the mathematization of nature that was to become a defining characteristic of the new science. Insight into the logic of appearance leads inevitably to demands for a more adequate understanding of reality. In this sense Alberti's *On Painting* belongs to the prehistory of modern science.

Alberti knows that our understanding of space by itself does not allow us to speak of the absolute size of things. This would presuppose some absolute measure, but such a measure is nowhere to be found. All things, Alberti insists are known by comparison. This leads Alberti to claim the sophist Protagoras as a forbear, like Narcissus, another surprising choice, given the ill repute in which the sophist had long been held, beginning

with Plato and Aristotle.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps, Alberti suggests, Protagoras had gotten hold of a profound insight that we would do well to heed:

By saying that man is the mode and measure of all things [he] meant that all the accidents of things are known through the accidents of man. (55)

This invites the reader to renounce the claim to know things as they are. Absolute knowledge is the privilege of God. Our understanding of things is limited by our finite, human perspective. But there is no trace of resignation in Alberti's text. Instead we meet with a proud **self-assertion**. The renunciation of the claim to absolute knowledge leads to the conviction that by our own resources we can make ourselves the masters of appearance. Painting here points the way.

#### 4

To whom did Alberti address his *On Painting*? First of all to his fellow painters. The science of perspective taught by Alberti was to render them the masters of appearance. Recall that Alberti's *On Painting* appeared in 1435/36, at a time when a new approach to art began to challenge the older medieval approach, which had blurred the boundary between art and craft and placed art in the service of religious truth. The book's prologue communicates something of the excitement that then pervaded the artistic world. Alberti tells us that he, too, used to believe that

Nature, the mistress of things, had grown old and tired. She no longer produced either geniuses or giants which in her more youthful and more glorious as she had produced so marvelously and abundantly. (39)

But the Florence of Brunelleschi, Donatello, and Masaccio taught him better. Here were once again true giants. And the credit for this flowering Alberti no longer gives to nature, but to man. A new prideful self-assertion lets him claim that

the power of acquiring wide fame in any art or science lies in our industry and diligence more than in the times or gifts of nature. (39)

It is this pride that places the reader on the threshold, not just of a new art — it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, down to the present, western painting has acted out the scenario set by Alberti and his friends — but of a new world, that our culture has enacted the scenario set forth by Cosimo de Medici and his friends, among them Alberti.

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<sup>56</sup> See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective*, “Homo Faber: The Rediscovery of Protagoras,” pp. 184-199.

Giving voice to the artistic revolution that overthrew medieval art, Alberti's *On Painting* helps mark the beginning of the aesthetic approach to beauty and art that has helped shape the development of art ever since.

## 16. The Narcissistic Origin of Painting

### 1

Near the beginning of Part Two of Alberti's *On Painting*, the first treatise to give voice to the aesthetic sensibility that was to shape the evolution of Renaissance and Post-Renaissance art, we find the following remark, to which I referred briefly last time:

*Moreover, painting was given the highest honour by our ancestors. For, although almost all other artists were called craftsmen, the painter alone was not considered in that category. For this reason, I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point. What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain (64)*

A strange remark! Why should Alberti want to claim Narcissus as his precursor.<sup>57</sup>

To call him the inventor of painting would seem to cast the art of painting in a very questionable light. Ovid, one of "the poets" of whom Alberti must have been thinking, although he speaks of "the poets," in the plural, describes Narcissus as a young man of extraordinary beauty, possessed by a pride that refused love, until one of those he scorned prayed to heaven that he, too, might feel the pain of unrequited love; punished by Nemesis, Narcissus fell in love with his own reflected image; slowly consumed by this love he was transformed into the flower we call "narcissus."

Alberti's use of the Narcissus story invites us to seek the origin of painting not just in **love**, but in an **inversion of love brought about by pride**. But can this be how Alberti would have his readers understand his remark?

To locate the origin of art in pride hardly seems to serve Alberti's stated purpose: to prove that "painting is not unworthy of consuming all our time and study." (63) How does Alberti understand that worth? If we take him by his word, the worth of painting would seem linked to its self-sufficiency: to say that it is not unworthy of **taking up all of our time**, is to suggest that the pursuit of art need not serve other activities, for if so, could it ever be worthy of taking up *all* of our time? For the sake of art, Alberti seems to

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<sup>57</sup> See Karsten Harries, "Narcissus and Pygmalion," *Philosophy and Art. Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), pp. 53 - 72.

suggest, we may suspend all other concerns. To be sure, I may be placing too much weight on what would seem to be no more than a casual remark made in passing; just like the anecdotal reference to Narcissus, it seems no more than a rhetorical aside, hyperbolic, as such asides tend to be, certainly not weighty enough to warrant the kind of literal approach I am imposing on it. But just such rhetorical asides, where the author relaxes a bit, often reveal his deepest concerns better than his central argument.

As stated, Alberti's statement of purpose gestures in a direction that would have to have troubled a more traditional Christian thinker. Just as Narcissus has denaturalized eros, the person who allows art to take up all of his time would seem to have **strayed from his natural end**. With Kierkegaard one could speak here of a **teleological suspension of the ethical**, although what is suspended here is not just the ethical, but the religious. Such suspension is indeed inseparable from the pursuit of art for art's sake. As Kierkegaard knew, there is something demonic about such suspension; and there is something demonic about dedicating one's whole life to art.

I would like to call special attention to Alberti's claim that art is not unworthy of consuming all our time. Art apparently is **capable of consuming, i.e., of abolishing time**. Do we get here a hint of the worth of painting, as Alberti understands it? Is its dignity linked to its ability to defeat, or perhaps only to let us forget, if only for a time, the tyrannical rule of time? As Schopenhauer insists, in time aesthetic experience promises to lift the burden of time.

But let me return to the traditional understanding of the tale of Narcissus as a tale of pride subverting the natural order. That Alberti is aware of this reading, a reading that has to invite criticism, is suggested when he tells the reader that he tells his playful determination of the origin of painting **only to his friends** (where the reader being let in on the secret, is thereby included in Alberti's circle of friends).

What readers was Alberti addressing? First of all his fellow painters. As I pointed out, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, down to the present, painting has acted out the scenario set by Alberti and his friends.

Giving voice to the artistic revolution that overthrew medieval art, Alberti's *On Painting* helps mark the beginning of the aesthetic approach to beauty and art that has shaped the development of art ever since. Alberti's mention of Narcissus forces us to question this approach's ruling ethos: should we locate the origin of Renaissance and



Post-Renaissance art in love, more precisely in that inversion of love brought about by pride of which Ovid's tale tells?

## 2

Consider once more Alberti's remark:

...I say among my friends that Narcissus who was changed into a flower, according to the poets, was the inventor of painting. Since painting is already the flower of every art, the story of Narcissus is most to the point.

Narcissus was changed into a flower. As we read in Ovid:

The pyre, the tossing torches, and the bier, were now being prepared, but his body was nowhere to be found. Instead of his corpse, they discovered a flower with a circle of white petals round a yellow center.<sup>58</sup>

It is significant that Narcissus was changed not just into a flower, but into the flower that now bears his name. As a matter of fact, the **myth of Narcissus** may well represent a response to the flower, which loves the water and turns its head downward. The flower also helps to explain the parentage of the mythical Narcissus, whose father is Cephisus, god of the main river of Boeotia, while his mother is called Liriope, because the narcissus was considered a kind of lily (*leirion*).<sup>59</sup> The myth, it has been argued, offers us an extended figure of the flower known in antiquity not only for its beauty, which returns every spring, but for its benumbing odor. The flower was thus also associated with fainting and death.

If the ancients associated the flower with both beauty and death, these associations return in the mythical figure of the beautiful Narcissus, who in antiquity was considered a symbol of death.<sup>60</sup> The images of Narcissus on grave monuments suggest that Narcissus was not only understood as an incarnation of pride, but more positively, as a symbol of a metamorphosis that offers consolation for the pain inflicted by the terror of time. Narcissus' metamorphosis into a flower rescues him from total annihilation and grants him a semblance of immortality.

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<sup>58</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. and int. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1955), p. 87.

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Wieseler, *Narkissos* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterischen Buchhandlung, 1856), p.78..

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The flower is the metamorphosed Narcissus, we can say his metaphor. In this metaphor Narcissus continues to live. Thus his final wish is granted after all. I quote Ovid's Narcissus:

I am cut off in the flower of my youth. I have no quarrel with death, for in death I shall forget my pain: but I could wish that the object of my love might outlive me. As it is, both of us will perish together, when this one life is destroyed.<sup>61</sup>

The wish is paradoxical: while ready to die, Narcissus yet wishes that the object of his love might outlive him; but that object is of course he himself. Narcissus accepts death and yet wishes for continued life. And **this paradoxical wish for life in death** is granted. As the flower he has become, Narcissus is reborn every spring and thus rescued from total destruction.

Note that this reading invites an interpretation of the flower as a figure of painting. "By embracing with art what is presented on the surface of the fountain," — these are Alberti's words, — the artist gives it permanence, allows the mirror image to remain when its original has long ceased to be. Is this then part of Alberti's reason for invoking Narcissus? Is art the ambiguous figure of both death and the victory over death, a victory the artist does not owe to nature, or to God, but to his own skill?

### 3

Once more consider the line: "What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the fountain." The artist does not just re-present what he sees in the mirror, he embraces it, where we should recall that just this was denied to Narcissus. The artist may thus be said to succeed where Narcissus failed. The offspring of that embrace is the work of art. **Art allows the narcissistic eros to become procreative after all.**

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<sup>61</sup> Ovid, p. 86.

## 4

Alberti's description of art as an embrace of what is reflected in the water's mirror recalls Plato's discussion of Book X of the Republic — this, too, a text that invites challenge of Alberti's celebration of painting.

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 all other workmen.

What an extraordinary man!

Wait a little, and there will be more reason for your saying so. For this is he who is able to create 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 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 sense 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 accomplished, none quicker than 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.

Yes, he said; but they would be appearances only.<sup>62</sup>

Alberti's artist embraces these appearances with his art and thereby grants them permanence. This embrace allows him to escape the proud self-isolation of Narcissus. The products of the painter's pride meet with the community's grateful acceptance. "*Any master painter*," Alberti suggests, "who sees his work adored will feel himself considered another god." (64) "In painting animals" Zeuxis is said to have set "himself up almost as a god." (64) Like Plato, Alberti, too, understands the artist as a maker of the gods, citing the authority of Trismegistus, who is supposed to have said the "mankind portrays the gods in his own image from his memories of nature and his own origins." (64) "Nothing," Alberti adds, "has ever been so esteemed by mortals." (65)

Socrates would have insisted that what is here being esteemed are only imitations of appearances. Alberti, of course, would not have disputed that. But why then should painting be so valued by mortals. The word "mortals" hints at the answer: Alberti

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<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Republic* X, 596c-e, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

observes that "Painting contains a divine force which not only makes absent men present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive. Even after many centuries they are recognized with great pleasure and with great admiration for the painter." (65) And a bit later: "Thus the face of a man who is already dead certainly lives a long life through painting." (65) Alberti thus places painting in opposition to death. It has its origin in that **ill will against time** Nietzsche calls **the spirit of revenge**. That ill will bids human beings translate themselves out of time. Art, as Alberti understands it, effects such a translation.

## 5

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this ill will against time is a refusal of the authority of eros. The tale of Narcissus has its origin in such a refusal. It is significant that the tale began with a perversion of eros, with a rape. The mother of Narcissus, Ovid tells us, "was the nymph whom Cephissus once embraced with his curving stream, imprisoned in his waves, and forcefully ravished."<sup>63</sup> The sexual act here is divorced from love. We understand why the unwanted offspring of such violence should refuse the nymph Echo's aggressive advances, why his "soft young body housed a pride so unyielding that none of those boys or girls dared to touch him."<sup>64</sup> Refusing all embraces, Narcissus would rather die than allow himself to be touched. In the end of course even proud Narcissus cannot escape love and love demands an object beyond the self. Narcissus finds that object in the mirrored reflection of his own beauty."

I am on fire with love for my own self. It is I who kindle the flames which I must endure. What should I do? Woo or be wooed? But what then shall I seek by my wooing? What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor. How I wish that I could separate myself from my body! A new prayer this, for a lover, to wish the thing he loves away! Now grief is sapping my strength; little life remains for me — I am cut off in the flower of my youth. I have no quarrel with death, for in death I shall forget my pain: but I could wish that the object of my love might outlive me: as it is, both of us will perish together when this one life is destroyed."<sup>65</sup>

Narcissus says of himself that he has what he desires. He thus would seem to embody that state of plenitude of the circle-men of whom Aristophanes speaks in Plato's

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<sup>63</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, III p. 83.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86

*Symposium*. Just as Ovid's tale links the plight of Narcissus to his pride, so it was the pride of these circlemen that provoked the punishment of Zeus.

The myth of Aristophanes interprets for us the awakening of love that puts an end to what Freud called "the primary narcissism of the child,"<sup>66</sup> to the child's only apparent self-sufficiency. Plenty now proves to be poverty. The self-embrace for which Narcissus longs would mean the impossible recovery of a plenitude denied by our fragmented self. Recognizing the impossibility, yet refusing to let go of his dream, Narcissus makes his peace with death. But Narcissus is not quite ready to renounce life altogether. He wants both: to be and not to be. This contradictory longing lets him wish that the object of his love, his own fleeting image in the pool, might outlast him. Narcissus knows that this is a vain wish. The mirror image will perish together with what it mirrors. But Alberti could have consoled Narcissus: art is able to give permanence to what has only fleeting existence in the mirror. It allows the beauty of Narcissus to survive, unsullied by a love that would embrace to give birth. Alberti's invites us not only to consider the history of painting from this Narcissistic perspective, but more especially the history of self-portraiture. Or is there perhaps a sense in which every painting can be considered a self-portrait?

Is art then born of a narcissistic self-assertion? Alberti's remark at any rate invites an understanding of art as a figure of that integral fulfillment reason that reality denies us and which we yet dream of and refuse to let go. Traditionally the dream of integral fulfillment has been the dream of paradise. Art thus appears as a figure of paradise.

The Association of art with paradise and of both with Narcissus is made explicit by Andre Gide's retelling of Ovid's tale. In Gide's retelling the pool of Ovid's story becomes the river of time:

On the banks of the river of time, Narcissus has come to a stop. Fateful and illusory river where the years pass and flow away....

The place where Narcissus is looking is the present. Out of the most distant future, things which are still only potential hurry towards existence; Narcissus sees them, then they pass him by; they flow away into the past. Soon it strikes him that everything is always the same. He wonders; he reflects. They are always the same forms that pass; the movement of the current alone differentiates them. — Why are they so many? or why are they the same? — It must be because they are imperfect, since they are always re-commencing...

and all of them, he thinks, are striving and rushing towards a lost primeval form, paradisaal and crystalline. Narcissus dreams of paradise.<sup>67</sup>

Paradise here names a state where "everything was perfectly what it ought to be." That of course is how the art-work has often been described and indeed, the paradise Narcissus dreams of is remarkably like a work of art:

Eden! where melodious breezes were wafted, undulating in pre-ordained curves: where the sky spread its azure over symmetrical lawns; where the birds were the colour of time and the butterflies on the flowers made providential harmonies; where the rose was rose-coloured because the green-fly settled on it for the very reason that it was green. Everything was as perfect as a number and scanned according to a rule; concord emanated from the relationship of lines between themselves; over the whole garden brooded a constant symphony.<sup>68</sup>

To the dream of paradise corresponds the dream of Adam, the grown-up child, who, knowing nothing of desire, knows nothing of time. Here is how Andre Gide describes him:

Single, still unsexed, he remained seated in the shade of the great tree. Man! Hypostasis of the Elohim! Mainstay of the Divinity! For his sake, by means of him, forms appear. Motionless and central in the midst of this fairyland, he watches it unrolling.<sup>69</sup>

Just as Gide thinks paradise in the image of the work of art, he thinks Adam in the image of the aesthetic observer. Or perhaps we should say rather the reverse: Gide thinks the work of art as a figure of paradise and the aesthetic observer as a figure of Adam, who in turn is thought, as John Scotus Eriugena already thought him, in the image of Aristophanes' circlemen. But with Gide it is first of all not pride that puts an end to this state of perfection, but boredom. That boredom might be the origin of the fall had indeed already been suggested by Kierkegaard's aesthete in *Either/Or*. Adam grows tired of forever watching, wants to see and thereby seize himself. Yet, are not pride and boredom linked? Gide's Adam wants to assert himself. Such self-assertion lets him refuse the plenitude of his original aesthetic state.

And man, terror-stricken, self-duplicated hermaphrodite, wept with anguish and horror, feeling surges up within him, at the same time as a new sex, the anxious, uneasy desire

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<sup>66</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Zur Einführung des Narzissmus*, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, pp. 39-73.

<sup>67</sup> Andre Gide, "Narcissus," *The Return of the Prodigal*, tr. Dorothy Bussy (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), pp. 4-5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

for that other half, so like himself — that woman who, in a blind effort to re-create out of herself the perfect being and then stop breeding, will nevertheless carry in her womb the unknown creature of a new race and soon push into existence another being, still incomplete and incapable of sufficing to himself.<sup>70</sup>

Gide's Narcissus, who dreams this version of the Aristophanic myth, refuses the other-directedness of procreative eros. Seeking to recover the plenitude of Adam, he seeks to embrace himself:

Narcissus, solitary and puerile, falls in love with the fragile image; with longing for a caress, he bends down to the river to quench his thirst for love. He bends down and suddenly, lo and behold! the phantasmagoria disappears; he can see nothing on the river now but two lips stretched towards his own, two eyes, his own, looking at him. He understands that it is himself, that he is alone and that he is in love with his own face. Around him is empty azure, which is broken through by his pale arms, stretching out with desire through the shattered apparition and plunging into an unknown element.<sup>71</sup>

His attempt to repossess lost plenitude fails. But what then is Narcissus to do. Gide would have him renounce eros altogether and contemplate. Following Schopenhauer, Gide understands contemplation here aesthetically. The inverted eros of Narcissus is quieted by beauty. To find satisfaction Narcissus must renounce the vain attempt to embrace himself and allow himself to become absorbed in contemplation of the plenitude of the work of art.

For the work of art is a crystal — a portion of Paradise in which the Idea reblossoms in its superior purity; where, as in the vanished Eden, a normal and necessary order has arranged all forms in a reciprocal and symmetrical interdependence...

Such works can crystallize only in silence; but there are silences sometimes even in the midst of crowds, when the artist, taking refuge, like Moses on Sinai, isolates himself, escapes from things and from Time and wraps himself in an atmosphere of light above the busy multitude. In him, slowly, the Idea rests; then lucid and fullblown, spreads forth, outside of Time. And as it is outside of Time, Time has no power over it. Nay, more; one wonders whether Paradise itself outside of Time was perhaps never anywhere else — never anywhere but ideally.<sup>72</sup>

Gide knows, as long as human beings experience themselves as subject to time, and such subjection manifests itself most inescapably in the awareness that we grow older and eventually must die, they are denied the plenitude of paradise. But art,

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

breaking, if only for a time, the rule of time, serves the ideal of pleasure as Marcuse understands it by granting illusions of presentness.

This, however, raises the question: Must pleasure be placed in opposition to time. Is Schopenhauer right to teach that the *principium individuationis* is the stain of which we must cleanse ourselves to be granted that pure perception which is the gift of art?



## 17. The Pursuit of Presence

### 1

In an earlier lecture I pointed out that we owe both the term "aesthetics" and the establishment of aesthetics as one of the main branches of philosophy to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's dissertation of 1735. Philosophical aesthetics is thus an offspring of rationalism, part of the somewhat questionable legacy left us by the Enlightenment.

In the last two lectures I turned to Alberti to suggest that the approach to beauty and art to which this institution of philosophical aesthetics responds goes back much further. It is thus intimately linked to that revolution in the history of art that we associate with the Renaissance. Today I would like to show that it continued to give direction to the development of modern art.

I don't want to review Baumgarten's discussion of beauty as sensible perfection. But I would like to return to his simile likening the work of art to the world described by Leibniz as a perfect whole. Implied in that simile is the understanding of the artist as **another god**, creator of another world, a view that we find already in Alberti.

To speak with Baumgarten of the beautiful as **sensible perfection** is to insist on the self-sufficiency of the beautiful. The art-work is autonomous: its point is not to refer beyond itself, to express some edifying thought or to represent some cherished object or person. To praise it for being true or to condemn it for being false is to have missed what matters: that it present itself to us as an all absorbing presence. Presenting itself to us as being just as it should be, a beautiful work of art delivers us from the sense of arbitrariness and contingency that is so much part of our everyday life, that again and again lets us wonder: why this and not that? Absorbed in a work of art, we no longer face different possibilities. But this is to say also that we no longer face the future. In time, the art-work's perfection lifts the burden of time, allowing us to exist, if only for a time, in a seemingly timeless present.

What matters here is not Baumgarten, but the general attitude. Not only do the thoughts of other thinkers of the period lead in the same direction — Diderot deserves to be singled out — but philosophical reflection only followed a change in attitude that, as I suggested, can be traced back to the Renaissance and by the early eighteenth century has triumphed over an older approach that placed art in the service of religious or political or

moral concerns. Thus while Baumgarten offers an obvious point of departure, the same general approach is taken by Kant, despite the fact that, as we saw, he criticizes Baumgarten on a number of points, questioning especially his understanding of the beautiful as a perfect whole, accusing him of having made aesthetic judgments too much like judgments of reason. But Kant, too, understands beauty as **self-justifying presence**. The point of his determination of the beautiful as the **object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction** becomes clear once we keep in mind that interest always looks beyond the present to the future. Governed as they are by care and concern, our usual ways of encountering things are essentially interested. Aesthetic experience demands that we leave behind such involvement, that we bracket our ordinary concerns.

To develop my model of the aesthetic approach, I turned next to Schopenhauer, who appropriating Kant, writes that in aesthetic experience "we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things," "let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation" of the object present and "lose ourselves entirely in this object."<sup>73</sup>

## 2

The extent to which the aesthetic approach governs the work of modern artists is suggested by the painter Frank Stella's description of his artistic goals:

I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting, the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever he's doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted. If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion.... What you see is what you see.<sup>74</sup>

I would like to underscore a number of points:

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<sup>73</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1960), p. 178.

<sup>74</sup> "Questions to Stella and Judd," Interview with Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 157 - 158.

1. Stella would have his painting so absorb our attention that we feel no need to look beyond it for meaning. It thus should **not** present itself to us as a **representation** that has its measure in the absent represented; nor as a **sign** that receives its meaning from the absent signified; nor as a **symbol** gesturing towards absent significance; nor as an **allegory** figuring absent meaning. **Its presence should not be haunted by absence.** What Archibald MacLeish said of the poem holds of it, too: **it should not mean, but be.**

2. The painting should be such that it allows us to "see the whole idea without confusion." It should not leave us wondering whether we may be missing something. Nothing in it should strike us as superfluous; nor should we experience it as just a fragment of an absent whole. The painting should present itself as *a self-sufficient whole*.

3. Such completeness demands of the observer that he leave the painting alone, that he keep his distance from it. Such distanced beholding is different from the way we usually relate to things; think of care that seeks to help; of desire that wants to possess; of aversion that would avoid; of hate that calls for destruction. First of all we are interested in what we encounter and interest does not leave things or persons alone. Aesthetic beholding *lets the beheld be what it is*.

4. To the painting's self-justifying presence corresponds **the self-sufficiency** of our experience of it. Paintings are not useful in any obvious sense; they are not good for anything. But just their uselessness endows them with an appeal denied to anything that answers to our interest. This uselessness allows us to exist in the present, for all interest is directed towards the future. Thus it lets us be present to ourselves in a way denied by our usual engagement in the world. To the plenitude of the aesthetic object corresponds *the plenitude of aesthetic experience*.

What Stella says of his art can thus be generalized and read as a description of the aesthetic object. And note how close it is to the one I drew in an earlier lecture from Baumgarten: Again, we obtain the following fourfold characterization:

1. The aesthetic object "should not mean, but be."
2. The aesthetic object should present itself as a self-sufficient, self-justifying whole.
3. The aesthetic object demands aesthetic distance.
4. The aesthetic object promises to put us at one with ourselves.

Stella's remarks are hardly isolated. They articulate the telos of all painting, more generally all art, governed by what I have called the aesthetic approach. That telos demands a turn away from signification, from meaning, from words, especially of course from the Word, i. e. from the subservience of art to Scripture.

I have suggested that the aesthetic approach demands the effacement of meaning. But is this not an impossible demand? One thing Kant showed in the *Critique of Judgment* is that there can be no absolutely free beauty in art. Art, as Kant insists, requires a governing intention, a purpose. Let me read you once more the relevant passage:

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. 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 is to say that there can be no work of art that simply is and does not mean. Art cannot help but have a human meaning and speak to us of that meaning and of something human beings thought important. This means, art works, when experienced as art, can never be simply there; they will always gesture beyond themselves to some governing intention. Art remains art only as long as it refers to intended meaning. That remains true of the most minimal work of art. **To ask of art that it should be, not mean, is to ask the impossible.** The ideal of a totally self-sufficient artistic presence must remain elusive, a mere idea, cannot become an experienced reality. Presence remains absent. **The work of art is only the figure of this absent presence,** which is its telos.

But this is to say that if modern art has its telos in a presence that would efface meaning, it has its telos **in the negation of its own art character**, that modern aims at its destruction as art. There is a hint of this already in Kant, when he writes

Par. 45. 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. (174)

According to the critic Clement Greenberg it is indeed precisely this "look of non-art" that confers presence on a painting. Stella's art, as he himself insists, is supposed to be entirely visual. But while we can grant that such objects are no longer supposed to mean anything, do they really lack all meaning? Not if, as I have suggested, Kant is right when he claims that we refer any object seen as a human creation back to the intention of its creator. All human creation has a meaning. Thus this art, intended to look like non-art, looks like art after all, despite its intention. Stella seems to suspect this. For he does not claim that his painting succeeds in being entirely visual; what he says is something different:

I also want my painting to be so you can't avoid the fact that it's supposed to be entirely visual.

This not only admits that even this minimal art communicates a meaning, an intention. It even declares that **the very point of this painting is to declare such an intention**. It is meant to communicate the dream of an artistic presence strong enough to silence meaning. But **the art work is not itself this presence, only its figure**. The dream of presence remains just that — a dream. The work of art gestures towards, but fails to incarnate the dream that haunts it. The gulf that separates being and meaning, thing and word, cannot be bridged.

### 3

I have suggested that even the most minimal art is not simply present, but gestures towards an ideal meaning. Precisely because it does, it calls for the interpreting word. That passionate interest so many have brought to minimal art cannot be divorced from an interest in its meaning. But why such passionate interest in the elusive ideal of presence? What does presence matter? Is what is merely present not essentially meaningless?

An answer to such questions is provided by Kasimir Malevich, the Russian suprematist, whose decision in 1914 to place a black square on a white background and to present it as a painting constitutes one of the decisive acts in the history of modern painting.<sup>75</sup> In explanation of this decision Malevich points out that he chose the **square as the most abstract form and black and white as the most abstract colors**.

"Abstract" here means not only non-representational. It means free of all associations,

feelings, emotions, interests that tie us to the world. "Abstract" thus belongs with the Kantian "disinterested." The square is chosen because it has no physiognomy, because it is in this sense uninteresting and because of this more purely present. Interest stands in the way of presence.

But to repeat the earlier question: why this fascination with presence? Why this attempt to get away from meaning? In his answer to the question Malevich appeals to the **conflict between human demands for meaning and the silence of the world**. Again and again this conflict has led human beings to veil this silence with words, with the words of poets, with the words of philosophers, but especially with the words of religion. Today, Malevich suggests, these words have shown themselves for what they are, human creations and, once recognized as such, unable to sustain us. The disintegration of the old value system has left us an oppressive silence. But that silence only remains oppressive as long as we demand meaning of the world. It is from this demand for meaning that Malevich wants to liberate us. He wants to convert us to an acceptance of the world as it presents itself to us. The pursuit of presence is to lead us beyond nihilism.

To the traditional ideal of life as a vocation Malevich opposes his own ideal of what he calls a **white mankind**. "*The consciousness of this mankind*" is said to be "**non-objective**." We exist in this sense non-objectively when we no longer need objects, and precisely because of this have become free to let things be the things they are. This freedom to let things be is distinguished by him from the freedom to do what one wants to do. The latter Malevich finds questionable because it leaves us with the question: what are we to do and just this question has no convincing answer.

It should be clear that what Malevich here calls freedom is indistinguishable from a spontaneity that has freed itself from deliberate doing. Malevich dreams of an existence that is no longer burdened by the demand for meaning. He knows that to pursue this dream, we have to take our leave from the familiar world. We must learn to let things be, to encounter them without asking anything of them, without trying to capture them in the net of our words and concepts. Yet we are so used to our world, so used to questions, to expecting answers, that we need to be transported by art into a

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 67-68.

stranger and cooler environment, into the white world of suprematism. The white square is to grant us an unmediated vision.

The simple white square is a limit of modern art that Malevich thinks, but does not try to mark with a particular work. His black on white compositions already represent a further step: the silence has been broken. Geometrical shapes announce their presence. And precisely the black square and the black circle have so little meaning in the usual sense, they announce their presence more forcefully than do the more familiar things of the world, which, because we know where to place them are easily overlooked and taken for granted. Because these things have a meaning, in this sense speak to us, their simple presence is obscured. Silence and presence belong together.

But once again we have to admit the force of Kant's observation that all art has a meaning and speaks to us of an intention. This art, too, strikes us as not just being, but as meant just to be. With good reason the art historian Werner Haftmann called Malevich's Black Square a "symbolic act," a "demonstration." Both terms suggest that the artist was not so much trying to paint a picture as to make a point. Malevich's *Black on White*, and the same is true of much recent art, is rather a theatrical gesture that refers us beyond itself, to the artist's intention, that is to say to something ideal, and perhaps this intention speaks to us more strongly in the case of Malevich's suprematist compositions than in much more traditional, say representational art. But what is the meaning intended by Malevich? Malevich's self-interpretation provides us with an answer: his art is to silence all meaning, all words; it gestures towards whiteness, towards the void. His Black Square has nothing for its meaning. The following remark makes this quite clear:

But there is no icon on which the holy is a zero. The essence of God is zero salvation. In this essence lies at the same time salvation zero. ... If the heroes and saints were to become aware that the salvation of the future is zero salvation, they would be confused by reality. The hero would let his sword drop and the prayers of the saint would die on his lips.<sup>76</sup>

Malevich's suprematist compositions are **icons that seek to establish zero as the holy**. In a way that recalls Schopenhauer, they offer an illustration of what Nietzsche wrote in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

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<sup>76</sup> Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematismus — Die gegenstandslose Welt*, trans. and ed. H. van Riemen (Cologne, Du Mont Schauberg, 1962), p. 57.

Man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* III, 28, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 163.



## 18. Beauty and the Problem of Time

### 1

Let me return to Frank Stella's description of his goals as a painter. What Stella says of his art can be generalized, I suggested, and read as a description of the aesthetic object. Once again we obtain the by now familiar fourfold characterization:

1. The aesthetic object "should not mean, but be."
2. The aesthetic object should present itself as a self-sufficient, self-justifying whole.
3. The aesthetic object demands aesthetic distance.
4. The aesthetic object promises to put us at one with ourselves.

Stella's remarks are hardly isolated. They articulate the telos of all art governed by the aesthetic approach. That telos demands a turn away from signification, from meaning, from the word, especially of course from the Word, i. e. from the subservience of art to Scripture.

In past lectures I turned to philosophers such as Baumgarten, Kant, and Schopenhauer to develop some of the implications of this aesthetic approach. To show the relevance of the aesthetic approach to the history of art and to exhibit some of its presuppositions I took a look at Alberti's *On Painting*. In my last lecture I considered a modern painter. Today I would like to turn today to an influential modern critic, to Michael Fried. I asked you to read an often cited essay, "Art and Objecthood," which focuses on the art of the sixties. But I would like to supplement here what Fried argues in that essay with points taken from his book, *Art and Theatricality*,<sup>78</sup> which offers a detailed analysis of the changes French painting underwent in the eighteenth century, changes that, according to Fried, amounted to the birth of **a distinctly modernist approach to art**.

To characterize that approach Fried singles out a new emphasis on **unity** in both painting and criticism of the second half of the eighteenth century. I take such emphasis on unity to be part and parcel of the emerging aesthetic approach. Recall in this connection Baumgarten's simile linking the work of art to the world described by the

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<sup>78</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: Chicago U. Press, 1988). Abbreviated AT.

philosophers as a perfect whole. **Perfection implies wholeness.** Compare Baumgarten's simile with what Fried has to say about Diderot: "for Diderot pictorial unity was a kind of microcosm of the causal system of nature, and of the universe itself; and conversely, the unity of nature, apprehended by man, was like that of a painting, at bottom dramatic and expressive." (AT 87) Fried speaks of the **supreme fiction of the beholder's nonexistence** (AT 108). This may be understood as a necessary corollary of the kind of perfection insisted on by the aesthetic approach. Fried's discussion of **absorption** may be used to flesh out what I only hinted at in my discussion of the kind of beholding demanded by the aesthetic approach to the work of art as an aesthetic object.

Fried has himself insisted on the parallels that link his discussion of French painting in the age of Diderot to his discussion of the work of such modernist painters as Louis, Noland, Olitski, and Stella or of sculptors such as David Smith and Caro, who treated the observer, "**as if** he were not there." The understanding of what a painting should be, which, Fried suggests, was inaugurated by the painters and critics of the second half of the eighteenth century, provided just the strongest artists of the next two centuries with a continuing challenge. Fried speaks of "a revolution or at least a profound change in the ontological status of the class of objects that we call paintings." (AT 159) My suggestion that paintings, and not only paintings, come to be understood ever more resolutely as aesthetic objects may be understood as an attempt to interpret that revolution.

But let me try to show in a bit more detail how the aesthetic approach, as I have analyzed it, also informs Fried's plea for an anti-theatrical art in "Art and Objecthood."<sup>79</sup> In that essay, too, we meet with the presupposition that a work of art should present itself to the beholder as a whole. Fried thus praises pictures by Noland and Olitski, or sculptures by David Smith or Caro, because "*at every moment the work is wholly manifest.*" (AO 145) To repeat a point I have made before, if we are to experience a work as thus manifest, we may not experience it as a sign, for signs are constituted as such by what they signify, by what is absent from them. Such beckoning absence discourages absorption in what presents itself. To experience a work as wholly manifest is to experience it as a **plenitude** that as such asks nothing of the beholder and, because it

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<sup>79</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 116-147. Abbreviated AO.

asks nothing of him, allows him to forget himself. Fried thus opposes what he calls **literalist** sensibility, which pursues the art object's **objecthood**, because what matters to it is not simply an object, but "an object in a situation — is one that virtually by definition, includes the beholder" (AO 125), that is to say, what matters are the circumstances in which the beholder encounters the work of art (AO 125) or, what Fried calls the "**theatricality**" of objecthood. But "theater and theatricality," Fried insists, "are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such." (AO 139)

But how are we to understand "art as such." Is aesthetics to give us the answer? By now I have said enough to render its authority questionable. When we turn to the authority of aesthetics we have already committed ourselves to what I have called the aesthetic approach. The reduction of the work of art to an aesthetic object is anything but unproblematic. Its understanding of the being of the work of art rests on presuppositions that invite questioning.

## 2

I have suggested that the idea of the aesthetic object presides over modern art as its elusive telos, that we can look at the evolution of modern art as a continued struggle to incarnate the idea of the aesthetic object. Modern art's resistance, first to allegory, then to representation, and finally to all meaning, may be understood as ever more resolute attempts to effect such incarnation. The pursuit of the aesthetic object would seem to provide us with a key to Kandinsky's turn to abstraction as to Malevich's call for a non-objective art. But let me return to the need or concern that elevated the aesthetic object into the telos of art. Following Schopenhauer I suggested that this need is linked to what I called the terror of time. In time art, so understood, lifts, if only for a time, the burden of time.

Although he does not mention Schopenhauer, Fried's answer is not very different. Crucial in this connection is his discussion of the temporality of aesthetic beholding. As he points out, to the painters and critics who resisted baroque and rococo theatricality, concern for the unity of the art-work meant also a concern for **instantaneousness**. Such concern is said to be presupposed by the emphasis they placed "on the **tableau**, the portable and self-sufficient picture that could be taken in at a glance," as opposed to the

"environmental,' architecture-dependent, often episodic and allegorical project that could not." (AT 89) Fried speaks of the then widely shared conviction that a painting "had to first attract and then to arrest and finally to enthrall the beholder, that is, a painting had to call someone, bring him to halt in front of itself, and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move." (AT 92) This suggests that the concern with absorption, and more generally the aesthetic approach, presuppose a concern with time. When fully absorbed, time seems to stand still for us and just this is what is most deeply desired. Consider what Fried has to say of Chardin's genre paintings: these paintings, he suggests, "come close to translating literal duration, the actual passage of time as one stands before the painting, into a purely pictorial effect: as if the very stability and unchangingness of the painted image are perceived by the beholder not as material properties that could not be otherwise, but as manifestations of an absorptive state — the image's absorption in itself, so to speak — that only happens to subsist." (AT 50) The stillness of the image beheld conquers the passage of time. "Images such as these", Fried continues, "are not of time *wasted*, but of time filled (as a glass may be filled not just to the level of the rim, but slightly above.)" (AT 51)

The same recognition of the fundamental importance of time also colors Fried's discussion of much more recent art in "Art and Objecthood." Part of his critique of theatrical art is his resistance to art that would make an awareness of the actual passage of time part of the aesthetic experience. Thus a cube by Tony Smith "is *always* of further interest; one never feels that one has come to an end of it, it is inexhaustible." (AO 143) Similarly Fried questions "Morris's claim that in the best new work the beholder is made aware that 'he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.'" (AO 144) Here, Fried suggests, "a presentment of endless, or indefinite, duration is made part of the aesthetic experience." (AO 144) To this conception he opposes the very different concerns of what he calls modernist painting or sculpture. "It is as though one's experience of the latter has no duration — not because one *in fact* experiences a picture by Noland and Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because *at every* moment the work itself is wholly manifest... It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if one were infinitely more acute, a

single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it." (AO 145 - 146)

Fried's celebration of presentness, "Not of time wasted, but of time filled," suggests that first of all and most of the time, we do not experience time as thus filled, but as strangely empty. Schopenhauer had insisted on this essential emptiness of time and of everything in time, i.e. everything real:

In time each moment is, only in so far as it has effaced its father, the preceding moment, to be effaced just as quickly itself. Past and future (apart from the consequences of their content) are as empty and unreal as any dream; but present is only the boundary between the two, having neither extension nor duration. In just the same way, we shall also recognize the same emptiness in all the other forms of the principle of sufficient reason, and shall see that, like time, space also, and like this everything that exists simultaneously in space and time, and hence everything that proceeds from causes or motives, has only a relative existence, is only through and for another like itself, i.e., only just as enduring. (I, 7-8)

But this emptiness is said to be suspended by the magic of art, which carries with it the illusion of time filled. Consider once more Schopenhauer's description of aesthetic beholding:

Raised by the power of mind, we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things, and ... devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceived from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception. (I, 178-179)

Why human beings should desire such a state should be evident from what has been said. Man's temporal existence is a burden to him. Art seems to lift that burden. "We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still." (196) It is essentially the same view of art that led Schopenhauer to attack allegory in painting and to praise "those admirable Dutchmen who directed such purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects, and set up a lasting monument of their objectivity and spiritual peace in paintings of *still life*." (197) Schopenhauer italicizes still life: life at rest.

I would like to suggest that Schopenhauer's reflections on time lead us to the very heart of the aesthetic approach. By its very nature the aesthetic object needs to be thought against time. I have suggested that the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object demands of the beholder that he leave it as it is. In an important sense it gives him nothing to do. He only should allow himself to be captured by its presence. Such capture satisfies because it gives the one so captured a sense of being at one with himself. No longer does anxious anticipation lead him beyond the present to an uncertain future. Think of Kant's determination of the aesthetic object. The point of his determination of the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction becomes clear when we keep in mind that interest always looks beyond the present moment to the future. Our usual ways of encountering things, governed as they are by cares and concerns are essentially interested. Only he who is truly disinterested lives in the present. And just because the aesthetic object presents itself as a plenitude that absorbs our interests as blotting paper absorbs ink, does it allow us to exist in the present and to forget the tyranny of time. "Presentness is grace." (AO 147)

## 3

But are we ever granted such grace? Is what Fried calls "presentness" more than an elusive idea that haunts us, but inevitably withdraws when we try to seize it? Time does not stand still in aesthetic experience. All that art can do is gesture towards such a standing still. Instead of effecting stillness it can only furnish semblances of stillness.

Fried hints at this. Note how, in the passages I quoted above, he retreats from the indicative to the subjunctive: "It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting **as it were**, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*: as though, **if only one were** infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything..." (AO 146, my emphasis) "If only one were infinitely more acute": If only there were a plenitude that would let the wheel of Ixion stand still. That lament returns in the statement by Stella that I used to characterize the aesthetic approach: "**If the painting were** lean enough, **we would be** able just to look at it" (my emphasis). But of course, it will never be lean enough, we will never be granted a completely innocent perception. The dream of creating an art object self-sufficient and dense enough to absorb all of our attention, full enough to allow

us to experience it in a way unclouded by meanings, by words, by absence remains a dream. No art object can ever have the required plenitude and density. Meanings will always get in our way. The idea of presentness is itself such a meaning. The modernist works praised by Fried do not so much grant presentness as they signify it. Signifying presentness they mean a secularized grace.

In *Absorption and Theatricality* Fried touches on this theme of secularization, when he says of Chardin that he "secularized the absorptive tradition — more accurately, it is in his genre paintings that the process of secularization begun in the previous century (chiefly in the Low Countries) and continued by Watteau and De Troy was brought to completion," (AT 130) or quotes Diderot's description of his experience of a work by Henri Robert: "One is no longer at the Salon or in a studio, but in a church beneath a vault." (AT 130) The place where the aesthetic experience takes place is here sanctified; it becomes a new church; aesthetic experience takes the place of religious devotion, beauty the place of the sacred, as paintings become icons on which the holy is a zero. That is to say, the presentness and plenitude that modern art pursues carry the aura of man's deepest concerns and hopes. Only if we keep in mind the way absorption and presentness secularize traditional religious themes, the way they allow for a reoccupation of the place left vacant by the dead God, will we understand what has supported the aesthetic approach: the continuing need for redemption from the terror of time. The beauty of truly modernist painting, as Fried understands it, offers at least a semblance of such redemption.

But beauty need not be thought against time, where to think beauty against time is inevitably also to think beauty against reality, against objecthood. Such thinking presupposes what Nietzsche termed "the spirit of revenge," which he defined as "the will's ill will against time and its it was" and understood as the deepest source of human self-alienation. For we cannot affirm ourselves except as embodied selves, that is to say as vulnerable and mortal, to be overtaken by time. If we cannot forgive ourselves our temporality, if we cannot make our peace with time, we also will not be able to make or peace with all that binds us to time, with our bodies, our sexuality. The spirit of revenge bids us think beauty not only against time, but against eros. And yet, as your reading in Plato should have taught you, originally beauty and eros appear profoundly linked: and eros refuses to be content with the mere contemplation of beauty: it wants to embrace it

and give birth. The possibility of an overcoming of the spirit of revenge invites a rethinking of Fried's claim that "the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater: and theater is now the negation of art." (AO 125) How are we to understand this "now"? Is it thought from the vantage point of the spirit of revenge? Does this vantage point govern modernist reflection about art and the creation of art? If so, our reflections should become untimely in Nietzsche's sense, that is to say, instead of embracing modernism, they should present it with a challenge.



## 19. Under the Rule of the Reality Principle

### 1

Let me begin this last segment of the course by returning to the myth of Aristophanes. According to that myth human being as we know it has its origin in a splitting apart of an original wholeness. Haunted by that original state, our fragmentary selves desire to unite with their other half in order to recover the lost whole. Love is that desire. You will remember that Plato's Aristophanes admonishes us to accept our present fragmented state. We should not try to recover what our pride lost us. Were we to do so, our refusal to accept the condition Zeus has decreed would threaten us with being split once more and thus becoming less than the beings we now are. But that story also invites thoughts challenging the divine decree that might seem to condemn us to something less than full humanity. Should we not perhaps, despite Aristophanes' warning, refuse to accept the finality of the divine decree, and attempt to recover lost plenitude.

When I discussed the Aristophanic myth I also pointed out its similarity to the Biblical fall story. Once again human being as we now know it is interpreted in terms of the fall and the expulsion from paradise. Fallen humanity is haunted by dreams of what it has lost, dreams of paradise regained. But we are supposed to resist the temptation to attempt to force open the gates of paradise: our present condition condemns us to less than the plenitude we dream off and the possibility of a final redemption is held out only to those who accept the lack that now helps to define their being. Although throughout the history of Christianity there have been heresies that refused to accept this admonition and wanted to force open the gates to the lost paradise.

As Marcuse points out in *Eros and Civilization*, Freud's account of the human condition recalls both the Aristophanic and the Biblical tradition, where Freud himself appears in the same role as Aristophanes and religious orthodoxy, that is to say in the role of someone who admonishes us to accept the less than perfect condition that is now our lot, while Marcuse, like many surrealist artists, places himself on the side of those who **refuse to accept the loss of paradise**, of integral wholeness. As I shall show next time, part of this refusal is a **refusal of the divorce of the aesthetic and reality** that helps to define the aesthetic approach as I have developed it.

## 2

But let us turn to the Freudian account. As Marcuse points out,

According to Freud, the history of man is the history of his repression. Culture constrains not only his societal, but also his biological existence, not only parts of the human being, but his instinctual nature itself. (11)<sup>80</sup>

**Cultural progress and self-alienation thus go together:**

Left free to pursue their natural objectives, the basic instincts of man would be incompatible with all lasting association and preservation; they would destroy even when they unite. The uncontrolled Eros is just as fatal as his deadly counterpart, the death instinct. Their destructive force derives from the fact that they strive for gratification which culture cannot grant; gratification as such and as an end in itself, at any moment. The instincts must therefore be deflected from their goal, inhibited in their aim. Civilization begins when the primary objective — namely integral satisfaction of needs — is effectively renounced. (11)

I shall have to say more about eros, the death instinct, and their relationship. But this much is clear: **civilized existence is here placed in opposition to the integral satisfaction of needs**; i.e. civilized existence is said to be marked by a profound lack. But this formulation invites the question that Marcuse would have us raise: what is it about our civilization which demands repression. Should we not attempt to take a **step beyond civilization** so understood?

Freud describes the emergence into civilization *as the* “transformation of the **pleasure principle** into the **reality principle**.” (12) Originally we human beings pursue simply pleasure. But this pursuit collides with the world into which we have been cast:

But the unrestrained pleasure principle comes into conflict with the natural and human environment. The individual comes to the traumatic realization that full and painless gratification of his needs is impossible... The reality principle supersedes the pleasure principle: man learns to give up momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained, but "assured" pleasure. Because of this lasting gain through renunciation and restraint, according to Freud, the reality principle "safeguards" rather than "dethrones," "modifies" rather than denies the pleasure principle. (13)

Inseparable from the establishment of the reality principle is the **subjection of desire to reason**. Distinctions are now made between what is good and bad, useful and harmful. This replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle constitutes

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<sup>80</sup> References in the text are to Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974),

the great traumatic event in the development of man, in the development of the genus as well as of the individual. (15)

I don't want to recapitulate here Freud's account of reason's ongoing struggle to control the pleasure principle. The very fact that this struggle is an ongoing one presupposes that the victory of the reality principle is less than complete:

the full force of the pleasure principle not only survives in the unconscious but also affects in manifold ways the very reality which has superseded the pleasure principle. The return of the repressed makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilization. (16)

Art is part of that history. Surrealism provides countless examples.

Repression is the price of civilization. Unfreedom and restraint are the price that must be paid. But the dream of a reality that would allow for the unrestrained satisfaction of our desires, for a state where necessity and freedom would coincide, remains. The repressed past, Marcuse insists, is projected into the future: "it generates **the wish that the paradise be re-created on the basis of civilization.**" (18)

### 3

But is the dream of an unrestrained satisfaction of all we desire one that can in principle be satisfied. Is the wish that paradise be regained not finally an impossible wish. One doctrine that forces us to question all attempts to regain paradise is the late Freud's understanding of the **death instinct** as the rival of the life instinct or eros. In earlier lectures I did indeed suggest that something like the death instinct is inseparable from the dream of full satisfaction. Consider in this connection once more Schopenhauer's understanding of human being as essentially will or desire. This characterization makes lack constitutive of human reality. Lacking full satisfaction, we desire it. And yet, what we desire is denied to us by what we are. We can achieve true satisfaction only by overcoming our own reality. **Freud's conception of a death instinct is quite in the tradition of Schopenhauer.** If pleasure means integral gratification, pleasure is drawn into the orbit of death.

The primary processes of the mental apparatus, in their striving for integral gratification, seem to be fatally bound to the "most universal endeavor of all living substance — namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world." The instincts are drawn into the orbit of death. (25)

The **Nirvana principle** wants pleasure, even if pleasure means death. Eros here threatens to transform itself into the death instinct, a transformation that is hinted at already in the Aristophanic myth. Freud, indeed, appeals to this myth in order to illustrate the regressive character of sexuality. The attempt to recover the plenitude of the circlemen only masks the death instinct. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud therefore asks:

Does Eros, in spite of all the evidence, in the last analysis work in the service of the death instinct and is life really only one long "detour to death"? (26)

This challenges the opposition of eros as life-preserving, life generating, and the death instinct. It would seem, that **if Eros is to preserve life it must indeed place itself in opposition to integral gratification**. But just this conclusion and the renunciation that it commands Marcuse would have us question:

Moreover, if the "regression-compulsion" in all organic life is striving for integral quiescence, if the Nirvana principle is the ground of the pleasure principle, the necessity of death appears in an entirely new light. The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. The descent toward death is an unconscious flight from pain and want. It is an expression of the eternal struggle against suffering and repression. And the death instinct itself seems to be affected by the historical changes which affect this struggle. (29)

Once again one can turn to Schopenhauer to support what Marcuse is here saying. The renunciation of life that is a presupposition both of the aesthetic experience and the ascetic life of the saint invite understanding as expressions of what Freud calls the Nirvana principle. Everything beautiful could thus be said to be figuring death. Schopenhauer's work is indeed governed by the death instinct, which in Schopenhauer's work presents itself to us quite explicitly as a struggle against suffering. But just the radical renunciation demanded by Schopenhauer Marcuse refuses:

When Schopenhauer defines the essence of beings as will, it shows forth as unsatiable want and aggression which must be redeemed at all cost. To Schopenhauer, they are redeemable only in their absolute negation; will itself must come to rest — to an end. But the ideal of Nirvana contains the affirmation: the end is fulfillment, gratification. Nirvana is the image of the pleasure principle. As such it emerges, still in a repressive form, in Richard Wagner's music drama: repressive because (as in any good theology and morality) fulfillment here demands the sacrifice of earthly happiness. The *principium individuationis* itself is said to be at fault — fulfillment is only beyond its realm. The most orgastic Liebestod still celebrates the most orgastic renunciation. (119)

Marcuse objects to an understanding of reality that makes it such that it precludes earthly happiness: **The fault is not with reality as such, but with a particular distortion of reality.** Schopenhauer's pessimism can itself be interpreted as a response to such a distortion. For this reason Marcuse appeals to the historical changes, to the evolution that has led to the establishment of the reigning reality principle.

The question remains, however, whether there is not an essential contradiction between happiness understood as integral satisfaction and human reality, and not just with human reality in western or in modern industrialized society. That contradiction would seem to be part of the Nirvana ideal, which does indeed include the idea of **affirmation** and gratification, as Marcuse points out, and that implies an affirmation of human being in some sense, even as the return to the quiescence of the inorganic world means the **negation** of human being. This same contradiction, it seems to me, haunts the end of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, as it haunts Wagner's *Liebestod*. **Does it also haunt Marcuse's idea of utopia?** Marcuse of course would not have welcomed this last suggestion. But the desire for integral satisfaction, he insists, appears incompatible with reality only given a particular organization of reality, only given the **ruling reality principle**. How then does Marcuse understand that principle?

#### 4

The basic idea is simple enough:

Behind the reality principle lies the fundamental fact of Ananke or scarcity (*Lebensnot*), which means that the struggle for existence takes place in a world too poor for the satisfaction of human needs without constant restraint, renunciation, delay. In other words, whatever satisfaction is possible necessitates work, more or less painful arrangements and undertakings for the procurement of the means for satisfying needs. (35)

But civilization has never succeeded, Marcuse points out, in equitably satisfying individual needs, to the extent that the prevailing conditions permitted this. Some inevitably fare much better than others.

The prevailing scarcity has, throughout civilization (although in very different modes), been organized in such a way that it has not been distributed collectively in accordance with individual needs. Nor has the procurement of goods for the satisfaction of needs been organized with the object of best satisfying the developing needs of individuals. (36)

One group inevitably comes to dominate others.

The various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle. For example, a society in which all members normally work for a living requires other modes of repression than a society in which labor is the exclusive province of one specific group. Similarly, repression will be different in scope and degree according to whether social production is oriented on individual consumption or on profit. (37)

In the modern world the reality principle has taken the form of the **performance principle**.

We designate it as performance principle in order to emphasize that under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members. It is clearly not the only historical reality principle: other modes of societal organization not merely prevailed in primitive cultures but also survived into the modern period. (45)

In his understanding of the performance principle Marcuse follows Marx. Following Marx, he speaks of the self-alienation that inevitably attends the performance principle. Considerations of efficiency demand the organization of time; increasing specialization fractures life. “While people work, they do not fulfill their own needs, but work in **alienation**.” (45) But such fragmentation stands in obvious opposition to the desire for integral satisfaction. And if Marcuse is right, alienation and regimentation do not stop with the work world, but increasingly encompass also our free time.

The basic control of leisure is achieved by the length of the working day itself, by the tiresome and mechanical routine of alienated labor; these require that leisure be a passive relaxation and a re-creation of energy for work. Not until the late stages of industrial civilization, when the growth of productivity threatens to overflow the limits set by repressive domination, has the technique of mass manipulation developed an entertainment industry which directly controls leisure time, or has the state directly taken over the enforcement of such controls. (47-48)

Note that Marcuse here suggests the possibility of a less repressive society: **Technology has reached a point today, he suggests, which should make scarcity far more manageable and allow for a less repressive society.** But the performance principle opposes all such attempts, suggesting that happiness is to be found **in ever greater consumption.**

The performance principle has also had to bring with it the domestication of potentially disruptive eros and thus the **repressive organization of sexuality**, which has been made subservient to procreation. Increasingly we meet with an insistence on monogamy. In this context Marcuse interprets **sexual “perversions”** as protests against the ruling reality principle:

Freud questioned why the taboo on the perversions is sustained with such an extraordinary rigidity. He concluded that no one can forget that the perversions are not merely detestable but also something monstrous and terrifying — "as if they exerted a seductive influence; as if at bottom a secret envy of those who enjoy them had to be strangled. The perversions seem to give a *promesse de bonheur* greater than that of "normal" sexuality. (49)

Marcuse sees in these perversions protests and revolts against the performance principle.

In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between normal, socially useful, and good, the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake must appear as *fleurs du mal*. Against society which employs sexuality as means for a useful end, the perversions uphold sexuality as an end in itself; they thus place themselves outside the domination of the performance principle and challenge its very foundation. (50)

It would seem that something similar should also be said of **art for art's sake**. I remind you of Alberti's suggestion that Narcissus is the inventor of painting. But art for art's sake is less threatening than sexual perversion in that it accepts the divorce of beauty and reality. It can thus coexist with the prevailing reality principle, even complement it and reinforce it by channeling forces that might threaten it into the harmless realm of art. Sexual perversion however invades reality and therefore has to threaten it. But I shall consider Marcuse's understanding of the place of art in the modern world in more detail next time.

## 20. The Aesthetic Dimension

### 1

Marcuse insisted that we live in an unnecessarily repressive society. What makes it repressive, according to him, is our understanding of reality or what he terms the ruling reality principle. That principle demands that we renounce what we most deeply desire, integral satisfaction, the kind of plenitude figure by Aristophanes' circlemen. Marcuse calls the reality principle governing our modern world the **performance principle**. That is to suggest that this reality principle has to bring with it a valorization of work, of future-directed, goal-oriented behavior, which brings with it an indefinite deferral of integral gratification. The idea of **paradise** is pushed into an indefinite beyond.

With its celebration of reason, of **logos**, philosophy, Marcuse insists, has helped to support that reality principle and thus has served the repression of **eros**; and yet within these limits, it has also gestured beyond the performance principle.

The representative philosophy of Western civilization has developed a concept of reason which contains the domineering features of the performance principle [Think of Descartes and of his promise to render us with his method the masters and possessors of nature]. However, the same philosophy ends in the vision of a higher form of reason which is the very negation of these features — namely, receptivity, contemplation, enjoyment. [Consider what Plato's Diotima has to say about the contemplation of pure beauty] Behind the definition of the subject in terms of the ever transcending and productive activity of the ego lies the image of the redemption of the ego: the coming to rest of all transcendence in a mode of being that has absorbed all becoming, that is for and with itself in all otherness. (130)

Near the beginning of Western philosophy we meet thus with Aristotle's God, who is neither creator nor savior of the universe, but represents "a mode of being in which all potentiality is actuality, in which the 'project' of being has been fulfilled." (112) Using Kant's language we can say, Aristotle's God is a disinterested observer. All our striving, according to Marcuse, has its goal in such self-contained being.

And towards the end of Western philosophy we meet with Hegel's conception of absolute knowledge in which the spirit returns home to itself. In this homecoming the spirit "overcomes its temporal form; negates Time" (116). Being now "no longer is the painful transcendence toward the future but the peaceful recapture of the past.



Remembrance, which has preserved everything that was, is "the inner and the actually higher form of the substance" (117). Western philosophy thus ends as it began:

At the beginning and at the end, in Aristotle and in Hegel, the supreme mode of being, the ultimate form of reason and freedom, appears as *nous*, spirit, Geist. At the end and at the beginning, the empirical world remains in negativity, as the stuff and tools of the spirit, or of its representatives on earth. (118)

Both Aristotle and Hegel thus point towards an overcoming of alienation, but **both place that overcoming in the realm of pure thought**, beyond our mundane reality. The essence of being is thought as *logos*, i. e. in opposition to temporal reality, and that means also in opposition to *eros*. From its very beginning Western philosophy has thus mutilated the human being:

The establishment of the reality principle causes a division and mutilation of the mind which fatefully determines its entire development. The mental process formerly unified in the pleasure ego is now split: its main stream is channeled into the domain of the reality principle and brought into line with its requirements. (141)

But to speak here of a main stream, is to suggest also that there is also a second stream which gives voice to what has been repressed and to its demands: That second stream finds expression in the placement of a contemplative above a procreative *eros*.

Freud singles out phantasy as one mental activity that retains a high degree of freedom from the reality principle even in the sphere of developed consciousness... "With the introduction of the reality principle one mode of thought-activity was split off: it was kept free from the reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone. This is the act of phantasy-making, which begins already with the games of children, and later, continues as daydreaming, abandons its dependence on real objects." ("Two Principles of Mental Functioning," *Collected Papers*, IV, 16 – 17) (140)

In our daydreams we allow free reign to the pleasure principle, where it is precisely the distance that separates these dreams from reality that allows the pleasure principle to go thus unrestrained. This **marginalization of phantasy** is demanded by the reality principle:

Phantasy as a separate mental process is born and at the same time left behind by the organization of the pleasure ego into reality ego. Reason prevails: it becomes unpleasant but useful and correct; phantasy remains pleasant but becomes useless, untrue — a mere play, daydreaming. As such, it continues to speak the language of the pleasure-principle, of freedom from repression, of uninhibited desire and gratification — but reality proceeds according to the laws of reason, no longer committed to the dream language. (142)

**Phantasy preserves the idea of paradise**, the ideal of integral satisfaction associated with Aristophanes' circlemen. In this sense it shadows the reality principle in ways that again and again beckon us to take a step beyond it, beckon us towards **an existence that does not sacrifice eros to logos, the pleasure principle to the reality principle.**

## 2

That shadow gains a voice in **art**. Here what has no place in our reality, what had to be repressed for that world to take its form, continues to speak to us. As Marcuse puts this point:

Art is perhaps the most visible "return of the repressed," not only on the individual but also on the generical-historical level. The artistic imagination shapes the "unconscious memory" of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed. Under the rule of the performance principle, art opposes to institutionalized repression the "image of man as free subject."

And yet, the potentially **revolutionary potential of art**, its call to a different mode of life, if you want its ethical significance, is **subverted by the institutionalization of art** and its place in the modern world, of which the establishment of the aesthetic sphere as an autonomous realm, removed from reality, is a central expression.

Since the awakening of the consciousness of freedom, there is no genuine work of art that does not reveal the archetypal content: the negation of unfreedom. We shall see later how this content came to assume the aesthetic form, governed by aesthetic principles. As aesthetic phenomenon, the critical function of art is self-defeating. The very commitment of art to form vitiates the negation of unfreedom in art. In order to be negated, unfreedom must be represented in the work of art with the semblance of reality. This element of semblance (show, *Schein*) necessarily subjects the represented reality to aesthetic standards and thus deprives it of its terror. (144)

In contrast to such art Marcuse envisions an art that common sense may well find unsettling, even terrifying. The terror of art is tied to the way that, by giving voice to the repressed pleasure principle, it calls into question the reigning reality principle and its established order. But the art establishment defangs art: by assigning to art its carefully limited place in the established order, by reducing its fundamentally erotic to a merely aesthetic significance, art's liberating and inevitably also destructive potential is controlled.

Like imagination, which is its constitutive mental faculty, the realm of aesthetics is essentially "unrealistic": it has retained its freedom from the reality principle at the price of being ineffective in reality. (172)

Art is rendered harmless. Yet this harmless, defanged art remains haunted by phantasies that *aim at an "erotic reality" where the life instincts would come to rest in fulfillment without repression.* (146) Again and again such phantasizing has led artists to be impatient with the marginalization of art, to refuse the defanging of art that is inseparable from its institutionalization, and again and again such trespassing has led to deliberate confrontations with established morality, where it is to be expected that the erotic sphere should be the privileged arena of such confrontation. Freud could not have supported such challenges to the established reality principle, because he could not conceive of an alternative, because he came close to identifying the established reality principle with reality as such. Just this identification Marcuse would have us question. If this is accepted, it becomes easy to call for a liberation of art from its aesthetic prison, to restore to art its revolutionary potential, to **take seriously the understanding of art as a figure of paradise, of a paradise that should not be relegated to the no-man's land of utopia, but should be taken seriously as a real possibility.** So understood art will have an obvious political significance. Just because of this Marcuse's real hero is not Freud, nor for that matter Marx, certainly not Kant who lent classical expression to the marginalization of the aesthetic, but the poet **Schiller**, who in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* recognized and took seriously the political potential of the aesthetic.

Indeed when, on the basis of Kant's theory, the aesthetic function becomes the central theme of the philosophy of culture, it is used to demonstrate the principles of a nonrepressive civilization, in which reason is sensuous and sensuousness rational. Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), written largely under the impact of the *Critique of Judgment*, aim at a remaking of civilization by virtue of the liberating force of the aesthetic function: it is envisaged as containing the possibility of a new reality principle. (180)

If Marcuse is right, Schiller's

ideas represent one of the most advanced positions of thought. It must be understood that the liberation from the reality which is here envisaged is not transcendental, "inner," or merely intellectual freedom (as Schiller explicitly emphasizes) but freedom in the reality. The reality that "loses its seriousness" is the inhumane reality of want and need, and it loses its seriousness when wants and needs can be satisfied without alienated labor. Then

man is free to 'play' with his faculties and potentialities and with those of nature, and only playing with them is he free. (188)

Marcuse shares this goal of an aesthetic education that would culminate in the transformation of society, where a presupposition of such transformation is the replacement of the prevailing reality principle with another.

### 3

I have said enough to make clear that Marcuse would have us reject any merely aesthetic understanding of art. Art communicates a truth that the established world finds uncomfortable, but nevertheless desperately needs.

Still, the dominion of repressive reason (theoretical and practical) was never complete: its monopoly on cognition was never uncontested. When Freud emphasized the fundamental fact that phantasy (imagination) retains a truth that is incompatible with reason, he was following in a long historical tradition. Phantasy is cognitive in as far as it preserves the truth of the Great Refusal, or positively, in so far as it protects, against all reason, the aspirations for the integral fulfillment of man and nature which are repressed by reason. (160)

This truth of art, a truth that is also kept alive in folklore and fairy tales, should not be marginalized, Marcuse insists. It should rather find expression in images of the good life, of heroes, that challenge the prevailing understanding of the good life and its heroes. In this spirit Marcuse opposes to the culture hero **Prometheus**, *who symbolizes productiveness, the unceasing effort to master life* (161), **Orpheus** and **Narcissus**.

As you will recall, we have encountered both before. Phaedrus mentions Orpheus in the *Symposium*. You will remember the way Phaedrus opposed Alcestis to Orpheus, who contrived to enter Hades alive and ended up losing not only the woman he loved, but his own life. Plato, as Marcuse points out,

blames Orpheus for his "softness" (he was only a harp-player), which was duly punished by the gods. (209)

Marcuse understands Orpheus instead as the hero who refuses to accept the separation of himself from the object of his desire, who refuses to accept the prevailing reality principle, the promise implicit in the idea of Aristophanes's circlemen:

The refusal aims at liberation. Orpheus is the archetype of the poet as liberator and creator: he establishes a higher order in the world — an order without repression. In his person art, freedom, and culture, are eternally combined. He is the poet of redemption,

the god who brings peace and salvation by pacifying man and nature not through force but through song. (170)

Marcuse points out that antiquity

associates Orpheus with the introduction of homosexuality. Like Narcissus, he rejects the normal Eros, not for an ascetic ideal, but for a fuller Eros. Like Narcissus he protests against the repressive order of procreative sexuality. (171)

As would those who place a contemplative above a procreative eros, Marcuse, too, here celebrates an eros that aims not at creation beyond the self, but as self-fulfillment. It refuses too make the renunciation on which Aristophanes Zeus insists, a renunciation that is repeated on a higher plane at the end of Diotima's speech. Given this refusal it is not surprising that the tradition has Orpheus collide with reality in such a way that he must perish: Here is how Ovid tells the story:

... Orpheus had shunned the love of all womankind, whether because of his ill success in love, or whether he had given his troth once and for all. Still many women felt a passion for the bard; many grieved for their love repulsed. He set the example for the people of Thrace of giving his love to tender boys, and enjoying the springtime and first flower of their growth.

He was torn to pieces by the crazed Thracian women. (171)

Marcuse considers Orpheus's refusal of the love of women as part of his refusal of a reality principle that would deny him integral satisfaction. We should, however not forget his end, which mirrors the end Zeus threatens to mete out to those who refuse to accept their split being and insist on laying claim to the plenitude of the circlemen.

Not surprisingly, Marcuse offers a similar interpretation of Narcissus, whom Alberti had called the inventor of painting. For Marcuse

The images of Orpheus and Narcissus reconcile Eros and Thanatos. They recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated — a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound in the petrified forms of man and nature. These powers are conceived not as destruction, but as peace, not as terror, but as beauty. It is sufficient to enumerate the assembled images in order to circumscribe the dimension to which they are committed: the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death: silence, sleep, night, paradise — the Nirvana principle not as death, but as life. (164)

The quote not only communicates the content Marcuse would like to give to his understanding of that paradise which the beauty of art figures and to which it calls us, but also of what renders such an understanding questionable. If we are to make sense of it, we have to be able to make sense of the reconciliation of Eros and Thanatos, of love and

the death instinct, where, as I showed before, the death instinct seems implied by the desire for integral satisfaction, by eros thus understood. In this sense the reconciliation is easy, but it implies a refusal of the life-affirming, procreative eros. This returns us to the topic of two loves, with which we began.

But, as Marcuse recognizes, if integral satisfaction is to mean something other than annihilation, if it is to mean an affirmation of human reality, it must be possible to reconcile human reality with what Marcuse calls the halt of time. But is it not just this that aesthetic experience as traditionally analyzed provides: “The conquest of time in so far as time is destructive of lasting gratification?” (193) To show that the redemption promised by Narcissus and Orpheus is no impossible hope, Marcuse invokes once more the aesthetic dimension:

Orpheus and Narcissus reveal a new reality, with an order of its own, governed by different principles. The Orphic Eros transforms being: he masters cruelty and death through liberation. His language is *song*, and his work is *play*. Narcissus' life is *beauty*, and his existence is *contemplation*. These images refer to the aesthetic dimension as the one in which their reality principle must be sought and validated. (171)

But can the aesthetic dimension validate a reality principle? This last demand collides with the irreality of the beautiful on which the aesthetic approach insists. Should we then, can we, follow Marcuse in his celebration of Narcissus and Orpheus, in his attempt to wed thanatos and eros? Everything depends on whether we can make any sense of his promise of a reality beyond our reality principle.

## 21. The Transformation of Sexuality

### 1

Last time I tried to show that Marcuse **would have us reject any merely aesthetic understanding of art**. Such an understanding defangs art in that it betrays its revolutionary potential. According to Marcuse every beautiful object points to the need to change the world we live in. Art communicates a truth that the establishment finds uncomfortable, that it has to repress, but nevertheless desperately needs. It gestures towards that ideal of **integral satisfaction** that is associated with the image of Aristophanes' circlemen or with the Biblical idea of paradise and it thus nourishes the hope to change a reality that would deny us what we so deeply desire.

But can that ideal ever be realized. Or is Marcuse holding out an impossible utopia. If we think the latter, we will also have to challenge his privileging of the contemplative Orphic and Narcissistic eros over the procreative eros privileged by the establishment, or his plea for a **transformation of sexuality into eros**. The introduction to the chapter that carries that title makes clear what is at stake:

The vision of a nonrepressive culture, which we have lifted from a marginal trend in mythology and philosophy, aims at a new relation between instincts and reason. The civilized morality is reversed by harmonizing instinctual freedom and order: liberated from the tyranny of repressive reason, the instincts tend toward free and lasting existential relations — they generate a new reality principle. (197)

Note that Marcuse's privileging of the Orphic and Narcissistic eros has political and ontological implications: it demands a certain reorganization of society and a new understanding of reality, a new reality principle.

Can there be a non-repressive political order:

The notion of a non-repressive instinctual order must first be tested on the most "disorderly" of all the instincts — namely sexuality. Non-repressive order is possible only if the sex instincts can, by virtue of their own dynamic and under changed existential and social conditions, generate lasting erotic relationships among mature individuals. (199)

Freud of course had questioned just that.

Freud repeatedly emphasized that the lasting interpersonal relations on which civilization depends presuppose that the sex instinct is inhibited in its aim. Love, and the enduring and responsible relations which it demands, are founded on a union of sexuality with 'affection,' and this union is the historical result of a long and cruel process of

domestication, in which the instinct's legitimate manifestation is made supreme and its component parts are arrested in their development. This cultural refinement of sexuality, its sublimation to love, took place within a civilization which established possessive private relations apart from and in a decisive aspect conflicting with the possessive social relations. (200)

Marcuse insists against Freud that this process is anything but inevitable. It depends on a repressive reality principle.

With the emergence of a non-repressive reality principle, with the abolition of the surplus-repression necessitated by the performance principle, this process would be reversed. In the social relations, reification would be reduced as the division of labor became reoriented on the gratification of freely developing individual needs; whereas in the libidinal relations, the taboo on the reification of the body would be lessened. No longer used as a fulltime instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized. The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in the reactivation of all erotogenic zones and consequently in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy... This change in the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family. (201)

Into this context belongs Marcuse's interpretation of homosexuality as inevitably a challenge to the establishment. How we respond to that challenge will depend on how we evaluate the presupposed ideal. If we accept Marcuse's claim that to overcome alienation, we must attempt to realize what the ideal of integral satisfaction demands, we may well want to follow him and oppose Orpheus and Narcissus to the culture hero Prometheus, **polymorphous sexuality** to **genital supremacy**. If on the other hand, we accept the claim that the human condition, that is to say not just the performance principle, but reality denies us integral satisfaction, we will be forced to question Marcuse's valuation of the eros of Orpheus and Narcissus. Then, in the face of their supposed promise to lead us to a less alienated existence, we will have to insist that, by holding up an ideal essentially incompatible with the human condition, they have to end up compounding alienation.

## 2

In this connection we should keep in mind how readily the desire for integral satisfaction merges with what Freud calls the **death instinct**. And it would seem that



such a merger is to be expected. For is Schopenhauer not essentially right when he suggests that our being is will, and that the will is essentially hungry, i.e. is Schopenhauer not right to insist that **our being is marked by a lack** that cannot be cancelled without cancelling human existence itself. Heidegger will make a related point when he argues that human being is constituted by **care**, where care is by its very nature forward looking. As caring beings we are never quite at one with ourselves. For Heidegger, too, **lack is constitutive of human being**. But if so the very idea of **integral satisfaction is incompatible with life**. To insist on it, despite that incompatibility, is to insist, once more with Schopenhauer, that life overcome itself. This would be to insist that Orphic and Narcissistic eros are ruled by the death instinct. Suicide would be a natural expression of that eros.

If the overcoming of the lack that is so much part of our being is to mean something other than annihilation, if it is to mean an affirmation of human reality, it must be possible for human beings to escape from their being as will or care, escape from that lack Schopenhauer and Heidegger take to be constitutive of human being. Can we make sense of such an escape?

In this connection Marcuse points to **art**; and with good reason. As we have seen, aesthetic experience has often been discussed in ways that suggested that in time such experience is able to lift the burden of time. Work here is replaced by play. It is thus to be expected that to show that his idea of integral satisfaction is no idle utopia Marcuse would invoke the aesthetic dimension.

But as Marcuse himself points out, the dominant aesthetic approach has divorced beauty and reality.

And to what extent is talk of aesthetic experience overcoming the rule of time really justified by a careful look at such experience? Could it be that it corresponds to wishful thinking on the part of those who offer such an analysis. Think once more of Schopenhauer's discussion of the beautiful. Schopenhauer is one of those who claim that in aesthetic experience the timeless present triumphs over time. But does aesthetic experience really overcome time? Or, and this is a related question: is aesthetic experience really disinterested, as Kant and Schopenhauer claim? Think of the actual experience of listening to a piece of music, or of reading a detective story, or even of looking at a picture. Are we not interested in how the piece or the plot are going to

develop, i.e. are we not looking ahead. How, otherwise could we ever be surprised? Is the escape from time aesthetic experience is supposed to effect not a fiction? An impossible ideal towards which the aesthetic experience may gesture, but which it fails to realize? How successful is Marcuse's appeal to aesthetic experience in support of the claim that it is possible to make sense of the experience of integral satisfaction.

## 3

That our reality, i.e. reality shaped by the performance principle, rules out the kind of satisfaction he has in mind Marcuse knows. But let me return to the all important question: does the ideal of integral satisfaction collide only with this version of the reality principle, or does it collide with the very essence of reality, as e. g. Schopenhauer thought, who insisted on the incompatibility of the idea of integral satisfaction with the idea of will or desire? Or, to put the same point differently: does the temporality of our existence, the victory of the past over every present and future, more especially, does our mortality finally rule out the kind of satisfaction demanded? The challenge of these questions is taken up by Marcuse at the very end of *Eros and Civilization*.

The powers that be have a deep affinity to death; death is a token of unfreedom, of defeat. Theology and philosophy today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate — they betray the promise of utopia. In contrast, a philosophy that does not work as the handmaiden of repression responds to the fact of death with the Great Refusal — the refusal of Orpheus the liberator. Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational — painless. Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life they may take it upon themselves to die — at a moment of their own choosing. (236 - 237)

The quote deserves careful analysis. First the beginning: Marcuse does not identify the theologians and philosophers that he has in mind. But Schopenhauer would be an obvious example of a philosopher who bestows transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind, although it seems more likely that Marcuse was thinking above all of his former teacher, Martin Heidegger, who had not only made guilt and death constitutive of man's essence — to be for man is to be towards death — but had also allied himself in the most obvious way with the powers of repression.

But is Heidegger "perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence," when he understands human being as being unto death, and links authentic being to the resolute anticipation of death. The incompatibility between Heidegger and Marcuse is indeed announced by the very title of Heidegger's main work: *Being and Time*. Reality, the title suggests, should not be thought in opposition to time, as philosophy ever since Plato has tended to do, but linked with time, where we could point to Schopenhauer, whose determination of reality would seem to anticipate much of what Heidegger was to insist on. Given such an ontology, those who refuse to acknowledge how intimately reality and time are linked, must become alienated from reality and finally from themselves. Schopenhauer of course recognized that such an understanding of reality is difficult to reconcile with the ideal of integral satisfaction. The recognition of this impossibility is indeed at the heart of his **pessimism**, for Schopenhauer refuses to let go of the ideal of integral satisfaction even as he insists on its incompatibility with reality. Marcuse is an **optimist**. But that optimism demands that there be no final incompatibility between reality and the ideal of integral satisfaction. But does this not demand in turn an ontology that places being once more in opposition to time?

## 5

Let me return to Marcuse's claim that philosophers like Heidegger and Schopenhauer betray the promise of utopia. In just what sense is that promise betrayed?

We have learned already that according to Marcuse the "promise of utopia" answers to "the tabooed aspirations of humanity" (18). Man carries within himself memories of "integral gratification, which is the absence of want and repression. As such it is the immediate identity of necessity and freedom" (18). But as long as human beings experience themselves as cast into and as subjected to time — and such subjection reveals itself most forcefully in the certainty that we must die — we cannot really be at peace with ourselves. Freedom wars with necessity. First of all and most of the time, certainly, human beings exist as they have not chosen to exist. This of course Marcuse would grant. But he would add: this is because first of all and most of the time they are subject to a repressive reality principle. But is there really an alternative? Marcuse suggests that to accept the inevitability death is to submit and to repress one's deepest desire.

The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but 'joy wants eternity.' Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure. Time has no power over the id, the original domain of the pleasure principle. But the ego, through which alone pleasure becomes real, is in its entirety subject to time. The mere anticipation of the inevitable end, present in every instant, introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations and renders pleasure itself painful. This primary frustration in the instinctual structure of man becomes the inexhaustible source of all other frustrations — and of their social effectiveness. Man learns that "it cannot last anyway," that every pleasure is short, that for all finite beings the hour of their birth is the hour of their death — that it couldn't be otherwise. (231)

Marcuse here puts his finger on the crucial point, which has to render his own position problematic.

That timelessness should be the ideal of pleasure is of course hardly a novel claim. Marcuse himself invokes in this connection Plato's *Symposium*, where Plato points out that human reality is constituted by a lack and by the longing to overcome that lack, i. e. by eros. If such longing is to find satisfaction it must be possible for us human beings to escape destructive time. **Eros demands eternity.** This demand can be met only if human being in an important sense does not belong to time. Plato thus maintained that the soul, while dragged into the sensible and changeable, yet in its essence belongs to unchanging being. And only when eros embraces logos does it gain access to this realm. In this Marcuse cannot follow Plato. He thus criticizes, as we have seen, Plato for intellectualizing eros. To Plato he opposes Nietzsche, whom he calls the only philosopher to have overcome the logocentric ontological tradition. But, as we shall see in the final sessions of this course, Nietzsche proves an ambiguous ally in that he forces us to call the ideal of integral gratification into question. He invites us to see that ideal as itself a source of alienation, which demands something impossible of us. To repeat a question raised earlier: could it be that the insistence on the overcoming of alienation only compounds it? This would mean the vindication of Aristophanes and his Zeus against those who with Marcuse would meet the order ordained by Zeus, or we can say the establishment, with the Great Refusal.

I have pointed out that Marcuse rejects Plato's account of the sense in which we human beings belong to timeless being rather than to becoming. Plato, he charges, denies the passions, the body. But how can we affirm the body without also affirming time and without recognizing the inescapability of death? What sense can Marcuse make of the

possibility of escaping destructive time? To do so, has to show how *eternity can become present in the here and now*. Something in us has to escape the tyranny of becoming if the ideal of pleasure is not to prove just another empty dream. In this connection Marcuse appeals to Freud, to that famous if difficult to understand passage in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* where Freud suggests that "*Time has no power over the id, the original domain of the pleasure principle.*" (231) The id thus promises an answer to the question I asked earlier: What sense can Marcuse make of the possibility of escaping destructive time? Descend to the level of the id! Note how Marcuse here inverts the Platonic anthropology. The id takes the place of the soul. Eternity is thought not above, in the realm of the forms, but below in the depths of the unconscious. Any such inversion inevitably retains much of the original picture. Most importantly, **both Plato and Marcuse subscribe to the ideal of integral satisfaction**, to what I have called **an ethics of satisfaction**, which makes being at one or self-integration the goal of human striving. If this hope for satisfaction is to be more than illusory, reality, more specifically human reality, has to transcend the power of time. **The ethics of satisfaction demands an ontology that opposes being to time** and asserts **the primacy of being over becoming**.

But what if reality will not be divorced from time. What if Heidegger is right when he insists that being be linked to time? Then Marcuse's dream of a transformation of reality that would allow for integral satisfaction will have to be considered utopian in a bad sense, as compounding rather than overcoming alienation. Are we then left with some version of that incompatibility of what we most deeply desire and reality on which Schopenhauer insists, and that would mean with some version of Schopenhauerian pessimism, and that would mean also, with some version of the aesthetic approach which thinks beauty in opposition to time, and to the extent that reality is itself temporal, in opposition to reality?

But is Marcuse not right to protest against the aesthetic approach and against its marginalization of art? I shall take up this question in my next lecture.

## 22. The Spirit of Revenge

### 1

Last time I pointed out that both Plato and Marcuse subscribe to the ideal of **integral satisfaction**, or to what I have called **an ethics of satisfaction**, which makes being-at-one or self-integration the goal of human striving. I pointed out that if this hope for satisfaction is to be more than illusory, reality, more specifically human reality, has to transcend the power of time. **The ethics of satisfaction demands an ontology that opposes being to time and asserts the primacy of being over becoming.**

But what if reality cannot be divorced from time? Then Marcuse's dream of a transformation of reality that would allow for integral satisfaction will have to be considered utopian in a bad sense, as compounding rather than overcoming alienation. Would we wthen not be left with some version of that incompatibility of what we most deeply desire and reality on which Schopenhauer insists, and that would mean with some version of Schopenhauerian pessimism? And would we then not be left also with **some version of the aesthetic approach, which thinks beauty in opposition to time, and to the extent that reality is itself temporal, in opposition to reality?**

But is it necessary to link the desire for happiness to the desire for integral satisfaction. **What if what really alienates is not, as Marcuse suggests, an understanding of reality that denies us integral satisfaction, but rather the very demand for integral satisfaction?** In that case we would be forced to take a step not only beyond the aesthetic approach, but also beyond Marcuse.

Let me begin today's lecture by reading you once more a passage from the *Genealogy of Morals* that points to what Nietzsche finds questionable about the aesthetic approach:

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues "without interest," one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of artists on this ticklish point are more "interesting" and Pygmalion was in any event *not* necessarily an unaesthetic man." Let us think all the more highly of the innocence of our aestheticians, which is reflected in

such arguments; let us, for example, credit it to the honor of Kant that he should expatiate on the peculiar properties of the sense of touch with the naiveté of a country parson.<sup>81</sup>

**Beauty**, Nietzsche suggests here, is too intimately **tied to love**, and that for Nietzsche means to sexual desire, to allow us to be convinced by Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested perception. You will recall that on Kant's understanding there cannot be, by definition, such a thing as an appreciation of the beautiful that as such arouses sexual desire. If art is to serve beauty alone it must be illuminated by that loveless light of which De Chirico speaks, or as Kant would put it, experienced as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction.

## 2

But although Nietzsche here speaks of Kant, as the context makes clear it is not so much Kant who here is his target as Schopenhauer, who was indebted to the Kantian definition of the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested perfection and yet brings to it a much more passionate involvement with art. But of what sort is this involvement?

Of few things does Schopenhauer speak with greater assurance than he does of the effect of aesthetic contemplation: he says of it that it counteracts *sexual* "interestedness," like lupulin and camphor; he never wearies of glorifying *this* liberation from the "will" as the great merit and utility of the aesthetic condition. Indeed, one might be tempted to ask whether the basic conception of "will and representation," the thought that redemption from the "will" could be attained only through "representation," did not originate as a generalization from this sexual experience. (In all questions concerning Schopenhauer's philosophy, by the way, one should never forget that it was the conception of a young man of twenty-six; so that it partakes not only of the specific qualities of Schopenhauer, but also of the specific qualities of that period of his life.) Listen, for instance to one of the most explicit of the countless passages he has written in praise of the aesthetic condition; listen to the tone, the suffering, the happiness, the gratitude expressed in such words.

"This is the painless condition that Epicurus praised as the highest good and condition of the gods; for a moment we are delivered from the vile urgency of the will; we celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of volition; the wheel of Ixion stands still."<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* III, 6, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 104.

<sup>82</sup> *Genealogy* III, 6, pp. 104-105..

Nietzsche's suggestion must be taken seriously. Schopenhauer's would indeed appear to have been tortured by his sexuality. His negative attitude to the opposite sex, towards sex, and that means also towards the body, towards time would appear to be of a piece with his metaphysics. But again it is best if we listen to Nietzsche:

What vehemence of diction! What image of torment and long despair! What an almost pathological antithesis between "a moment" and the unusual "wheel of Ixion," "penal servitude of volition" and "vile urgency of the will!" — But even if Schopenhauer was a thousand times right in his own case, what insight does this give us into the nature of the beautiful? Schopenhauer described one effect of the beautiful, its calming effect on the will — but is this a regular effect? Stendhal, as we have seen, a no less sensual but more happily constituted person than Schopenhauer, emphasizes another effect of the beautiful: The beautiful *promises* happiness"; to him the fact seems precisely that the beautiful *arouses the will* ("interestedness"). And could one not finally urge against Schopenhauer himself that he was quite wrong in thinking himself a Kantian in this matter, that he by no means understood the Kantian definition of the beautiful in a Kantian sense — that he, too, was pleased in the beautiful from an interested point of viewpoint, even from the strongest, most personal interest: that of a tortured man who gains release from his torture? — And, to return to our first question, "what does it mean when a philosopher pays homage to the ascetic ideal?" — here we get at any rate a first indication: he wants *to gain release from a torture*.<sup>83</sup>

### 3

The essential point made here had already been stated by Nietzsche's Zarathustra in his sermon "On Immaculate Perception,"<sup>84</sup> the title an obvious pun, playing with the "Immaculate Conception" of the Virgin Mary, who is said to have been conceived without the stain of original sin. We should note the way the shift from conception to perception parallels the shift from a procreative to a contemplative eros. The sermon deserves a careful reading:

When the moon rose yesterday I fancied that she wanted to give birth to a sun: so broad and pregnant she lay on the horizon. But she lied to me with her pregnancy; and I should rather believe in the man in the moon than in the woman. (233)

Kaufmann's translation is misleading: in German **the moon is masculine**, the sun feminine, an interesting exception to most languages, but important to keep in mind when

<sup>83</sup> *Genealogy* III, 6, pp. 105-106

<sup>84</sup> References are to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954)



reading this sermon. The preservation of the masculine is important here: it suggests the inversion of the established way of relating the sexes.

But what kind of a man is Nietzsche's moon?

Indeed, he is not much of a man either, this shy nocturnal enthusiast. Verily, with a bad conscience he passes over the roofs. For he is lecherous and jealous, the monk in the moon, lecherous after the earth and all the joys of lovers. (233-234)

The moon, which soon is likened to a tomcat, is here associated with an unhappy sexuality that longs to be procreative and yet for some reason is unable to be so and jealous of what is denied to it. One of those Nietzsche has here in mind is no doubt Schopenhauer. Both his asceticism and his aestheticism are born of an experience of the earthly as a realm of torture.

You too love the earth and the earthly: I have seen through you: but there is shame in your love and bad conscience — you are like the moon. Your spirit has been persuaded to despise the earthly; but your entrails have not been persuaded, and they are what is strongest in you. And now your spirit is ashamed of having given in to your entrails, and, to hide from its shame, it sneaks on furtive and lying paths. (234)

Nietzsche describes here an existence that is torn between the immediate claims of the body and some other ideal that demands that we despise the earthly, despise the procreative eros. The ideal that leads to such despising is, as I shall develop later, linked to what I have called the ideal of satisfaction. Nietzsche offers us an account of the origin of that ideal, its genealogy if you wish. It is born of an experience of one's own life as suffering, as torture. Schopenhauer would seem to have experienced his sexuality in this way. But unlike Schopenhauer or for that matter unlike Marcuse, Nietzsche refuses to admit this ideal as inescapable.

As I have argued in this course, Nietzsche, too, links this ideal of satisfaction to what I have called the aesthetic approach, more expressly to Schopenhauer's interpretation of aesthetic experience as pure perception.

"This would be the highest to my mind" — thus says your lying spirit to itself — "to look at life without desire and not, like a dog, with my tongue hanging out. To be happy with looking, with a will that has died and without the grasping and greed of selfishness, the whole body cold and ashen, but with drunken moon eyes. This I should like best" — thus the seduced seduces himself — "to love the earth as the moon loves her, and to touch her beauty only with my eyes. And this is what the immaculate perception of all things shall mean to me: that I want nothing of them, except to be allowed to lie prostrate before them like a mirror with a hundred eyes. (244)

Zarathustra proceeds to oppose to this ideal of a contemplative eros his own:

O you sentimental hypocrites, you lechers! You lack innocence in your desire and therefore you slander all desire. Verily, it is not as creators, procreators and those who have joy in becoming that you love the earth. Where is innocence? Where there is a will to procreate. And he who wants to create beyond himself has the purest will.

Where is beauty? Where I must will with all my will; where I want to love and perish that an image may not remain a mere image. Loving and perishing: that has rhymed for eternities. The will to love, that is to be willing also to die. Thus I speak to you cowards. (234-235)

Zarathustra would have us refuse the distance that on the aesthetic approach separates beauty and reality. The beautiful should not remain a beautiful illusion. It should give birth to a beautiful reality, where it is interesting to note that Nietzsche too links loving and perishing, but in a very different sense than suggested by a Wagnerian *Liebestod*, perhaps in the sense Alcestis is willing to die so that her husband may live. Death here is in the service of ongoing life. It is life-affirming in a way Schopenhauer would have to find reprehensible. And just as Schopenhauer's admirer Wagner perverts the eternal rhyme of loving and perishing, so Schopenhauer perverts the love by breaking the bond between beauty and procreation.

But now your emasculated leers wish to be called "contemplation." And that which permits itself to be touched by cowardly glances you would baptize "beautiful." How you soil noble names!

But this shall be your curse, you who are immaculate, you pure perceivers, that you shall never give birth, even if you lie broad and pregnant on the horizon. (235)

#### 4

Implicit in this celebration of a procreative eros is a critique of Schopenhauer's understanding of redemption, which can be found only by leaving behind reality. Like Marcuse, Nietzsche, more precisely his Zarathustra, insists here on redemption in this world, and again, like the tradition and like Marcuse, he understands the state of redemption as one where freedom and necessity coincide.

But did we not see in Marcuse's case that just this state is denied to us, that the hope for an earthly redemption is a hope for something impossible, that Schopenhauer is right to seek redemption beyond reality? How then does Zarathustra understand redemption? We are given an answer in his sermon "On Redemption":

To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it' — that alone should I call redemption. (251)

Like Marcuse, Zarathustra links redemption to the transformation of the past, which, having happened, cannot be changed, into something freely willed. Once again the thought of redemption is linked to the **coincidence of necessity and freedom**.

But how can that be? How can we think that coincidence?

Will — that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this, too: the will itself is still a prisoner. Willing liberates; but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was' — that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy. (251)

That we cannot “break time and time's covetousness,” — that, according to Nietzsche, is the deepest source of our melancholy. With this we come to what for Nietzsche is **the root-alienation that gives birth both to asceticism and to the aesthetic approach**. As long as human beings are subject to such melancholy they will be vulnerable to Schopenhauer's siren call.

But what escape is there? How, given that situation, can there be anything like redemption?

Willing liberates; what means does the will devise to get rid of his melancholy and to mock his dungeon? Alas, every prisoner becomes a fool; and the imprisoned will redeems himself foolishly. (251)

Once again Schopenhauer would be a good illustration of such foolish redemption, although the critical reader should wonder whether Nietzsche's thought of the eternal recurrence might not be another such foolish redemption.

That time does not run backwards, that is his wrath; 'that which was' is the name of the stone that he cannot move. And so he moves stones out of wrath and displeasure, and he wreaks vengeance on whatever does not feel wrath and displeasure as he does. Thus the will, the liberator, took to hurting; and on all who can suffer he wreaks revenge for his inability to go backwards. This, indeed this alone, is what revenge is. The will's ill will against time and its 'it was.' (251-252)

The **spirit of revenge** is Nietzsche's name for the power that presides over our deep-rooted tendency to turn on ourselves in the name of some impossible ideal or other. From

this perspective the thinking of both Schopenhauer and Marcuse appears governed by the spirit of revenge. What then would it mean to escape the spirit of revenge?

We are given a hint in Zarathustra's sermon "On Those Who are Sublime." He there offers us the following remarkable definition of beauty:

When power becomes gracious and descends into the visible — such descent I call beauty. (230)

To understand this definition we should keep in mind that while Schopenhauer understands the will first of all as a will to live, a formulation that suggests that it is in the end a self-assertion aiming at self-preservation that is our deepest concern, Nietzsche understands it first of all as will to power, where the latter may aim at what lies beyond the limits of my personal existence. One could for example say that Athens and Sparta bore witness to the will to power of their founders, of Solon and Lycurgus, who gave these cities their laws.

But every human will to power has to recognize limits to its power. If Nietzsche is right and we are indeed **will to power**, then we surely have to add, but **we lack power**: **we are will to power, lacking power**. And because we will power, yet lack power, **we find it difficult to forgive ourselves our lack of power**. Here we have the origin of **the spirit of revenge**, and thus also of the aesthetic approach. But at this point we also glimpse what would be necessary to overcome the spirit of revenge and thus to achieve a humanly possible **redemption**: we would have to learn to accept that lack which is constitutive of our being, without renouncing our will to power. This is to say, the will must **learn to become gracious**, i.e. it must learn to forgive itself its lack of power, its temporality. Only such forgiveness, only such grace, will allow the will to power to make its peace with the earthly, the sensuous, to really embrace reality, to really descend into the visible.

We have here a first hint as to the nature of the kind of beauty Nietzsche would oppose to that celebrated by the aesthetic approach. It would be a beauty not born of the spirit of revenge, but of a grace that the will to power extends to itself. Such a beauty, far from presenting itself as a plenitude, would be marked by a profound negativity, if you will, it would be a **tragic beauty**. And **by embracing negativity it would open itself to reality**. The kind of beauty towards which Nietzsche's Zarathustra is here gesturing is not so very different from the **tragic beauty** the young Nietzsche had articulated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. So it is to *The Birth of Tragedy* that I shall turn next time.

### 23. Nietzsche contra Schopenhauer: *The Birth of Tragedy*

#### 1

Last time I discussed Nietzsche's conception of what he calls the spirit of revenge. I suggested that someone who subscribes to what I have called an **ethics of satisfaction**, must finally be filled with that spirit, for never will reality be able meet what is demanded. Nietzsche thus understands Schopenhauer's pessimism and what flows from it, his asceticism and aestheticism, as expressions of the spirit of revenge.

But Nietzsche also finds it impossible to reject Schopenhauer's understanding of human being as constituted by a lack. Given such acceptance — and regardless of the details, the general position must, I think, be granted — it follows that we can escape Schopenhauer's pessimism only by breaking with **the ideal of satisfaction**. Here, I think, lies the basic weakness of *Eros and Civilization*. By holding on to a version of the ethics of satisfaction — recall all that talk about integral gratification — Marcuse must end up unable to affirm reality, condemned to a bad utopianism, to dreams of paradise that may be given an illusory life in art, yet can never be realized. That is not to say that I do not recognize and would not support Marcuse's **refusal to accept the divorce of beauty from reality** that is part of the aesthetic approach. But to become effective that refusal must break with the ethics of satisfaction, must recognize that lack is constitutive of human being and will not be elided.

As I pointed out last time, the recognition that lack is indeed constitutive of human being is part of Nietzsche's understanding of human being as **will to power, lacking power**. The difficulty we have to forgive ourselves **our lack of power** lies at the origin of **the spirit of revenge**, and thus also of the aesthetic approach. If we are to overcome the spirit of revenge, we must learn to accept that lack which is constitutive of our being. This is to say that we must **learn to become gracious to ourselves**, must learn to forgive ourselves our lack of power, its temporality.

We have here a first hint as to the nature of the kind of beauty Nietzsche would oppose to that celebrated by the aesthetic approach. It would be a beauty born, not of the spirit of revenge, but of a grace that the will to power extends to itself. Such a beauty, far from presenting itself as a plenitude, would be marked by a profound negativity, if you will, it would be a tragic beauty. And by embracing negativity it would open itself to

reality. Already in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche is attempting to articulate such a conception of beauty.

## 2

The *Birth of Tragedy* is written, both with and against Schopenhauer. The key contrast between the Apollinian and the Dionysian with which the book begins is indeed obviously derived from Schopenhauer's distinction between representation and will. For Schopenhauer the human being belongs on one hand, as this knowing individual, to the order of representations, yet also experiences himself as will, and thus transcends in his innermost being this realm of representations. Given his twofold nature the human being experiences quite heterogeneous claims on himself. These claims are objectified in the two Greek divinities: Apollo and Dionysus.

Let me begin then by taking a closer look at Nietzsche's description of the Apollinian:

The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is truly an artist, is the prerequisite of all plastic art, and, as we shall see, of an important part of poetry also. In our dreams we delight in the immediate understanding of figures; all forms speak to us; there is nothing **unimportant or superfluous**. But even when this dream experience is most intense, we still have, glimmering through it, the sensation that it is **mere appearance**: at least this is my experience, and for its frequency — indeed, normality — I could adduce many proofs, including the sayings of the poets. (34)<sup>85</sup>

Note how much here recalls traditional descriptions of the aesthetic. Nietzsche reads the beautiful object in the image of the dream; more precisely perhaps, he reads the dream in the image of the beautiful object. Once again the beautiful is marked by plenitude: in it nothing seems unimportant or superfluous. But this plenitude is bought at the price of reality: we sense that the beautiful lacks reality.

But the significance of the Apollinian is not exhausted with this look at the beautiful. The dream sphere contrasts with waking reality by its clearer form and heightened meaning: it transforms reality so that it acquires a plenitude that it lacked. But is not everyday reality itself a reality that has already been transformed, subjected the human understanding and its modes of organization.

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<sup>85</sup> Page references are to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

Philosophical men even have a presentiment that the reality in which we live and have our being is also mere appearance, and that another, quite different reality lies beneath it. Schopenhauer actually indicates as the criterion of philosophical ability the occasional ability to view men and things as mere phantoms and dream images. Thus the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on the image he trains himself for life. (34)

Note that this invites an interpretation of artists and of philosophers such as Schopenhauer as human beings who have somehow have become distanced from reality, have lost their place in everyday life and now observe it from the outside, as it were, as aesthetic spectators. But the analogy between waking reality and dream on which Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer, here insists, also suggests that it is precisely by shaping reality in a quasi-artistic fashion that we give it structure and meaning. I shall have to return to this point.

Apollo is understood by Nietzsche as the incarnation of what Schopenhauer had called the *principium individuationis*.

The joyous necessity of the dream experience has been embodied by the Greeks in their Apollo: Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, is at the same time the soothsaying god. He, who (as the etymology of the name indicates) is the "shining one," the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy. The higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast to the incompletely intelligible everyday world, this deep consciousness of nature, healing and helping in dreams and sleep, is at the same time the symbolical analogue of the soothsaying faculty and of the arts generally, which make life possible and worth living. (35)

Nietzsche suggests here that to make life possible and worth living we must transfigure it by means of artistic illusion, which in turn are linked to our dreams. Note that this implies a profound disagreement with Schopenhauer. According to Schopenhauer art affords redemption from life, while according to Nietzsche art makes life worth living. Art serves life by transfiguring it. In the later preface, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," Nietzsche will return to this point:

In the book itself the suggestive sentence is repeated several times, that the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed, the whole, book knows only an artistic meaning and crypto-meaning behind all events. (22)

In that later preface Nietzsche is quite aware of how profoundly this set him apart from Schopenhauer, despite all the Schopenhauerian rhetoric of the book. **Art is placed in the**

**service of life.** In this connection you should also note that according to Schopenhauer the aesthetic experience delivers us from the rule of the *principium individuationis*, while Nietzsche insists on just the opposite.

### 3

In his understanding of the Dionysian, too, Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer, but once again gives his account a twist very much his own.

In the same work Schopenhauer has described for us the tremendous *terror* which seizes man when he is suddenly dumbfounded by the cognitive form of phenomena because the principle of sufficient reason, in one of its manifestations, seems to suffer an exception. If we add to this terror the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the *principium individuationis*, we steal a glimpse into the nature of the *Dionysian*, which is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication. (36)

There are experiences when we glimpse that everyday reality is only the surface, when we begin to suspect the superficiality of the ruling reality principle. That such suspicion should be attended by terror can hardly surprise. Yet terror is linked to blissful ecstasy: Nietzsche could be said to transform Schopenhauer's pessimistic reading of reality as will into almost its opposite:

Either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness. In the German Middle Ages, too, singing and dancing crowds, ever increasing in number, whirled themselves from place to place under this same Dionysian impulse. In these dancers of St. John and St. Vitus, we rediscover the Bacchic choruses of the Greeks, with their prehistory in Asia Minor, as far back as Babylon and the orgiastic Sacaia. There are some, who, from obtuseness or lack of experience turn away from such phenomena as from "folk-diseases," with contempt or pity born of the consciousness of their own "healthy-mindedness." But of course such poor wretches have no idea how corpse-like and ghostly their so-called "healthy-mindedness" looks when the glowing life of the Dionysian revelers roars past them. (37)

Art can serve Dionysus as well as Apollo. An art serving Dionysus has to challenge the established reality principle with the promise of liberation. Note how much like Marcuse the following passage sounds:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once



more her reconciliation with her lost son, man. Freely, earth proffers her gifts, and peacefully the beasts of prey of the rocks and desert approach. The chariot of Dionysus is covered with flowers and garlands; panthers and tigers walk under its yoke. Transform Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy" into a painting; let your imagination conceive the multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck — then you will approach the Dionysian. Now the slave is a free man; now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or "impudent convention" have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled and fused with his neighbor, but at one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity. (37)

This is a reading of Schopenhauer's will that appears to substitute for the pain and suffering that Schopenhauer took to be essential to the will and to all its manifestations joy. In the Dionysian experience the individual affirms himself not as this individual, but as a part of humanity, to which he is joined by an ecstatic fellow feeling — I don't want to use the Schopenhauerian "sympathy" because that word suggests something like pity, i.e. that we are joined through shared suffering, rather than through joy.

The distinction between Apollo and Dionysus suggests the possibility of distinguishing between two kinds of art. Nietzsche marks this distinction by contrasting the Apollinian art of Homer with the Dionysian art of Archilochus.

To understand Nietzsche's turn to tragedy, we have to keep in mind the shortcomings of the Apollinian and the Dionysian. A purely Apollinian state would lose touch with reality, would substitute for reality beautiful illusion. In this sense the aesthetic approach in its entirety, as I have discussed it, is Apollinian. A purely Dionysian state, on the other hand, would destroy the individual. This is to say: human beings can truly affirm themselves only by saying yes to both, individuality and reality, to both Apollo and Dionysus. This calls for a mediation of the Apollinian and Dionysian spheres. And precisely such mediation or synthesis, according to Nietzsche, is effected by tragedy. We can see now how tragedy serves life. It is the art form that allows for the fullest self-affirmation. And here we return once more to the radical difference between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Listen to how Nietzsche himself puts this difference in the later preface:

I regret now that in those days I still lacked the courage (or immodesty?) to permit myself in every way an individual language of my own for such individual views and hazards — and that instead I tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations which were basically

at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste! What, after all did Schopenhauer think of tragedy? "That which bestows on everything tragic its peculiar elevating force" — he says in *The World as Will and Representation*, volume II, p. 495 — "is the discovery that the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is not worthy of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit — it leads to resignation."

How differently Dionysus spoke to me! How far removed I was from all this resignationism! (24)

It was precisely their ability to temper the Dionysian with the Apollinian that is said to have distinguished Greek culture from the barbarian cultures around it.

From all quarters of the ancient world — to say nothing here of the modern — from Rome to Babylon, we can point to the existence of Dionysian festivals which the bearded satyr, who borrowed his name and attributes from the goat, bears to Dionysus himself. In nearly every case these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty which always has seemed to me the real "witches brew." For some time, however, the Greeks were apparently perfectly insulated and guarded against the feverish excitement of these festivals, though knowledge of them must have come to Greece on all routes of land and sea; for the figure of Apollo, rising full of pride, held out the Gorgon's head to this grotesquely uncouth Dionysian power — and really could not have countered any more dangerous force. It is in Doric art that this majestically rejecting attitude of Apollo is immortalized. (39)

Note how much here recalls Marcuse, but there is also an important difference. Like Freud, Nietzsche recognizes a need for the repression of our instincts. There is a sense in which Apollinian Greek culture is profoundly repressive. In the Doric state Apollinian illusion triumphs over Dionysian reality. And as Sparta illustrates: that triumph entails a great deal of repression.

A question must be raised at this point: is this Doric culture not an overly aesthetic, dishonest, repressive culture, which stands in need of a critique not altogether unlike that Marcuse directs at modern culture? Why does Nietzsche not plead, like Marcuse, for a more wholehearted return to the Dionysian? One reason is Nietzsche's Schopenhauerian reading of the Dionysian sphere. Here, Nietzsche tells us, is what Greek folk wisdom has to say about life:

"There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable thing for

man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke into these words: "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is — to die soon." (42)

Were one to listen to this wisdom of Silenus, one would be well on one's way towards becoming a Schopenhauerian saint. But the Greeks refused to listen to Silenus. Before the darkness that finds expression in Silenic wisdom they placed the shining world of the Olympians, itself an artistic, Apollinian construction. The human will to live here triumphs over the wisdom of Silenus and inverts it. And yet the Dionysian sphere cannot be banished, without banishing something essential about our own being. We need an art that is not only Apollinian, like Homer's, but also Dionysian. That is to say, we need tragedy.

## 24. Redemption and Tragedy

### 1

Last time I spoke of Nietzsche's distinction between Apollo and Dionysus. I pointed out that to understand Nietzsche's turn to tragedy, we have to keep in mind the shortcomings of both. A purely Apollinian state of mind loses touch with reality. Apollinian art substitutes for reality beautiful illusion, as we do when we dream. In this sense the aesthetic approach in its entirety, as I have discussed it, is Apollinian. A purely Dionysian state, on the other hand, would destroy the individual, drown the individual in the Heraclitean river — Nietzsche points to getting drunk, to the Dionysian orgy. This is to say: human beings can truly affirm themselves only by saying yes to both, to individuality and to reality, to both Apollo and Dionysus. This calls for a mediation, a synthesis of the Apollinian and Dionysian spheres.

Precisely such a synthesis, according to Nietzsche, is effected by tragedy. We can see now how tragedy serves life. It is the art form that allows for the fullest self-affirmation. And here, as I pointed out, we have a radical difference between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer understood tragedy as providing the “discovery that the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is not worthy of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit — it leads to resignation.” (24) Nietzsche on the other hand understood tragedy as the art form that allows for the fullest possible **affirmation of life**. It does so by teaching us to recognize and to affirm ourselves as will to power, lacking power.

### 2

Just in its complete self-affirmation, Nietzsche suggests, the spirit of tragedy is opposed to the spirit that has presided over the evolution of modern culture, to the now dominant reality principle — Marcuse, you will recall, understood it as the **performance principle**. Nietzsche would oppose to it a reality principle that we can call **tragic**. As we shall see, in many ways Nietzsche's critique of modernity resembles Marcuse's, but Nietzsche finds his heroes not in Orpheus or Narcissus, but in Oedipus and Prometheus,

But let me return to the *Birth of Tragedy*. The title is of course a bit misleading: what Nietzsche provides is not just an investigation into the **birth** of Greek tragedy, but

equally an analysis of its **death**, and also of its rebirth in the music drama of Richard Wagner. This death is associated with two persons: with **Euripides** and, even more, with **Socrates**. In blaming Socrates, Nietzsche is not so much attacking the historical Socrates, although he is doing that, too. But more significant is his attack on the Socratic tendency, which Nietzsche thinks fundamental to our civilization. Nietzsche's critique of Socrates is more fundamentally a critique of that tradition, or if you wish, of its underlying reality principle.

What is the **Socratic tendency** and why does it have to bring with it the **end of tragedy** and of tragic culture?

But let us consider first what Nietzsche has to say about Euripides? What made him exemplary and exciting to the dramatists who followed him was, according to Nietzsche, that he brought the spectator onto the stage. That is to say the subject matter of his art was drawn from everyday life. Euripides is thus portrayed by Nietzsche as the realist among the three great tragedians. That interpretation would seem to have been influenced by the portrayal of Euripides that Aristophanes gives us, especially in *The Frogs*.<sup>86</sup>

Aristophanes' Euripides proclaims the **democratic** character of his tragedy; he claims to have taught all the town **to talk with freedom**.

I put things on the stage that came from daily life and business.  
Where men could catch me if I tripped, could listen without dizziness  
To things they knew, and judge my art. I never crashed and lightened  
And bullied people's sense out; nor tried to keep them frightened  
With Magic Swans and Aethiop knight, loud barb and clanging vizor. (969)

And a bit later

This was the kind of lore I brought  
To school my town in ways of thought --  
I mingled reasoning with my art  
And shrewdness, till I fired their heart  
To brood, to think things through and through;  
And rule their houses better, too. (970)

As the Dionysus of the play then points out, the Athenian who had gone through the school of Euripides ceased to be a

Religious, unsuspecting fool,  
And happy in a sheeplike way. (970)

Euripides appears here rather as a representative of the Enlightenment, Nietzsche suggests:

The spectator now actually saw and heard his double on the Euripidean stage, and rejoiced that he could talk so well. But this joy was not all; one could even learn from Euripides how to speak oneself. He prides himself upon this in his contest with Aeschylus: from him the people have learned how to observe, debate, and draw conclusions according to the rules of art and with the cleverest sophistries. (77)

We can speak of a profanation of tragedy. One could perhaps liken this to the profanation of medieval painting by the Renaissance, which finds its expression in the turn to representation and the abandonment of the idealizing gold background. To use a metaphor, the Euripidean tragedy had lost the gold background of the older tragedy, represented there by the chorus, which should perhaps also be understood as an idealizing, metaphorical device. And we also meet with an insistence on realism, on the probable. The gods are psychologized. The individual psyche is substituted for the sacred:

With this gift, with all the brightness and dexterity of his critical thinking, Euripides had sat in the theatre and striven to recognize in the masterpieces of his great predecessors, as in paintings that have become dark, feature after feature, line after line. And here he had experienced something which should not surprise anyone initiated into the deeper secrets of Aeschylean tragedy. He observed something incommensurable in every feature and in every line, a certain deceptive distinctness and at the same time an enigmatic depth, indeed an infinity in the background. (80)

Euripides exchanges this divine perspective for one that is merely human.

However we judge Nietzsche's interpretation of Euripides, he does seem to sketch the place of an art that has subordinated itself to reason: the place of art in the modern age

And how dubious the solution of the ethical problems remains to him! How questionable the treatment of the myths! How unequal the distribution of good and bad fortune! Even in the language of the Old Tragedy there was much he found offensive, or at least enigmatic; especially he found too much pomp for simple affairs, too many tropes and monstrous expressions to suit the plainness of the characters. So he sat in the theater,

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<sup>86</sup> Aristophanes. *The Frogs*, trans. Gilbert Murray, *The Complete Greek Drama*, ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1938), vol. II, pp. 919-999.

pondering uneasily. And as a spectator he confessed to himself that he did not understand his great predecessors. (80-81)

### 3

If Euripides differed from his two great predecessors, Aeschylus and Sophocles, in having brought the spectator onto the stage, this does not mean that he was therefore more popular than they were. Quite the opposite. The public tended to prefer the old tragedy. But then they were not the spectators he really cared about; these, Nietzsche suggests, were first of all he **himself as spectator and Socrates**. What links the two?

That the Greeks did indeed link the two we sense in the conservative Aristophanes, who pokes fun at them both. They are blamed for the fact that the Athenians had lost their mettle, that the spirit which won the battles of Marathon and Salamis had passed away. Socrates, Nietzsche tells us, was rumored to have helped Euripides write his plays and he is said to have gone to the theater only when a new play by Euripides was being performed; the two names are associated in the Delphic pronouncement which declared Socrates the wisest of the Greeks, Euripides the second, and Sophocles the third, Sophocles, who, as Nietzsche points out, boasted that, while Aeschylus did the right thing, he Sophocles knew why he did it. The emphasis on knowledge guiding poetic practice is decisive here. The Delphic pronouncement expressed the prestige that was now being accorded to knowledge. A new reality principle begins to announce itself here.

The most acute word, however, about this new and unprecedented value set on knowledge and insight was spoken by Socrates when he found that he was the only one who acknowledged to himself that he knew **nothing**, whereas in his critical peregrinations through Athens he had called on the greatest statesmen, orators, poets, and artists, and had everywhere 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 the core of the Socratic tendency. With it Socratism condemns existing art as it condemns existing ethics. Wherever Socratism turns its searching eyes it sees lack of insight and the power of illusion; and from this lack it infers the essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists. Basing himself on this point, Socrates conceives it to be his duty to correct existence: all alone, with an expression of irreverence and superiority, as the precursor of an altogether

different culture, art, and morality, he enters a world, to touch whose very hem would give us the greatest happiness. (87)

4

Nietzsche calls the Greeks *the chariot-drivers of every subsequent culture*, that is to say Greek culture has provided the heroes that subsequent culture imitated. Socrates is one of these. He is the model of the theoretical man.

In order to vindicate the dignity of such a leader's position for Socrates, too, it is enough to recognize in him a type of existence unheard of before him: the type of theoretical man whose significance and aim it is our next task to try to understand. Like the artist, the theoretical man finds an infinite delight in whatever exists, and this satisfaction protects him against the practical ethics of pessimism with its Lynceus eyes that shine only in the dark. Whenever the truth is uncovered, the artist will always cling with rapt gaze to what still remains covering even after such uncovering; but the theoretical man enjoys and finds satisfaction in the discarded covering and finds the highest object of his pleasure in the process of an ever happy uncovering that succeeds through his own efforts. (94)

The artist is content with beautiful appearance. Theoretical man, on the other hand wants to penetrate appearance, wants to get to the bottom of things. Just this desire Nietzsche questions. One thing pre-Socratic Greek culture can teach us is, in the words of *The Gay Science*,

to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial — *out of profundity*... Are we not, precisely in this respect, Greeks? Adorers of forms, of tones, of words, and therefore — *artists*?<sup>87</sup>

Art is content with appearance. It lets it be. This ability to let things be presupposes a certain renunciation. No longer does the artist insist on being, as Descartes put it, the master and possessor of nature. So understood all genuine art has something of tragedy about it. It is born of a will to power that recognizes its own lack of power, recognizes that in the end it will never master reality.

Science, on the other hand, wants to seize reality. Theory, as Nietzsche presents it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is possessed of a will to power that wants to appropriate reality, to comprehend it. It fails to recognize the human being's final impotence to overpower reality. Science covers up that impotence. Over its progress presides the

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<sup>87</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, p. 38.



profound illusion that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being, but even of correcting it. (95)

The latter suggests that Nietzsche understands modern science and even more technology as the triumph of the Socratic reality principle.

Science is said by Nietzsche to be governed by a deep-seated illusion. Note what that illusion demands: the human capacity to know is made the measure of reality. **What is real is what I can grasp** or comprehend. But I can comprehend only what has a certain hardness and endures. **Reality is understood in opposition to time.** It is easy to see that what supports this deep-seated illusion is what Nietzsche came to call the spirit of revenge. The spirit of revenge bids us think being against time. But if, as Nietzsche is convinced, reality and temporality cannot be divorced, then a metaphysics that thinks being against time even as it claims to seize the essence of reality has to alienate us from reality. That Nietzsche's Socrates resembles Descartes should be evident.

## 5

Inseparable from the Socratic project is the faith in the power of reason to lead us to happiness.

By contrast with ... practical pessimism, Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to knowledge and to insight the power of a panacea, while understanding error as the evil par excellence. To fathom the depths and to separate true knowledge from appearance and error, seemed to Socratic man the noblest, even the only human vocation. And since Socrates, this mechanism of concepts, judgments, and inferences has been esteemed as the highest occupation and as the most admirable gift of nature, above all other capacities. Even the most sublime ethical deeds, the stirrings of pity, self-sacrifice, heroism, and that calm sea of the soul, so difficult to attain, which the Apollinian Greek called *sophrosune*, were derived from the dialectic of knowledge by Socrates and his like-minded successors, down to the present, and accordingly designated as teachable. (97)

But this optimism in reason's power to grasp the essence of reality and to guide human beings to happiness must in the end undermine itself. Reason itself calls such optimism into question, and here Nietzsche is thinking first of all of Kant and

Schopenhauer as critics of the claims of reason to render us the masters and possessors of reality and thus to lead us toward ever greater happiness.

But science, spurred on by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly towards its limits, where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points; and while there is no telling how this circle could ever be surveyed completely, noble and gifted men nevertheless reach, e'er half their time and inevitably such boundary points on the periphery from which one gazes into what defies illumination.

When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail [Nietzsche is thinking here of Kant's antinomies] — suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured needs art as a protection and remedy. (97 - 98)

Nietzsche obviously welcomes this tragic insight, terrifying as it is and much as it needs art for a remedy. This presupposes that he understands the Socratic spirit and its reality principle as tending towards disaster precisely because it raises the false expectation that by just being reasonable we can indeed render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature and assure universal happiness.

Now we must not hide from ourselves what is concealed in the womb of this Socratic culture: optimism with its delusion of limitless power. We must not be alarmed if the fruits of this optimism ripen — if society, leavened to the very lowest strata by this kind of culture, gradually begins to tremble with wanton agitations and desires, if the belief in the earthly happiness of all, if the belief in the possibility of such a general intellectual culture changes into the threatening demand for earthly happiness. (111)

Socratic optimism generates the idea of paradise regained, the idea that what the ethics of satisfaction demands not only can, but should be made available to all. This is indeed Marcuse's dream. If Nietzsche is right, and on this point he agrees with Schopenhauer, this dream conflicts with the human condition and he credits Kant and Schopenhauer with having shown the limits that are set to knowledge and the desire for happiness:

The extraordinary courage and wisdom of Kant and Schopenhauer have succeeded in gaining the most difficult victory, the victory over the optimism concealed in the essence of logic — an optimism that is the basis of our culture. While this optimism, resting on apparently unobjectionable eternal verities, had believed that all the riddles of the universe could be known and fathomed, and had treated space, time and causality as entirely unconditional laws of the most universal validity, Kant showed that these really served only to elevate the mere phenomenon, the work of maya, to the position of the

sole and highest reality, as if it were the innermost and true essence of things, thus making impossible any knowledge of this essence, in Schopenhauer's words, lulling the sleeper still more soundly asleep. (112)

But why is it important to know that what science investigates is only the world of phenomena, that science gives us no insight into things in themselves? After all, is it not precisely the world of phenomena that matters? Why should we care about the depth? Should Nietzsche not apply modernity what he said about the Greeks? "Those Greeks," he had said, *were* "superficial — **out of profundity.**"... But are our scientists "not, precisely in this respect, Greeks"? Why is it important to oppose to the reality principle governing science a deeper, more encompassing one?

A first answer to this question is suggested already by Kant. The world of phenomena that science investigates, according to Kant, knows nothing of values or for that matter of freedom, and that is to say of persons. Of course, persons and their behavior, too, can be investigated as any object can be investigated. But such investigation will never understand persons as persons, as complicated robots with even more complicated computer brains perhaps, but not as persons. Nor will it have room for value, as Wittgenstein recognized in the *Tractatus*. Freedom and values have no place on the map of science. The reality principle presiding over science leads to nihilism. **Socratic optimism**, as Nietzsche understands it, **culminates in nihilism**. I accept this claim and would add that this is precisely why modern culture, shaped by such optimism, has required the aesthetic for a complement. In this sense **the aesthetic approach and the ruling reality principle belong together**. Art provides fictions of meaning, but as the word "fictions" suggests, the turn to the aesthetic is understood here as turn away from reality, a turn towards illusion. **The aesthetic approach** as I have analyzed it in this course **is incapable of giving birth to a new reality principle**. But just this is what Nietzsche asks of art.

That Kant himself knew that nature as discussed in the First Critique should not be equated with reality, and that is to say also that experience as discussed in the First Critique should not be equated with experience, is shown by the need he felt to write the Second Critique. But is **practical reason** able to establish the worth and meaning of human life? Can we even make sense of a pure practical reason? Just this Schopenhauer has taught Nietzsche, and us, to question. Nietzsche recognized that **all meaning finally had to be grounded in our affective life, above all in eros**. It is the downgrading of the

affects that he holds against the Socratic tradition. Socrates insisted that *established ethics* be given a firmer foundation in reason, but reason Nietzsche insists is incapable of providing such a foundation.

## 6

We do indeed find some recognition of the final inadequacy of the Socratic project in Plato's account of the life of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* Plato tells of Evenus, a poet, who has heard that Socrates, awaiting his death in prison, has turned to the writing of verse and music. He asks Cebes about the rumor and Cebes in turn checks it with Socrates. Socrates answers that there is indeed something to the story: he had had a recurrent dream that always told him that he should cultivate and make music. Hitherto, Socrates explains, he had thought that he had been engaged in making the right kind of music when engaging others in conversation, that the dream was just exhorting him to continue his pursuit of philosophy. But now, that he is facing death, he is uneasy about that interpretation. Could it be that the dream meant the popular music rather than philosophy? The delay of the return of Apollo's sacred ship from Delos has given him a bit of extra time, which he spends composing a hymn to Apollo and by putting some of Aesop's fables into verse.

The voice of the Socratic dream vision is the only sign of any misgivings about the limits of logic: Perhaps — thus he must have asked himself — what is unintelligible to me is not necessarily unintelligent? Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science? (93)

Nietzsche finds an analogue in the life of Euripides:

In the evening of his life, Euripides himself propounded to his contemporaries the question of the value and the significance of this (the Socratic) tendency, using myth. Is the Dionysian entitled to exist at all? Should it not be forcibly uprooted from Hellenic soil? Certainly, the poet tells us, if only that were possible; his most intelligent adversary — like Pentheus in the *Bacchae* — is unwittingly enchanted by him, and in his enchantment runs to meet his fate. (81)

The play is curious. One cannot but sympathize with Pentheus who sees in the anarchic potential of Dionysiac frenzy a threat to the establishment, to the state. And yet the Dionysian power he battles proves stronger than his measure. In the end he is torn to pieces by his own mother in just such a frenzy.

But if indeed both Euripides and Socrates came to recognize the one-sidedness of Socratic culture, such recognition came too late. With the privileging of reason art had lost its religious, mythical significance. With Euripides art comes to be entertainment — the aesthetic conception of art, with Plato art becomes an edifying discourse, a moralizing tale. Interesting in this connection is Nietzsche's suggestion that the Platonic dialogue is the Aesopian fable raised to its highest power, an interpretation that invites one to read the reference to Aesop in the *Phaedo* somewhat differently: Socrates could then be seen as pointing ahead to Plato. But more important is that in the wake of the Socratic privileging of reason, art comes to be caught between an aesthetic and a moralizing function. To the extent that the Socratic spirit presides over the reality principle of the modern world, Hegel's famous pronouncement, that art in its highest sense belongs to the past, would seem to be correct. Art in its highest sense preserves the aura of myth

Nietzsche is unwilling to accept the finality of Hegel's judgment. Such unwillingness leads him to attempt to take a step beyond the Socratic reality principle and that means also beyond the aesthetic approach.

## 25. Beauty and Truth

### 1

I would like to begin this next to last lecture with a quote from *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche writes there: “we are all *afraid* of the truth.”<sup>88</sup> It is important to keep in mind this statement when one reads the many passages in Nietzsche where he appears to question claims to truth. Could it perhaps be that insistence on truth all too often is born of a fear of truth?

But let me return to the statement: **we are all afraid of the truth**. Fear distorts our understanding of reality. This theme of a fear of truth is hinted at already in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche speaks of the fear to face up to the wisdom of Silenus, which, as we saw, turned out to be pretty much the gloomy wisdom of Schopenhauer: that happiness we most deeply want is denied to us by our own being; life is full of pointless suffering; there is no higher meaning to redeem that suffering. In the end death will overtake us all. The Greeks responded to this truth, Nietzsche seems to say, by covering it up: *aware of the terrors and horrors of existence*, they had to place before themselves *the shining fantasy of the Olympians*. **Aesthetic illusion is here seen as a remedy for suffering**, and also an evasion of the truth. Aesthetic illusion is placed in opposition to the truth. But does this not place *The Birth of Tragedy* in the tradition of aesthetics? Think of Schopenhauer. Is this then to say that *The Birth of Tragedy* does not really offer an alternative to the aesthetic approach, but falls right into it?

To be sure, there is this decisive difference. **Aesthetic illusion** in *The Birth of Tragedy* is interpreted **not** so much as a **leave-taking from reality**, but as a **transfiguration of reality**. The gods of the Greeks are humanity transfigured. But is reality so transfigured not still a covering up of reality as it really is? Is Nietzsche then saying that, to live, the human being must cover up the truth about reality and about himself? Is what allows us to live a life that to us seems meaningful not some self-deception, some **bad faith** or other? — And perhaps one should ask here: what is so bad about self-deception? **Why is bad faith bad?** Is it not perhaps better than no faith at all? Why the insistence on **truth**?

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<sup>88</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I am so Clever,” 4, trans, Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 246.

The later self-critical preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche suggests that it was precisely his own insistence on truth that led him to become dissatisfied with that book.

To say it once more: today I find it an impossible book: I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, mistrustful even of the propriety of proof, a book for initiates... (19)

But are Nietzsche's later books, more especially, his *Zarathustra*, written with the will to **logical cleanliness**? Does it attempt to **prove** its claims?

## 2

What, e.g., about its central thought, the thought of the **eternal recurrence**? With it Nietzsche meant to inaugurate a changed attitude to life and to reality, **a new reality principle**, as it made quite clear in that passage in the *Gay Science*, where this thought is first expressed, here still in highly tentative form: the passage is found in a section named "The Greatest Stress" (341):

How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, "this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurable small or great in your life must return to you — all in the same succession and sequence — even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it a dust grain of dust." Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "you are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly." If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you, as you are, or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?" might weigh upon your actions as the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate confirmation and seal.<sup>89</sup>

In the *Gay Science* the eternal recurrence is put forward only hypothetically, as a fiction, in the mode of: what if... (Is it possible to think of the eternal recurrence as standing in

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<sup>89</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 341, trans. Walter Kaufmann.

the same relationship to temporal reality as the Greek gods stand to humanity?) Accepting the eternal recurrence as truth would indeed have to change you, perhaps crush you. At any rate: it would affect you. Consider what that thought claims: first of all that nothing would be lost. Everything, not only every joy, but every pain, every seemingly pointless suffering, would return. The past's victory over the future would prove illusory. To welcome the eternal recurrence one would have **to love life**, despite all that may argue against such love. A pessimist like Schopenhauer would therefore **be crushed by the thought**. That thought can be born only by someone who loves life. As Zarathustra makes clear, it is indeed a thought that, born of the love of life, is to awaken and strengthen the love of life. The question is whether it is more than a **poetic fiction**: love of life can lead the lover into self-deception just as readily as the terror of time can distort the sight of the terrified. Does the pursuit of truth not demand that we free ourselves from such affects?

In *Zarathustra* the thought of the eternal recurrence is offered as an answer to the terror of time. In this connection it is worth noting that the immediately following section in *The Gay Science* is virtually identical with the beginning of *Zarathustra*. In *The Gay Science* it is entitled: "The Tragedy Begins." The beginning of *Zarathustra* is the beginning of a new tragedy. With his *Zarathustra*, and more especially with the doctrine of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche attempted to **inaugurate a new tragic reality principle**. But is it more than a fantastic hypothesis? And can such a poetic construct found a new reality principle?

### 3

How are we to understand that doctrine? Is it true? A poetic vision? To whom is this doctrine addressed? In *Zarathustra* we are given an answer, and as Nietzsche was to add in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche is here describing his perfect reader:

To you, the bold searchers, researchers, and whoever embarks with cunning sails on terrible seas — to you, drunk with riddles, glad of the twilight, whose souls flutes lure astray to every whirlpool, because you do not want to grope along a thread with cowardly hand; and where you can guess you hate to deduce... (267-268)

This invites the same objections Nietzsche himself made to *The Birth of Tragedy* in the later preface: isn't Nietzsche here once more disdainful of proof, distrustful even of the propriety of proof?



But must not anyone who would overthrow the established reality principle be disdainful of proof? For what does it mean to prove something? To do so we have to be in possession of what we take to be firmly established truths. Someone who hopes to prove something has to stand on firm land, so to speak. But Zarathustra is at sea, addressing sailors. That is to say, he does not stand on firm land, has become uncertain of where he is and where he should go. Both the traditional reality principle and the traditional ethics have become questionable to him. He is searching for a new reality principle.

It should indeed be evident that no radically new reality principle can be established by a readily understood and accepted argument, for such an argument would have to base itself on the already established and taken for granted. **All radical questioning and innovation must leave proof behind.** As the product of such radical thinking the eternal recurrence cannot be deduced, but must be guessed at. The discourse that points towards a new reality principle will have something of the **riddle** about it. We are asked to **guess**?

#### 4

In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche suggests that the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is born of **courage, love, and honesty**. But can love and honesty really be reconciled, at least love as Nietzsche understands it? Love makes blind, they say. Certainly this would seem to be true of Nietzsche's love. For how does Nietzsche understand love?

Love, according to Nietzsche **idealizes**, it **perfects**. Love **transfigures** the beloved, makes it perfect whole. In this sense love of humanity gave birth to the Greek gods. To love all of temporal existence is therefore to transfigure it, to make it perfect, whole. But how is possible to think linear time, which seems to be stretching endlessly into past and future, as a **whole**? By thinking it as a **ring**. And rightly understood the thought of the eternal recurrence does not say that everything will happen again and again. Strange as it may seem, the recurrence of the **self-same** has to mean that time is a circle, a ring. Everything happens only once.

But is such idealization not born precisely of an inability to accept reality as it is? Does love not here defend us against the truth? Nietzsche suggests that love idealizes. The question is whether such idealization must not do violence to reality.

Nietzsche would have us understand the thought of the eternal recurrence as a thought that allows us to overcome the spirit of revenge and allows for the most complete affirmation of being. As the teacher of the eternal recurrence Zarathustra would then play the part of the ancient tragedians.

But in his narrative Nietzsche includes an important detail that makes us wonder: Zarathustra gets bitten by the **tarantula**, which is said to be the embodiment of the spirit of revenge; and Zarathustra is said to become ill. It is this still **not yet healthy Zarathustra**, who teaches the doctrine of the eternal recurrence. Nietzsche himself thus offers the possibility of understanding the doctrine of the eternal recurrence as a doctrine born of the spirit of revenge, of the inability to forgive ourselves our subjection to time. This is to ask whether there is not still too much Plato, too much Schopenhauer, too much Wagner in that thought. Is Zarathustra perhaps closer to Wagner than to Aeschylus? That is to ask also: is Zarathustra to be understood as someone who with the doctrine of the eternal recurrence overcomes the spirit of revenge or is that teaching subject to the spirit of revenge? The answer is not easy.

The story Nietzsche tells undoubtedly tries to present Zarathustra as someone who step by step overcomes the spirit of revenge, who overcomes Schopenhauerian nausea, Schopenhauerian pity, the two obstacles that according to Nietzsche stand in the way of a full affirmation. But does he really arrive at such affirmation? Consider in this connection "The Other Dancing Song" and "The Seven Seals" with which the Third Part concludes.

One!

O man, take care!

Two!

What does the deep midnight declare?

Three!

"I was asleep--

Four!

"From a deep dream I woke and swear:

Five!

"The world is deep,

Six!

"Deeper than day had been aware.

Seven!

"Deep is its woe;

Eight!  
 "Joy, deeper yet than agony:  
 Nine!  
 "Woe implores: Go!  
 Ten!  
 "But all joy wants eternity --  
 Eleven!  
 "Wants deep, wants deep eternity."  
 Twelve! (338)

Schopenhauerian **woe** gives way to the positive affect of **joy**, where we should keep in mind that "joy" does not quite capture the meaning of the German **Lust**, which has overtones of desire — think of the English "lust" — and thus of eros. **Eros wants eternity**. With this we return to the *Symposium*. The question is whether this desire for eternity leads eros to leap over time, leap over reality. **Does eros demand that we surrender our commitment to truth and honesty?**

## 5

Every section of "The Seven Seals" ends with the same lines:

Oh, how should I not lust after eternity and after the nuptial ring of rings, the  
 ring of recurrence?  
 Never yet have I found the woman with whom I wanted children, unless it be  
 this woman whom I love, for I love you, O eternity.  
*For I love you, O eternity!* (340)

This makes it clear that it is not time that Zarathustra loves, but eternity. But is this not the old and quite traditional Platonic theme that Nietzsche himself had analyzed as born of the spirit of revenge. Zarathustra, too, it seems, finds it impossible to make his peace with the covetousness of time, so he retreats to eternity. And must this retreat not bring with it a downgrading of all that ties us into time, of care, anticipation, suffering, and even of love, at least of that love which wants to embrace and looks beyond the lover to the offspring of love, to the still to be born children? So the wedding, too, is displaced, sublimated. Zarathustra (and presumably Nietzsche himself) professes never to have found the woman of whom he wanted children. That kind of love gets sublimated into a love of eternity. But can eternity bear children?

Finally it would seem to be himself Zarathustra wants, not children. Throughout *Zarathustra* we encounter Zarathustra's inability to affirm himself as part of some larger

whole. He remains subject to pride in a very traditional sense, close to the circlemen of Aristophanes. To test that claim consider "The Drunken Song" of the Fourth Part, which offers an interpretation of the "Dancing Song."

Woe entreats: Go! Away, woe! But all that suffers wants to live, that it may become ripe and joyous and longing — longing for what is farther, higher, brighter. "I want heirs" — thus speaks all that suffers; "I want children, I do not want myself."

Joy, however, does not want heirs, or children — joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same. (434)

**This eros is the eros of Narcissus.** The desire to have children is now subordinated to self-affirmation. Nietzsche, too, would appear to belong with those who end up sacrificing becoming to being and who thereby lose touch with reality. Is his Zarathustra not to be counted among the inventors of afterworlds? Is he in the end not offering us once more only an aesthetic escape, and I am using aesthetic here in a sense that suggests illusion, mere art.

## 6

Nietzsche remains caught, and indeed suspects himself of remaining caught, between **honesty** and **seductive illusion**. He never quite becomes the music making Socrates he envisions as his ideal. He never quite is able to escape Wagner, the master of bad faith as Nietzsche came to understand him. The struggle with Wagner finds striking expression in the fourth part of *Zarathustra*, in the figure of the Old Magician, who is also a caricature of both Zarathustra and Nietzsche himself, as he is certainly a caricature of Wagner. Listen to the Old Magician's "Song of Melancholy":

In dim, de-lighted air  
When the dew's comfort is beginning  
To well down to the earth,  
Unseen, unheard —  
For tender is the footwear of  
The comforter dew, as of all that gently comfort —  
Do you remember then, remember, hot heart,  
How you thirsted once  
For heavenly tears and dripping dew,  
Thirsting, scorched and weary,  
While on yellow paths in the grass  
The glances of the evening sun were running

Maliciously around you through black trees —  
 Blinding, glowing glances of the sun, mocking your pain?

"Suitor of truth?" they mocked me; "you?"  
 No! Only poet!  
 An animal, cunning, preying, prowling,  
 That must lie,  
 That must knowingly, willingly lie:  
 Lusting for prey,  
 Colorfully masked,  
 A mask for itself,  
 Prey for itself —  
 This, the suitor of truth?  
 No! Only fool! Only poet!  
 Only speaking colorfully,  
 Only screaming colorfully out of fools' masks,  
 Climbing around on mendacious word bridges,  
 On colorful rainbows,  
 Between false heavens  
 And false earths,  
 Roaming, hovering —  
 Only fool! Only poet! (409-410)

Life itself mocks the old magician. Does it also mock Zarathustra? Is Zarathustra, too, only fool, only poet? I pointed out that the Old Magician is a figure of both Nietzsche and Wagner. Whenever Nietzsche criticizes Wagner he also struggles with a side of himself: at issue is the role illusion and bad faith have and should have in our lives. Is Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* with its doctrine of the eternal recurrence more than a poetic narrative that finally cannot lay claim to truth? Is the author of Zarathustra in the end only a poet, not the suitor of truth he would love to be? Or does Nietzsche help point the way towards an art beyond the aesthetic approach, where, by so doing, he would inevitably also be opening philosophy once more to poetry, giving a new content to the image of the music-making Socrates.

## 26. Conclusion: Postmodern Reflections

### 1

As I suggested in the very first lecture, in this course I have made an attempt to **call into question certain key assumptions commonly made about art, assumptions that underlie what I have called the aesthetic approach. These assumptions turn on the relationship between beauty and art, on one side, and love, on the other.** And this approach, I have tried to show, is but the other side of a distinctly modern understanding of reality, an understanding that has helped to define the shape of the world we live in and the place of art in that world. To question the aesthetic approach is inevitably also to question modernity, the reality principle presiding over modernity. This is why this course concludes with some **postmodern reflections**.

### 2

In the *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche claims that Socratic culture leaves no place for art in its highest sense. With his claim he restates a point Hegel had advanced in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*: “art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past.”<sup>90</sup> Note that Nietzsche and Hegel speak of what the latter considers art on the side of its highest destiny, i. e, art that offers a **world orientation**, that helps to establish and support what Marcuse we calls a reality principle. **Such art has a mythic quality.** Homer and Greek tragedy are art in this sense. So is the art of the Middle Ages. **Art and the sacred are here linked.** The modern world no longer seems to allow for art in this sense. It has severed art and the sacred, had to sever it, because of its ruling reality principle, which makes our ability to comprehend the measure of reality. Or, to put the same point differently, **the modern world no longer either needs or has a place for myth.** To the extent that the rule of the established reality principle goes unchallenged, the main function of art becomes that of **entertainment**, perhaps entertainment of the most refined or elevated sort, but entertainment nonetheless. What I have called the aesthetic approach is in keeping with this **marginalization of art**. So is its divorce of beauty from love.

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<sup>90</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. Michael Inwood (London: Penguin Books, 193), p. 13.

But should we be troubled by this marginalization of art? Should we not insist rather that, just as science has only in relatively recent times come into its own, so has art? Art now is only for art's sake. These two developments would seem to supplement one another.

Many, no doubt, will object with Nietzsche and Heidegger that, contrary to what is claimed by the aesthetic approach, the development that lets art be only for art's sake leads art away from its essence.

But how are we to understand that **essence**? What do we ask for when we ask for the essence of something? To ask for the essence of art is to ask for what it is that makes something a work of art. But that search for the essence of art is by its very nature circular. For where are we to look for the essence of art? In works of art, of course! But how do we know what is to count as a work of art unless we already know what art is? And to know that, must we not have grasped its essence? The truth or falsity of the aesthetic conception of art cannot be decided by looking at art. Is it even meaningful to speak here of truth and falsity? Much of what today is called art and exhibited in museums would not have been considered art 200 years ago. Consider, e. g., what you can see in this year's Whitney Biennial. Is all of that art? In a way that question receives and answer by the fact that it is exhibited in the Whitney Museum. We might thus want to say something like: art is whatever the current art world is willing to accept as art. This has been called the institutional theory of art. But some visitors appear to have experience what they saw differently, calling it trash or worse. Are they clearly wrong? Can we appeal to some essence of art to settle the matter?

When we say something like "A is the essence of art," **we express what we take to matter about art.** And what we take to matter about art, and indeed about anything, will inevitably be bound up with the concrete way in which we exist and want to exist in the world. In this sense the aesthetic conception of art, as I have tried to show in preceding lectures, can be understood as a function of the modern world. And all questioning of the aesthetic approach is bound up with a critique of what could be called the shape of the modern world.

## 3

I have suggested that there is a sense in which the modern period has witnessed the emancipation of art from what is extrinsic to it. The beautiful has thus divorced itself from the sacred. That art loses a great deal of its former significance when it loses its connection with religion is evident. But those committed to the aesthetic approach will insist that art does not lose anything that really belongs to it. And must not religion, too, insist on such a divorce? From the very beginning Biblical religion has struggled to keep its proper distance from art.

What I have called the aesthetic approach is thus linked to what we can call a splintering of the modern world, a splintering that means inevitably also a splintering of individuals and their lives. Phrases such as "war is war," "business is business," "art for art's sake" belong into this context.<sup>91</sup> Thus when we go to a museum or a concert we leave behind the concerns and burdens that are part of everyday life. The term *aesthetic distance* is telling.

And is religious life today not marked by a similar distance? Religious life, too, seems to have separated itself from the whole of life; also from art. And must religion not insist on this distance to guard its own essence? From its very beginning Biblical religion is thus shadowed by iconoclasm. Think of Moses smashing the golden calf. Israel's God is invisible. That the marriage of art and Christian faith should have been an uneasy one is to be expected, given Christianity's valorization of the spirit, its understanding of the one invisible God, who suffers no other gods.

Modernity has inherited Christianity's suspicion of art. If we are no longer iconoclasts, this is because we no longer take the religious function of art seriously. Hegel forcefully makes this point:

We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, considerate kind, and the feelings which they stir within us require a higher test and a further confirmation. Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art.<sup>92</sup>

Nietzsche might have said: the Socratic spirit has suffocated art in what was once its highest sense. And are both not supported by the shape of our modern world?<sup>93</sup> Art in

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<sup>91</sup> See Hermann Broch, "Der Zerfall der Werte," *Essays*, vol. II, *Erkennen und Handeln* (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), p. 42.

<sup>92</sup> Hegel, p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> See Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1974, pp. 677-696.



what Hegel considers its "true sense" does indeed seem to be coming to an end, i. e., art understood as a privileged way of expressing the "deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind."<sup>94</sup> "Thought and reflection have" indeed "taken their flight above fine art," have left art behind.

The question remains: have they not left also the whole human being behind?

4

When I wrote *The Meaning of Modern Art* more than forty years ago I tried to point beyond modern art, to point out what art might be and become in the future. I gestured towards what I called then a **new realism**, an art that once again would discover — today I would say **re-present**, meanings that do not have their foundation in human freedom. Listening to these meanings, I observed, "takes modesty and patience, modesty because first man must recognize that he depends for meaning on something transcending his freedom, patience because we capture meaning only in fragments."<sup>95</sup> In this sense I concluded with a call for an art "content to explore the meanings of the world."<sup>96</sup> I don't consider this a pessimistic conclusion. I do take seriously Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. But though God may no longer call us, this does not mean that human beings are not called at all. To such a single world-transcendent meaning that could ground and integrate our little worldly meanings, I did and do claim, we today can no longer give a definite content, except in bad faith. But I do not consider this at all a pessimistic, but rather a life-affirming conclusion. I am deeply suspicious of the gap that is supposed to separate the many little meanings that are part of our usual dealings with persons and things from one great world-transcendent Meaning supposed to be necessary to ground the former.<sup>97</sup> I am suspicious of appeals to **transcendence** thus understood. To be sure, I too, insist that to live a full life, human beings must recognize that they depend for meaning on something transcending their freedom. But this transcendence is not to be understood in opposition to the world and to time. It is very much a worldly or, perhaps better, an **earthly or material transcendence**.

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<sup>94</sup> Hegel, p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 159.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

A word must be said about the word "transcendence." I call "transcendent" here what eludes our concepts and words. But in that sense we transcend ourselves precisely as embodied, temporal beings, where, as Nietzsche recognized, the body should not be placed in opposition to soul. With Nietzsche's Zarathustra I would rather say that **the self**, which Zarathustra calls both "body" and "a great reason, **"transcends the spirit,**" "your little reason." (146)

## 5

**Transcendence** and **self-transcendence** may of course and indeed must also be understood in a very different sense. To what I have called **material transcendence** I thus want to oppose a **formal, spiritual transcendence**. Let me try to explain what I have in mind: In reflection we transcend ourselves, raise ourselves beyond the here and now, the limits imposed on us by the body and the senses, which inevitably tie us to a particular point of view and thus to a particular perspective. Thinkers from Plato to Descartes have thus insisted that the soul cannot be assigned a place as readily as can the body. Such insistence captures something essential about human existence. It is this sort of self-transcendence that offers a key to a distinctly modern type of spirituality.

Consider for example this statement by the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart:

Yesterday as I sat yonder I said something that sounds  
incredible: "Jerusalem is as near to my soul as this place  
is." Indeed a point a thousand miles beyond Jerusalem  
is as near to my soul as my body is, and I am as sure of  
this as I am of being human, and it is easy to understand  
for learned priests. My soul is as young as the day it was created; yes, and much  
younger. I tell you, I should be ashamed if it were not younger tomorrow than it is today.

<sup>98</sup>

The soul is here placed beyond space and time. And being beyond space and time, it is no closer to one place than another, to one time than another. It transcends all space and time. For Eckhart to say that he "should be ashamed" if his soul were "not younger

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<sup>97</sup> See Karsten Harries, "Questioning the Question of the Worth of Life," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol.88, no. 11 (November 1991), pp. 684 - 690.

<sup>98</sup> Raymond B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart, A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 134. Translation revised.

tomorrow than it is today,” is to say that should be ashamed if he his spiritual life had not grown into an ever clearer realization of this essential transcendent self.

But while I admit the possibility and recognize the seductive power of such self-transcendence, I also am deeply suspicious of it. It seems to me to involve a profound self-alienation, even as it robs transcendence of all content so that it threatens to dissolve into nothing.

That there is very little that separates certain forms of medieval mysticism from modern atheism is shown by this text by one of Eckhart’s followers: the mystic Suso here tells us of someone, who, lost in meditation on a bright Sunday, sees an incorporeal image:

He began to ask: where do you come from?

It said: I did not come from anywhere.

He said: Tell me, what are you?

It said: I am nothing.

He said: What do you will?

It answered and said: I do not will.

He, however, said: This is a miracle! What are you called?

It said: I am called the wild that has no name (*daz namelos wilde*).

The disciple said: You may rightly be called the wild, for your words and answers are indeed wild. Answer me now one question: What is the goal of your insight?

It said: Unbound freedom.

The disciple said: what do you call unbound freedom?

It said: When a man lives entirely according to his own will, without anything other (*sunder anderheit*), without looking to before or after.<sup>99</sup>

How are we to understand this apparition? Is it a manifestation of God? Is it our own freedom that here speaks? Our power of self-transcendence is indeed such that it may lead us to discover an abyss within the self. That abyss is "the wild that has no name." The divine here becomes undistinguishable from an infinite, empty transcendence. Such an empty transcendence cannot provide human beings with a measure and thus leads to a new experience of radical freedom. This freedom again, acknowledging no measure, must degenerate into caprice.

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<sup>99</sup> Heinrich Seuse 9 e, *Das Buch der Wahrheit, Daz buechli der warheit*, ed. Loris Sturlese and Rüdiger Blumrich, intro. Loris Sturlese, trans. Rüdiger Blumrich, *Mittelhochdeutsch --Deutsch* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1993), pp. 56-57.

The medieval text is thus strangely close to the modern existentialist Sartre. Already in the fourteenth century we find a conception of freedom as radical as anything the existentialists were going to come up with much later, an understanding of transcendence that has to leave behind the sacred. Modern spirituality does indeed invite what Kierkegaard called a "**teleological suspension of the ethical.**" But this is an invitation I think we should resist. Kierkegaard's Abraham is no knight of any faith I think worth following.

## 7

I have suggested that we need to distinguish two kinds of transcendence: a **material or earthly** from a **formal or spiritual transcendence**. In the former case what is transcended is precisely that linguistic or conceptual space in which things must find their place if they are to be understood and comprehended. "Material transcendence" points in the same direction as the Kantian "thing-in-itself," which is present to us only as appearance. What invites talk of a thing in itself is the fact that, even if constituted by our language or concepts and as such appearance, whatever thus appears is not created by our understanding, but given. Inseparable from our experience of things is a sense of this **gift**, an awareness that our understanding is finite, and that means also that the reach of our words is limited. **Everything real** is infinitely complex and thus can never be fully translated into words. Like Kant's "aesthetic idea," it is "**inexponible.**" But this is to say that the real is given to us precisely as an aesthetic idea, that **the rift between thing and word, between reality and language cannot be closed**. Language, to be sure, opens human beings to reality. Yet language conceals even as it reveals. Where this essential concealment is forgotten, language cannot but replace reality with a false, merely linguistic reality. This is why any living religion needs art, especially art that does not rely just on words, say painting or architecture. To be sure, human being is, as Heidegger put it, essentially a dwelling in language. And to be at home in a language means inevitably also to be ruled by a particular reality principle. But the house of language is not a prison. Art may be understood as a way of opening the windows or doors of that house.

When I spoke in *The Meaning of Modern Art* of a new realism I meant to suggest that art has the power to recall us to what I have called material transcendence, to a sense

of the gift of reality. What puts us in touch with material transcendence, this transcendence within the visible, within the sensible, is first of all the body. Here it is important to keep in mind that the embodied self is also a caring, desiring, loving self. What it discloses is not just an assemblage of mute facts, but an inevitably meaningful configuration of objects. To be in the world is to be claimed in countless different ways by persons and things. What I call **material transcendence may thus not be reduced to the mute presence of things**. To be open to it is inevitably to be affected, moved, claimed. Material transcendence thus also refers to the **affective base** without which all our talk of values and divinities is ultimately groundless: idle talk.

## 8

Material transcendence seems to me a necessary, but not sufficient condition for what may be called **sacred transcendence**.<sup>100</sup> What it lacks is precisely that "unique power of integration" that has often been taken to be a defining attribute of the sacred. Sacred transcendence is material transcendence experienced as possessing an integrating power. Sacred art then means art understood as a re-presentation of material that even before taken up by some artist, "speaks" in some fashion, a re-presentation that understands itself as a response to divinity, to some higher, integrating power. Think of a temple built to honor Aphrodite. Sacred transcendence I thus define as material transcendence experienced as an integrating power. The beautiful and the sacred here are inseparable.

The modern understanding of reality has no room for the sacred. But I agree with Marcuse and Nietzsche when they challenge the modern reality principle, when they insist that the understanding of reality presupposed by our science and technology fails to do justice to reality as a whole, especially to human reality. And I agree with Nietzsche that the hegemony of that reality principle is supported not so much by good reasons, but by an affect, by the spirit of revenge, by a will to power that finds it difficult to acknowledge its own lack of power, that the metaphysical foundations of modern culture are called into question by philosophy itself. Recall in this connection Nietzsche's discussion of Kant and Schopenhauer as philosophers inaugurating a new tragic culture.

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<sup>100</sup> See Louis Dupré, "The Sacred as a Particular Category of Transcendence," *Transcendent Selfhood*, pp. 19 - 22.

I agree with Nietzsche once more when he insists on the **affective base of every reality principle**, that a change of reality principle requires a change of **affect**, a change of heart. And I also agree with Nietzsche when he recognizes that such a change of heart is not brought about by proofs, but by being touched in a special way, perhaps by another person, perhaps by suffering, perhaps by thoughts of future generations, perhaps by art, say by what we can call the special music of a discourse, by its poetry. In this sense we should take seriously the possibility of a music making Socrates. The image of the music making Socrates points beyond both the ruling reality principle and what I have called the aesthetic approach. Much art today thus struggles, refusing to be ruled by the aesthetic approach, to keep human beings open to this elusive dimension. Without such openness, without some experience of what we may call sacred transcendence, our existence becomes hollow.

I realize that I am leaving you with no more than pointers, but this course has come to an end. It will not be taught again.