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Art and the Sacred

Seminar Notes

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Religious and Sacred Art	17
3. The Modern Divorce of Beauty and the Sacred	36
4. Religious Kitsch	52
5. The Golden Calf	67
6. The Legacy of Alberti	83
7. Formal and Material Transcendence	96
8. Beauty and Aura	111
9. Beauty and Hope	127
10. Beauty and Love	146
11. Beauty and Faith	165
12. Nostalgia	183
13. Conclusion	200

1. Introduction

1

The title of this seminar is *Art and the Sacred: Untimely Meditations on the Need for Sacred Art*. Especially the subtitle needs explanation. It is meant to recall Nietzsche, who wrote his four untimely meditations to challenge the dominant spirit of his age. He was not telling his readers what they expected or wanted to hear. This, to be sure, is not to say that he was not telling them something they needed to hear. In that sense his untimely meditations were timely indeed.

What I have to say in this seminar may well strike you as similarly out of touch with the world we live in, which, it would seem, has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our modern lives. Art, too, has distanced itself from the sacred. Challenging that distance, I want to insist on the continued need for a sense of the sacred and for sacred art, especially for sacred architecture, and this indeed in a twofold sense: I want to claim that the sacred needs art, and especially architecture, if it is not to wither and that similarly art and architecture need the sacred. Untimely as they are, both claims invite challenge. In this seminar I shall develop that challenge to show how difficult it is to get around it. But despite so much that speaks against them, in the end I hope to develop some considerations that support my two claims.

2

Let me begin by saying a few words about what led me to offer this course now. I have reached a point in my career where I feel a need to gather together what I have thought over many years on various subjects. One of these subjects is the relationship of art and the sacred.

The topic has been with me since my student days. But perhaps it all started when I was 7. That was in 1944. The war had made Berlin a rather unpleasant place with almost nightly bombing raids. An incendiary bomb fell on our house, without doing much damage. My father was good at dealing with this sort of thing. By then he had decided that he wanted us to be conquered by the Americans. So he found us a place to await the end of the war in the Franconian Königshofen. Outside that small town is a small rococo pilgrimage church: Mariä Geburt, in the village of Ipthausen. It made a

deep impression, although “magical” may describe it better than “religious.” We were not at all a religious family, although (or perhaps rather because) my mother was the daughter of a Lutheran minister. Be this as it may, that church was the beginning of a life-long love affair with the Bavarian rococo. That love affair invites the charge of nostalgia. There does indeed seem to me to be a profound connection between religion and nostalgia that I shall explore in the closing sessions of this seminar.

But let me return to the church in Ipthausen. The impression of that first encounter with a rococo church was reinforced when after the war we settled in Munich and the religion teacher in the gymnasium I attended hiked with me and some of my classmates to another, this time much better known pilgrimage church, the Benedictine abbey church of Andechs. I was twelve at the time. My fascination with the rococo shows itself in two ink drawings I did at the time of the interiors of two rococo churches.



Karsten Harries, Rott am Inn (1950)

I must have been thirteen or so at the time. They are among the very few things of this period that I kept. Many years later that fascination led me to write *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (1983), supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship. It has established itself as the standard work on the subject, at least in the English speaking world. I reworked and expanded that book a bit a few years ago in a German version, which appeared in 2009 as *Die Bayerische Rokokokirche. Das Irrationale und das Sakrale*. The Bavarian rococo church continues to shape much of my thinking about the relationship of art and the sacred, as will become evident in the course of this seminar.

In this connection the subtitles of my two books on the rococo church are of some interest. I see the eighteenth century as a century in which the aesthetic understanding of art that came to preside over modern art definitively triumphed over another understanding that would tie art to religion. In the Bavaria of the eighteenth century this threshold becomes especially perspicuous. Counter-reformation and Enlightenment here collide in unusually illuminating fashion. Hence the subtitle: *Between Faith and Aestheticism*. The crossing of that threshold is intimately connected with the Enlightenment, which had to dismiss the religious art of the rococo as surrendering to irrationality. The Enlightenment's strident critique of the irrationality of the rococo is particularly instructive. Hence the subtitle of the German edition: *Das Irrationale und das Sakrale — The Irrational and the Sacred*. Enlightenment reason has no place for the Baroque sacred, as demonstrated so theatrically by the decision, made at the behest of Chaumette, the president of the French commune, to place, on the occasion of the festival of reason celebrated on November 10, 1793, the Goddess of Reason, personified by one Sophie Momoro, wife of the printer Antoine-François Momoro, another committed revolutionary, on the high altar of Notre Dame.

But my interest in art was not limited to looking at rococo churches. I had always been interested in drawing and painting. Art had long fascinated me. As a Yale undergraduate I thus took a course in free hand drawing with Josef Albers. So it is not surprising that soon after I begun teaching here at Yale, I should have taught a course on the philosophy of modern art. The notes for that course evolved into my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (1968).

My interest in the relationship of art and the sacred was shared by another philosopher here at Yale, Louis Dupré, who then was a member of the Religious Studies department. Many discussions with him followed, in the course of which some fundamental differences concerning the relationship of art and the sacred emerged. To work out these differences we decided to teach a joint seminar in the spring semester 1975. That seminar already had the title "Art and the Sacred". Many years later I summed up some of the results of that seminar in an article I wrote for the Festschrift for Louis Dupré and which I called "Art and the Sacred: Postscript to a Seminar."¹ But rereading my by now rather ragged notes for that seminar I decided that much here deserved reconsideration and a more careful working out.

I spoke of disagreements Dupré and I had concerning the relationship of art to the sacred. These disagreements will be apparent to anyone who attempts to reconcile what is asserted in my *The Meaning of Modern Art*² with Dupré's *magnum opus*, *The Other Dimension*.³ Let me briefly speak to these disagreements.

Many years have passed since I wrote my book on modern art, which, although still in print, in several ways now seems inadequate. Continuing work on Hegel and Heidegger has helped me to gain a clearer understanding of the "modern world" (an expression that, like "modern art," names here not so much the world we actually live in as an illuminating construct),⁴ and of the difficulties involved in any attempt to assign art a significant place in that world. If that "new realism" called for by the book's last chapter is to become a reality — and I continue to think it important that art, and not just art, move in this direction — it must be possible to take a step beyond the "modern world" as here described and leave behind the project that supports it, a project Sartre then helped me to interpret.

But such a step becomes impossible, if we agree, as I claim to do in that book — a claim I retracted a few years later in my introduction to the Japanese translation of the

¹ Karsten Harries, "Art and the Sacred: Postscript to a Seminar," *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modern: The Thought of Louis Dupré*, ed. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schnier, S. J. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 189-203.

² Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

³ Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972).

⁴ Cf. Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. xiii, fn 4.

book⁵ — with Sartre that the fundamental human project is to become like God, that "fundamentally man is the desire to be God," a claim that Sartre thought followed from "an a priori description" of human being.⁶ That description now seems to me deeply flawed and while I still think that Sartre's understanding of the fundamental project helps us understand the "modern world" and the progress of modern art, the renunciation of that project seems to me to be a precondition for a full self-affirmation and to hold the key to that new realism towards which the ending of the book gestured uncertainly — although today I am more likely to speak with Nietzsche of the need to overcome "the spirit of revenge," "the will's ill will against time and its 'it was.'"⁷ It is this ill will that speaks to us in Sartre's description of the being of the for-itself as lack, vainly desiring to become God. The project to become like God is born of an exaggerated demand for security, which in turn presupposes an inability to accept all that makes human beings vulnerable and mortal, open to friendship and love.

Even more it was developments in the art production of the past thirty years, such as the works of artists like Warhol and Beuys, Richter and Twombly, Koons and Hirst, that called for a reassessment of *The Meaning of Modern Art*, especially of its concluding chapter, "Beyond Modern Art."⁸ At the time I had not heard of post-modernism. And yet there is a sense in which this book called for a post-modern art, although too much of what has since been labeled "post-modern" participates in what I criticized in that book, following Kierkegaard, as "The Search for the Interesting." What the conclusion called for was an art that would no longer pursue the novel or interesting, that would so represent fragments of the familiar world that we would once again attend to their silent "speech," return to the endless task of interpreting "the book of nature" and in such interpretation gain some understanding of our vocation. I refer here to "the book of nature" to suggest that what I had in mind sought to move art in the direction of what might be considered the sacred, where for me thoughts of the sacred and of nature

⁵ Preface to the Japanese translation by Takeo Narukawa, *Gendai Geijutsu e no shisaku-Tetsugakuteki Kaishaku* (Tokyo: Tamagawa University Press, 1976).

⁶ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 557 - 75. See *The Meaning of Modern Art*, p. xiii, fn. 3.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 252.

intertwine. In my conversations with Louis Dupré I insisted on the continuity, indeed a partial identity of art and the sacred, while he emphasized their essential difference. We decided to offer our joint seminar in the hope that such a public discussion would help us to become clearer about our disagreement and its significance. Traces of that course survive in much that I have written since, so in my essays on architecture, and especially in my book *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997).⁹

I have to admit that Dupré's insistence on the essential difference between art and the sacred is supported by the realities of today's artistic and religious life. The history of modern art could indeed be written as a history of the progressive emancipation of art from everything foreign to its essence. The first part of such a history might discuss the emancipation of art from religion; the second the emancipation of art from representation; the third the emancipation of art from the demand for all external meaning and content.

Just to illustrate this end-point let me read you a remark made now many years ago by the painter Frank Stella's describing 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.¹⁰

⁸ See the notes for my lecture course "The End and Origin of Art (Philosophy of Modern Art), Yale University, Fall 2002 <karstenharries.commons.yale.edu/files/End-and-Origin-of-Art3.pdf>

⁹ *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

¹⁰ "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.

On this view the painting does not in any way point beyond itself. It is neither symbol nor allegory. It does not say anything. Therefore it can be neither true nor false. But it is precisely this quality of pointing beyond itself that characterizes the religious symbol. A conception of the art work such as that here stated by Stella would seem to rule out religious or sacred art — that we should not equate the two will become clear in the following seminar. What matters to a painter such as Stella is not that the work point beyond itself to some higher reality. Quite the opposite: what matters, is that it offer itself to us as a self-sufficient absorbing presence. Why such absorptive states should be enjoyed and taken to matter will require more discussion. Here I offer the statement by Stella only as an example of a view of art that understands the art-work first of all as an occasion for pleasure, perhaps of a quite rarefied and distinctive kind. For reasons that will become clear in the course of this seminar, I call such a view “aesthetic.” I shall have quite a bit more to say about this aesthetic approach in future seminars, especially in our fifth session. Here I only want to point out that such an aesthetic understanding of art leaves no room for experiences of the sacred.

Stella’s statement by now is likely to seem quite dated. If it is taken to be representative of the aesthetic approach, there is good reason to claim that the master narrative that presided over that approach came to some sort of end in the sixties, as Arthur Danto claimed, who looked especially to the art of Andy Warhol in support of his thesis of the end of art.¹¹

And if we accept Danto’s thesis of the end of art so understood, this end, really the end of art presided over by the aesthetic approach, could be said to have generated new interest in the relationship of art to the sacred, just as the growing uneasiness about the future of a world shaped by technology has given a new impetus to religious concerns. There is thus quite a bit of talk today of this being a post-modern, post-secular age.¹²

¹¹ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

¹² See the dissertation by Eric Bugyis, “*Postmetaphysical Madness: A Critique of the Postsecular return of Religion in the Thought of Jürgen Habermas*,” Yale University, 2013.

3

If issues raised by the seminar I taught with Dupré almost three decades ago are one reason for offering the present seminar, another and more immediate reason is a lecture I gave at Yale in November 2007 to introduce a symposium at the Yale School of Architecture, organized by Karla Britton, to which she had given the title *Constructing the Ineffable. Contemporary Sacred Architecture*. To my introductory lecture I had given the title “Untimely Meditations on the Need for Sacred Architecture.” The symposium was subsequently published.¹³

That lecture began and concluded with the claim that the sacred needs architecture if it is not to wither and that similarly architecture needs the sacred. The present seminar extends this claim to art, although I shall continue to emphasize the importance of architecture, indeed will give special weight to the difference between painting and architecture. As I pointed out in the beginning: this twofold claim invites a twofold challenge: does the sacred need art? And does not art do very well without the sacred?

Let me begin with the first: does the sacred really have a need for art? Is it not the quality of the inner life, open to a spiritual dimension that transcends the sensible, that matters? Indeed, does the very transcendence of the sacred not demand that religion preserve its distance from art and architecture? That is the position of Louis Dupré.¹⁴ My claim that the sacred needs art, and more especially architecture, seems out of touch with the inwardness demanded by the sacred. Is it not the very dynamism of religious transcendence that caused religion to leave art behind? This is how Hegel understood the superiority of Christianity over Greek religion. He recognized that in the beginning of history art and religion were inseparably bound together. But that beginning we have left behind. Hegel — and I shall have to return to this point — assigned art a place in his story of the spirit's progress. This progress tends towards an ever more complete appropriation of the earth. This process has to break down the walls that separate persons, races, and regions, as it has to subject nature to the rule of technology. As Hegel understands it, this progress also has to leave behind, first architecture, that “first pioneer

¹³ See Karsten Harries, “Untimely Meditations on the Need for Sacred Architecture,” *Constructing the Ineffable. Contemporary Sacred Architecture*, ed, Karla Cavarra Britton (New Haven: Yale School of Architecture and Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 48-65.

on the highway toward the adequate realization of the Godhead,"¹⁵ and finally all art that claims to express humanity's deepest interests. Do not science and technology provide us with a far more complete mastery of the earth than art could ever provide? And is it not reason alone that in the end should bind freedom? Has the Enlightenment not taught us that it is within ourselves that we must look for whatever can give meaning to our lives? That is the central question, a question I want to answer with a resolute "no".

4

Let me turn to my second claim, that art needs the sacred. How can such a claim be defended?

Whatever we experience as sacred we experience as transcending our ability to produce or reproduce it. What Benjamin has to say about the way art must lose its aura in this age of its technical reproducibility will demand our consideration. Here the way Benjamin links the aura of the authentic work of art to the way it is "imbedded in the fabric of tradition"¹⁶ is significant. Reproduction is said to tear the artwork out of its historical context and thus to destroy its aura. By the same token, it has to destroy our experience of the sacred. The sacred, too, depends on history and memory. To experience architecture as sacred is to experience it as possessing an aura of transcendence. But what sense can someone truly of this modern age still make of such an experience?

What makes my claim that art needs the sacred so untimely is thus at bottom nothing other than our modern understanding of reality. Key here is the Cartesian conviction that whatever deserves to be called real is in principle comprehensible. But we cannot comprehend what is fleeting and cannot be analyzed into simple elements and represented by joining these elements. In this sense we really understand something only to the extent that we can reproduce it. Descartes thus promised a practical philosophy

¹⁴ Cf. Louis Dupré, *Transcendent Selfhood. The Loss and Recovery of the Inner Life* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vol. 12, p. 125. trans. F. P. B. Osmaston, "Selections from The Philosophy of Fine Arts," *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976), p. 439.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 223.

that will allow us to understand nature as distinctly as a craftsman understands what he is able to make. Understanding came to mean know-how. It was no idle promise. The triumph of that promise in technology had to carry the loss of transcendence that is a presupposition of the conviction that human reason can comprehend and finally reproduce reality back into our concrete lives. No surprise then that reality should come to be experienced ever more decisively as a reality without transcendence, a reality in which the sacred has no place, mere material for us to use and transform as we see fit.

5

There is a very different objection my two claims need to confront. I suggested that our way of life has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our lives. But is ours not the most religious of all advanced industrial societies, as countless statistics and newspaper reports have documented, indeed the only developed country in which, in poll after poll, a majority of those polled say that religion plays an important part in their lives, that they believe in God, that they go with some regularity to church or temple. To be sure in the last few years there would appear to have been a weakening of this trend. But such recent developments notwithstanding, has religion not strengthened rather than weakened in the last fifty years? Just look at the political arena and the role religion plays there today. To give just one local example: when I was a graduate student here at Yale, Brand Blanshard, then perhaps the leading member of the philosophy department, could state without being challenged that it was impossible to be a good philosopher and to be religious. It is difficult to imagine such a statement today. How things have changed.

But the religiosity of this country invites questioning. How for example are we to understand that, according to one of these polls, “Only 33 percent of the American Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists, and 28 percent of the Episcopalians agreed with the statement that Christ was without sin.”¹⁷ Or that the vast majority of America's Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics do not accept the doctrine that man is justified before God alone by grace through faith in Christ's saving work, but believe that good works are sufficient. As Gerald McDermott, an Episcopalian, put it, “in

¹⁷ Barna Poll on U.S. Religious Belief - 2001.
<http://www.adherents.com/misc/BarnaPoll.html>

the last 30 years American pastors have lost their nerve to preach a theology that goes against the grain of American narcissism."¹⁸ But are narcissism, which is self-centered, and genuine religion, which is centered on what transcends the self not incompatible? George Gallup, Jr., supported by 70 years of Gallup-family polling, points out that "Americans are largely ignorant about doctrine and lack trust in God."¹⁹ How then are we to understand statistics that show that in the United States 85 or 90 percent of the population consider themselves religious, while 59 percent consider religion a very important part of their lives, making the United States the thought-provoking exception to the general rule that the higher the annual per capita income in a country the less likely it is that religion will be considered very important.²⁰ That religion should flourish in countries where the quality of life makes it difficult to experience this earth as a home is hardly surprising. But how are we to understand the anomalous role of religion in a country with perhaps the highest standard of living? Do we, too, despite our affluence, find the quality of life in some important way deficient and therefore look to religion for a spiritual supplement?

Despite what the statistics have to tell us, despite the obvious political significance religion possesses in this country, I do not experience this as an especially religious society. This raises the question: What does it mean to be religious? To be able to give an affirmative answer to some pollster's questions: "do you consider yourself religious?" "Do you believe in God?" "Do you go to church or temple with some regularity?" Do the results of countless polls refute the claim that our culture has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our modern lives? Could it be that our religious practices, too, including the architecture that serves them, have increasingly lost sight of the sacred? But what do we mean by "sacred"?

6

Following the Yale symposium I was asked to speak at another symposium at Catholic University that bore the title, "Transcending Architecture: Aesthetics and Ethics of the Numinous." I found this title interestingly ambiguous: transcending suggests going beyond. But is "architecture" in the title to be understood as subject or object?

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/46.htm>

Who or what here is doing the transcending, architecture or human observers? Is it we who must transcend architecture, which in this sense would have to be gone beyond or left behind, if we are to open ourselves to the numinous. Or is it perhaps architecture that in some sense must transcend itself? I shall have to return to these questions.

I gave my contribution to that symposium the title “Transcending Aesthetics: Architecture and the Sacred.” I chose the title in part to engage and call into question the title given to the conference: “Transcending Architecture: Aesthetics and Ethics of the Numinous.” In the statement I was sent a brief explanation that followed the title clarified what the title intended: sacred architecture should transcend itself as a material thing: “At its highest, architecture has the ability to turn geometric proportions into shivers, light into grace, space into contemplation, and time into divine presence. A transcending architecture disappears in the very act of delivering us into the awesome and timeless space of the holy.” This seems to assert that, at its highest, sacred architecture is somewhat like a bridge that transports us into an inner spiritual realm that allows us to enter some inner subjective space. As we cross that bridge everything material, and with it architecture is transcended as the solitary subject discovers within him- or herself “the awesome and timeless space of the holy” or the “numinous.” Architecture is understood here as occasioning an experience of the numinous. So understood, it would seem, the numinous does not really reside in the architecture, but in the subject. Louis Dupré could have endorsed this statement.

But to do justice to the sacred, I would like to suggest, we must look, not just to the subject, but to things, places, texts, in which the divine is experienced as present, must look to the mystery of incarnation. With this the relationship of the sacred to the aesthetic and more especially to the beautiful and the sublime becomes problematic: sacred objects need not be, indeed often are not aesthetically distinguished. I shall return to this point in the following seminar. As I hope to show, aesthetic experience as it has come to be understood ever since the 18th century and encounters with the sacred, and that means also with sacred art and architecture, are incompatible. Constitutive of the sacred, I would like to claim, is the inseparable unity of spirit and matter, is the overcoming of their opposition. And spirit here may not be sought within the observing subject, but must be sought in a reality that transcends whatever human artifice can form

²⁰ <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=167>

and create. The sacred breaks into the horizontality of the mundane and establishes a vertical that unites heaven and earth. The divine logos descends into the visible. Meaning is incarnated in matter. Matter becomes the bearer of divinity. That gives objects we experience as sacred their special aura.

But what sense can we today still make of such incarnation except as a projection of a spiritual significance into things, which that does not really belong to them? Have objects that once were experienced as sacred not lost the aura of the sacred for us moderns? Is this not one lesson Walter Benjamin has taught us? I shall return to the phenomenon of aura in the second half of this seminar.

In the following session I want to examine the difference between the sacred and the profane and the difference between the religious and the sacred.

2. Religious and Sacred Art

1

In this session I want to examine both the difference between the sacred and the profane and the difference between the religious and the sacred, more especially between religious and sacred art.²¹ Let me begin with the last. When we look at a medieval altarpiece in some museum we would not hesitate to call it a work of religious art. Its former function seems sufficient to justify that description. But in all probability you would no longer experience it as a sacred object, but rather as a work of art that still speaks of its former religious function. For us, it has lost the aura of the sacred it once possessed. How are we to understand that aura?

Our experience of works of art is always mediated by some larger context. When we today experience some Greek temple or Gothic cathedral, we are very much aware of the fact that once great art served religion. Once they were experienced as a manifestation of the divine; the places they occupied was experienced as a holy places. The appropriate response was not so much an aesthetic observing, but participation in a communal religious practice. In this sense we can say it was liturgical, where “liturgy” is understood, to cite Wikipedia, as “the customary public worship done by a specific religious group, according to its particular tradition.” But the world of these works has perished and with it the liturgy that once sustained it. We may still experience their greatness, but the works have lost their power to place us into their worlds. As Heidegger asks in “The Origin of the Work of Art”:

Works are made available for public and private art appreciation. Official agencies assume the care and maintenance of works. Connoisseurs and critics busy themselves with them. Art dealers supply the market. Art-historical study makes the works the objects of a science. Yet in all this busy activity, do we encounter the work itself? (p. 40)²²

²¹ See Peter Hawel, “Aspekte zur Sakralkunst,” *Sakralität und Moderne*, Ed.. Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkowitz (Dorfen: Hawel Verlag, 2010), pp. 13-74.

²² G5. Holzwege (1935–1946), “The Origin of the Work of Art,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). references in the text are to the translation.

Consider a work such as the temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum. Do we encounter it in a way that does justice to its former self-subsistence? Transported into an altogether different environment, such works are no longer the works they once were. They have become rootless. They still invite us to consider what this art once meant to human beings, how it helped establish their world. In that sense we still experience them as examples of religious art. The fact that such works have been “torn out of their own native sphere” (G5, 26/40) has, however, made them available to us in a new way: as aesthetic objects that we can admire for their beauty and historical significance. As beautiful relics of the past they now have their place in our modern world. The aesthetic approach to works of art with its insistence on the autonomy of art is very much part of this world. As Hegel put it,

There is, however, a deeper form of truth, in which it is no longer so closely akin and so friendly to sense as to be adequately expressed by that medium. Of such a kind is the Christian conception of truth; and more especially the spirit of our modern world, or, to come closer, of our religion and our intellectual culture, reveals itself as beyond the stage at which art is the highest mode assumed by man’s consciousness of the absolute. The peculiar mode to which artistic production and works of art belong no longer satisfies our supreme need. We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped; the impression which they make is of a more 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. (12)²³

But to call an object sacred, I want to suggest, is to consider it in some sense divine and deserving our worship.

We are given a paradigm of such a sacred object by the story of Jacob’s ladder:

²³ Page references to Hegel in the text are to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993). See also *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, in *Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vols. 12-14.

And he, (Jacob) came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he set it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached the heaven: and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. Then Jacob awoke and said: "*Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*" (Gen. 28, 11-17, RSV)

Once this passage from *Genesis* was read as part of the consecration rite of every church. It served to establish the traditional symbolism of the church as house of God and gate of Heaven.

We should note these main points: something higher, something numinous — I shall have more to say about the numinous later — here breaks into the everyday world: a particular place is experienced at a particular time as filled with the presence of the divine: Jacob thus calls it the house of the Lord; God is felt to dwell in that landscape. In this place heaven and earth are experienced as somehow linked: the place is not just the dwelling place of God, but it opens up to a higher reality: Jacob thus calls it the gate of heaven. The ladder of the dream symbolizes that linkage. And that linkage, and this is what matters perhaps most in this context, is tied to a trust that extends beyond the individual to his offspring, extends into an indefinite future. The world is experienced as in tune, not just with Jacob, but with coming generations. The experience of the sacredness of the place is here bound up with faith in a communal future.

The experience of the sacred demands an action.

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of the place Bethel. (Gen. 28, 18-19, RSV)

Jacob responds by marking the place, taking the stone on which he slept, turning it into a pillar, transforming thus the horizontal slab into a vertical post, and anointing it with oil. There is no mention here of beauty. And this invites us to reflect on the relationship of beauty to the sacred. Beauty would not seem to be a necessary attribute of sacred art. There are countless sacred objects that we would not consider beautiful.

Later churches reenact that archetypal act: every church once was thought to represent Bethel. But what can this story still mean to us today? Does it not lie so thoroughly behind us that all attempts to return to it must seem anachronistic? Particularly difficult to accept for us moderns is the emphasis on a particular time and place. Even a religious person may well object: how can God be closer to one place than to another? Is not the Lord said to be in the midst of wherever two or three persons come together in his name? No special place seems needed.

But something like that particularity, I would like to suggest, is constitutive of the sacred object. In this particular thing, in this particular place, at this particular time, the divine is felt to break into the everyday. In his book *Vom Bau der Kirche*, the architect Rudolf Schwarz begins by inviting us to imagine a very simple church:

In order to celebrate the holy feast of the Lord, one needs a space that is not too large of good proportions, in its center a table and on it a bowl with bread and a chalice with wine.²⁴

In the consecrated bread and wine the distinction between the visible and contingent and the invisible and divine collapses and is overcome. The earth opens itself for the faithful to the divine. Here, too, a ladder links heaven and earth, where the table takes the place of Jacob's pillar, which he anoints with oil.

Let me give you just one more example which I take from the period in the history of art that I know best, the rococo pilgrimage church Die Wies — it would be easy to come up with examples from other cultures and other times: My story begins in the monastery of Steingaden, south-west of Munich. Here it is important to keep in mind

²⁴ Rudolf Schwarz, *Vom Bau der Kirche*, 2nd. ed. (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1947), cited in *Sakralität und Moderne*, p. 332.

that the Bavaria of the eighteenth century retained, as far as the countryside was concerned, pretty much a peasant culture. Its creators and those who made a pilgrimage to this church lived in a world that had changed little since the Middle Ages. In that world miracles still happened and were taken for granted. Consider the events that led to the building of what now has come to be listed as a world heritage site. In 1730 —



Die Wies, High Altar, Christ on the Column

elsewhere the Enlightenment was just beginning — Hyacinth Gassner, the abbot of Steingaden, needed an image of the flagellated Christ. In an attic filled with

paraphernalia a head was found, then a chest, arms, and feet. The parts did not quite fit together, but they would do: rags were used as stuffing and the whole was covered with canvas and painted. For three years this simple image was carried in the procession, until something better was demanded and the statue was stored away, together with other props that might find use in future theatrical productions. Finally it was given to a local innkeeper, who had taken a liking to it. His cousin, a peasant woman who lived an hour's distance from Steingaden, "in der Wies," in the meadow, begged him to let her have the statue. A month later she found tears on its face. When the miracle recurred, the terrified woman called her husband. A simple chapel was built and soon there were miraculous cures. The monastery appears to have been not at all pleased with what was happening out "in the meadow"—was it not the eighteenth century? The monasteries were in the forefront of a rather modest Bavarian enlightenment. So the peasant woman, Maria Lori, and her husband, Martin, were questioned and publicity was discouraged. But the miracles and the number of people who made the pilgrimage to the humble statue increased rapidly. Soon the provisional church that had been built proved insufficient. There were days on which several thousand pilgrims arrived from as far away as Bohemia, the Rhineland, and Switzerland. Given such success, which translated into funds, and given increasing complaints about the inadequacy of the existing shelter, the abbot decided to build a large and costly church. The peasants to whom the church owes its origin contributed their labor.

It was the piety of the people, a piety that placed great weight on pilgrimages, that gave rise to many of the best rococo churches, and the piety extended to the builders of these churches, to the abbot of Steingaden, Marianus Mayr, who etched into the window of the house connected to it, the words: *in hoc loco habitat fortuna hic quiescit cor*, "in this place fortune dwells, here the heart finds rest," and to the architect, Dominikus Zimmermann, who spent the rest of his life there. Once more we should note the similarity to the story of Jacob's ladder: in a particular place, at a particular time something divine was thought to descend into a material contingent object.

2

But if the story establishes that sacred objects need not be beautiful, it also shows how thoroughly the world that built die Wies lies behind us. Hegel was right: “We are beyond the stage of reverence for works of art as divine and objects deserving our worship.” The story also shows why we should not equate sacred art, so understood, with religious art. That the two should not be equated is suggested by Luther, who appreciated religious art but would not have wanted it to be considered sacred. Unlike some other reformers, Luther welcomed art into his churches. But not as objects deserving our worship.

“I am not of the opinion” said [Luther], “that through the Gospel all the arts should be banished and driven away, as some zealots want to make us believe; but I wish to see them all, especially music, in the service of Him Who gave and created them.” Again he says: “I have myself heard those who oppose pictures, read from my German Bible. ... But this contains many pictures of God, of the angels, of men, and of animals, especially in the Revelation of St. John, in the books of Moses, and in the book of Joshua. We therefore kindly beg these fanatics to permit us also to paint these pictures on the wall that they may be remembered and better understood, inasmuch as they can harm as little on the walls as in books. Would to God that I could persuade those who can afford it to paint the whole Bible on their houses, inside and outside, so that all might see; this would indeed be a Christian work. For I am convinced that it is God’s will that we should hear and learn what He has done, especially what Christ suffered. But when I hear these things and meditate upon them, I find it impossible not to picture them in my heart. Whether I want to or not, when I hear, of Christ, a human form hanging upon a cross rises up in my heart: just as I see my natural face reflected when I look into water. Now if it is not sinful for me to have Christ’s picture in my heart, why should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?”²⁵

²⁵ Jeremiah F. Ohl, “Art in Worship”. *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association* (Pittsburgh: Lutheran Liturgical Association, 1906), trans. Willard R. Trask (A Harvest pp. 88–89.

The religious work of art is here understood as an occasion for meditation. The work of art so understood invites edifying thoughts and it is these that are taken to matter. Such art speaks to the individual. What matters here is the religious content of the work, and that content remains whether the work gives rise to pious thoughts or hangs in a museum and is now aesthetically appreciated. It remains a religious work of art. What is experienced as sacred, however, is experienced as the site of the descent of the divine into matter. Here the emphasis is not on the subject, but on the object. Spirit is experienced as dwelling in matter. The invisible and the visible here coincide. But if so understood, should we not say with Hegel that the progress of spirit has left art so understood behind, and with Dupré, that religion has left sacred art, so understood, behind.

3

At this point it is helpful to pause and take a closer look at the meaning of “sacred.” A good starting point is Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane; The Nature of Religion*.²⁶ Eliade introduces the book by calling attention to the “extraordinary interest aroused all over the world by Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige* (The Sacred.)”²⁷ We should note that “sacred” here translates “heilig”, i.e. “holy”. Otto’s analyses, Eliade insists, have not lost their value since the book first appeared in 1917, although he, Eliade, proposes to look at the “*sacred in entirety*,” suggesting that there is something significant that Otto has left out. But what was Otto’s understanding of the holy? And what, if anything, did he leave out?

Otto begins by pointing out that religion possesses two aspects, one conceptual or rational, the other belonging to the realm of feeling or irrational. As all discussion uses concepts, it tends to stress the rational element, while in dealing with the irrational it is a bit at a loss; here it has to rely, like a Platonic myth, on the ability of the individual to feel what it tries to suggest.²⁸

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁸ Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart/Gotha, 1923), p. 6. *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 1

Otto attempts to bring his view of religion into sharper focus by introducing the **“category” of the Holy**, as that element that forms the innermost core of all religious experience. Like religion, this category possesses two aspects: one rational, the other irrational. Otto takes the irrational to be the more basic element, calling the rational, the conceptual, a predicate of the irrational. Otto uses the term **“numinous”** for the Holy without its rational or ethical elements. It is the subject to which all religious schematization gives only predicates.

Following Kantian terminology, Otto proceeds to define “moments” of the Numinous. These are summarized in his reference to the Holy as the *“mysterium tremendum et fascinans.”* As the Numinous relates to religious feeling, not to a religious concept, it lies outside the categories of human thought. Hence it is ungraspable, indefinable, a mystery that forces man to use symbolic or negative language. It is the completely other, that which does not fall into the circle of our thoughts and our reality, that which is above nature and the world, “Mysterium” marks thus the feeling of human beings in the presence of the completely different.

“Tremendum” suggest something like fear. Although even more appropriate would seem to be terms such as “dread” or “anxiety.” It is this feeling that is an essential component of “awe.” We may sense something of the *tremendum* in the *ira Dei* of the Bible and in the Latin hymn *Dies Irae*, which dating from the 13th century, is sung as part of the Roman Catholic Requiem mass and speaks of the last judgment.

This moment has to be complemented by the moment of the “overpowering” (*majestas*). It is especially this moment of the numinous that Otto calls the “Kreaturgefühl,” the sense of being a finite creature, cast into the world, surrounded by an overpowering infinite.

A fourth moment of the numinous is the “energetic,” the religious feeling is not directed towards a cold abstraction, but toward something “living,” “passionate,” “powerful.” In this respect especially the numinous differs from an abstract philosophical conception of God or the Divine.

If *tremendum* suggests fear or dread, the last part of the phrase, *fascinans*, suggests an aspect of the Numinous that makes it fascinating, attractive, alluring. The Numinous thus embodies a *Kontrastharmonie*, a harmonious contrast between the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*.

Otto considers the holy an *a priori* category. This is to claim that human beings possess a religious disposition or faculty rooted in their very being. Just as Kant's categories are *a priori*, in that they are presupposed by all experience, so Otto thinks of his category of the Holy as presupposed by all religious experience, arising not out of sensible experience, although it may be stimulated by it, or sensed through sensible experience. Sensible experience can function here only as an occasion for the experience of the Holy. In this sense Otto's category of the "holy" invites comparison with the Kantian category of the sublime.

That the same would also hold for art objects that are called holy is evident. Also that such a conception of the sacred would hardly support the position I announced in the beginning of this seminar.

In spite of Otto's claims to follow in Kant's footsteps and his use of a Kantian vocabulary, his conception of the Holy is far removed from Kant. Kant's categories, these pure concepts of the understanding that make experience possible are only empty forms without the content of experience. Otto's category of the holy, on the other hand, although without it religious experience is said to be impossible, possesses more than the formal side of a Kantian category. If Otto were using the word in its Kantian sense, we would have a right to ask: what is the content to which the category is applied? But Otto's category may be divorced from all sense experience:

Sie (weltliche und sinnliche Gegebenheiten und Erfahrisse) sind Reiz und "Veranlassung," dass es selber sich rege. Sich rege und sich anfänglich zugleich einflechte und einwebe in das Weltlich-Sinnliche selber, bis es dieses in allmählicher Läuterung von sich stösst und es sich selbst schlechthin entgegensetzt.²⁹

...though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise out of them, but only by their means. They are the incitement, the stimulus, and the occasion for the numinous experience to become astir, and, in so doing, to begin at first with a naive immediacy of reaction to be interfused and interwoven with the present

²⁹ Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, p. 131.

world of sensuous experience, until, becoming gradually purer, it disengages itself from this and takes its stand in absolute contrast to it.³⁰

Sensible experience stimulates the religious faculty, which, however, finally opposes itself to all such experience, asserting its independence. This is utterly un-Kantian. And un-Kantian is also so the sense in which he speaks of the category as positing its content.

Er (der reinste Fall spontaner Entwicklung des Gefühls des Numinosen) ist für die Entwicklung der Religionen besonders bedeutungsvoll, weil das religiöse Gefühl hier von vornherein sich nicht ... auf irdische, diesseitige Dinge lenken lässt, indem es sie fälschlich für numinos nimmt, sondern entweder rein Gefühl bleibt ... oder aber den numinosen Gegenstand selber erfindet (oder besser entdeckt), indem es seine eigenen Vortstellungskeime entwickelt.³¹

The purest case, however, of the spontaneous stirring of numinous emotion would seem to be that mentioned in No. 7 (the feeling of daemons), which is of quite special significance for the evolution of religion. This is because here the 'religious' emotion does not from the first get diverted (following the 'stimulation' of emotional associations) to earthly things, wrongly taken as numinous: but either it remains a pure fueling, as in 'panic' terror (in the literal sense of the word), or itself invents, or, better, discovers, the numinous object by rendering explicit the obscure germinal ideas latent in itself.³²

Otto's category posits its own content. A similar difference between Otto and Kant is shown by their method. Otto does not provide anything like a transcendental deduction. Instead he reduces what he considers basic to religion to one fundamental human faculty.³³

And yet it is possible to provide something like a deduction of Otto's category of the holy. Let us begin with the postulate that an essential part of being human is to think.

³⁰ *Idea of the Holy*, p. 113

³¹ *Das Heilige*, p. 144.

³² *Idea of the Holy*, p. 125

³³ Cf. Friedrich Feigl, *Das Heilige. Kritische Abhandlung über Rudolf Ottos gleichnamiges Buch* (Haarlem, 1921), p. 74.

Thought requires something like a subject and an object. In all thought “self” is opposed to an “other,” the object. This rift is thus basic to human existence. The process of individuation, of becoming a thinking self, leads us out of a state that does not know the rift and thus opposes us to the “other.” Using the formulation of Karl Joel we obtain these three terms: the “separating “ or the thinking subject, the “separated” or the other, and the “unseparated” or the state that lies outside of conscious existence.³⁴ The situation described by these three terms is basic to all human thought. It is the shadow that follows the human being as a thinking being. Individuation lets the world of the individual emerge as he become conscious of it. The world arises as the individual separates himself from the other, the “all”, and with it arise all the anguish and sorrows of the world to which Schopenhauer gave such eloquent expression. This separation invites, therefore attempts to in some fashion reverse that development, to return home to the origin, to the beginning, or to surrender the thinking self to the other and thus to eliminate the painful rift.

This urge to surrender, to yield, conflicts, however, with a desire to maintain the self, which is not based on reason, but rooted in the inexplicable direction of the human libido. Man is afraid of plunging back into the unknown other. But to invoke here the libido may be misleading. The argument presented is not biological or psychological. It arises rather out of reflection on the nature of the thinking self. Once we accept this view of human being as on one hand striving to maintain the self, on the other longing to return to the All or the other, it is possible to see in Otto’s category of the holy a shadow that necessarily accompanies the thinking human being and that is, in this sense, *a priori*.

Consider once more the moments of the *numinous* Otto describes. It is easy to see the justification for the *mysterium*. The shadow that accompanies man as a thinking being is what he cannot conceptualize; it is the other from which he has been separated by his thought, the paradise from which he has been expelled by the sin of individuation, as Schopenhauer might have put it. It should be noted, however, that there is nothing in this argument that confines the *mysterium* to religious experience. On the contrary, whenever the human being confronts the limits of conceptual thought he senses the *mysterium*. There is thus also a *mysterium* in love and in an art that may strike the human being as an echo of the paradise that he or she has lost.

³⁴ Karl Joel, *Seele und Welt* (Jena, Diederichs, 1912), p. 83.

A second moment of the numinous is *majestas*, which has its counterpart in what Otto calls *Kreaturgefühl*, the awareness of being finite, of being incapable of comprehending the inscrutable other. This feeling is a necessary consequence of our becoming conscious of our finite self. Related to this moment is fear or dread. The unfamiliar, infinitely powerful, which threatens our own precarious existence and makes us acutely aware of our finitude, fills us with what Otto calls “fear.”

Another moment of the numinous is “energy.” Our conceptualizing mind traces stable patterns in the flow of becoming and by opposing with its concepts the flow of the Heraclitean river, it makes us aware of the passage of time. The shadow of the conceptualizing mind is thus the flowing, dynamic other. The flowing river is one of the symbols for which we reach when we wish to describe the other. Again I would like to point out that “majestas,” “fear,” “energy,” are found not just in religious experience, but are also present in erotic and aesthetic experience. But this is a point to which I shall have to return.

The last moment of the numinous, the *fascinans*, its alluring and fascinating aspect, is once again a proper attribute of the shadow of man. The other as figure of some lost paradise is eternally fascinating. And once again it is necessary to point out that the *fascinans* is essential also to erotic and aesthetic experience.

But this sort of explanation of Otto’s concept of the holy negates one important claim that he makes, that the religious disposition is unique and thus radically different from others, such as the erotic or the aesthetic. Otto, I would like to claim does not establish that difference and tends to obscure it, indeed suggests a rather close connection between, for instance, the aesthetic and the religious. His insistence on putting words in quotes, e.g. “fear” is designed to emphasize the uniqueness of the religious experience and indeed, if the reader does possess a unique religious disposition to which the author can appeal, the procedure may carry conviction. On the other hand, if it is possible to arrive at the religious disposition along the lines I have sketched this suggests that religious experience is closely related to aesthetic and erotic experience, that all three have their roots in the basic human situation, and that all three are characterized by the numinous.

This brings us back to the question, whether Otto's conception of the holy yields an adequate general theory of religion. I have suggested that the concept of the numinous is too broad a concept to be peculiar to religious experience.

It follows from this that, if it is possible to speak of a unique religious experience — and this may of course not be the case — its uniqueness has to be sought not in an a priori religious disposition which may posit its own object, which would be nothing more than a projection of the human self, but in an object towards which this disposition is directed and which may not be derived from it. The essential difference between love, art, and religion would then seem to stem not so much from the fact that they are rooted in different dispositions, but from the differences in their objects. Thus it is necessary to shift the focus of the discussion from the human disposition to the religious object.

4

By now it should have become clearer just what Otto left out in his discussion of the holy. Otto admits the worldly and sensible as a stimulus and “occasion” for experiences of the sacred, but in the end the sacred pushes the sensible “away from itself and altogether opposes it to itself.” That is not how Eliade understands the experience of the sacred.

Man become aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate *the act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e. that *something sacred shows itself to us*. (p. 11)³⁵

The sacred manifests itself, manifests itself in some thing in a way “wholly different from the profane.” The emphasis is here on an entity. That entity has to be experienced as a manifestation of the sacred. I realize that such emphasis on an entity may be challenged and I shall have much more to say about this in subsequent sessions. But for the time being I want to follow Eliade:

³⁵ References in text are to Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1959).

It could be said that the history of religions — from the most primitive to the most highly developed — is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities. From the most elementary hierophany — e.g. manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree — to the supreme hierophany (which for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. (p. 11)

Awareness of the sacred, Eliade insists, is tied to hierophany: the sacred must manifest itself in some thing. I agree with this claim, quite aware that it invites question as will become clear as this seminar progresses. And I want to underscore that in the Christian context the most obvious and highest example is the incarnation of God in Christ. Eliade points out that it is not the entity as such that is adored:

The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but *the sacred*, the *ganz andere*. (p. 12)

Eliade knows very well that we moderns have difficulty experiencing entities in this sense as sacred. But he is also aware “that the *completely* profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos in a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit.” (p. 13) Crucial steps in this history of the desacralization of reality are the Renaissance, where we will have occasion to consider this step more closely when we turn to Alberti in our 6th session, and the Enlightenment, although we may well wonder whether even our modern world has become wholly desacralized. As Eliade himself points out, in many ways a residual sense of the sacred continues to light up our lives.

To show this let me turn briefly to the first chapter of Eliade’s book: “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred.” Eliade begins this chapter by contrasting the way space is homogeneous for the profane person and heterogeneous for the religious person. In the second chapter he will make an analogous point about time. For the religious man, he points out, “some parts of space are qualitatively different from others. ‘Draw not nigh hither,’ says the Lord to Moses; ‘put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the space whereon thou standest is holy ground’ (Exodus, 3. 5). There is then, a sacred space, and

hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.” (p. 20)

That last formulation invites us to challenge Eliade’s sharp opposition between profane and sacred space. Is the space of our everyday experience really “without structure or consistency, amorphous”? Is space not experienced by us first of all and most of the time as quite heterogeneous, as Heidegger had insisted in *Being and Time*. I find it indeed surprising that Heidegger does not figure in this book. That Eliade is quite aware of the artificiality of his opposition is suggested by a passage like the following:

Yet this experience of profane space still includes values that to some extent recall the nonhomogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space. There are for example privileged places, qualitatively different from all others — a man’s birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth. Even for the most frankly nonreligious person, all these places retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the “holy places” of his private universe, as if it were in such spirits that he received the revelation of a reality other than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life. (p. 24)

The passage invites careful consideration. If you were asked to draw up such a list of special places, what would it look like? In the first seminar I already mentioned some places that are special to me. Eliade recognizes the fundamental importance of knowing one’s place:

So it is clear to what a degree the discovery — that is the revelation — of a sacred space possesses existential value for religious man; for nothing can begin, nothing can be *done*, without a previous orientation — and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point. (p. 22)

But the second part of the sentence remains true for us today. Such an orientation is provided by the way we find ourselves in the world. Our world inevitably has its centers, although we may not think of these as having a religious value or of the space of our everyday life a sacred space. We should not be too quick to oppose homogeneous to heterogeneous space as sacred to profane. The work sphere implies a heterogeneous understanding of space in which things have their proper places. Does such everyday being in the world require a sense of the sacred? Eliade comes close to suggesting this:

It is for this reason that religious man has always sought to fix his abode at “the center of the world.” *If the world is to be lived in*, it must be *founded* — and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery of a projection of a fixed point — the center — is equivalent to the creation of the world; and we shall soon give some examples that will unmistakably show the cosmogonic value of the ritual orientation and construction of sacred space. (p. 22)

As already suggested, Eliade pays insufficient attention to the heterogeneity of everyday lived space. That sacred space is closer to that space of our life-world than to the homogeneous space of our science must be granted. But this leaves the question how the former are related.

Important here is the concept of hierophany which implies a revelation of the transcendent in some mundane entity:

Within the sacred precincts the profane world is transcended. On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various *images of an opening*; here in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; because there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man may symbolically ascend to heaven. (ppp. 25-26)

As the story of Jacob’s ladder suggests, “men are not free to choose the sacred site, ... they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs. (p. 28)

5

“Where the break-through from plane to plane has been effected by a hierophany, there, too, an opening has been made, either upward (the divine world) or downward (the underworld, the world of the dead). The three cosmic levels — earth, heaven, and underworld — have been put in communication. As we just saw, this communication is sometimes expressed through the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*, which at once connects and supports heaven and earth and whose base is fixed in the world below (the infernal regions). (pp. 36-37)

For the Christian Golgotha is such a site, repeated in countless altars. As center of the world such an altar possesses the power to gather it into a cosmos.

Every city, every temple, every house built by primitive man is said by Eliade to be a repetition of some cosmogony:

We have said enough about the religious significance of the human dwelling place for certain conclusions to have become self-evident. Exactly like the city or the sanctuary, the house is sanctified, whole or part, by a cosmological symbolism or ritual. This is why settling somewhere, building a village or merely a house — represents a serious decision, for the very existence of man is involved; he must, in short, create his own world and assume the responsibility of maintaining and renewing it. Habitations are not lightly changed, for it is not easy to abandon one's world. The house is not an object; a "machine for living in"; it is *the universe that man constructs for himself by imitating the paradigmatic creation of the gods, the cosmogony*. Every construction and every inauguration of a new dwelling are in some measure equivalent to a *new beginning, a new life*. And every beginning repeats the primordial beginning, when the universe first saw the light of day. Even in modern societies, with their high degree of desacralization, the festivity and rejoicing that accompany settling in a new house still preserve the memory of the festival exuberance that, long ago, marked the *incipit vita nova*. (pp. 56-57)

6

Let me sum up. In the beginning I tied the sacred to some sort of hierophany. Something divine must manifest itself in some material entity. In the sacred object the invisible and the visible coincide. That makes some sort of incarnation constitutive of the sacred. But must we bind the sacred in this fashion to some external reality? Does Otto's Idea of the Holy not point us towards a more adequate understanding of the sacred, one more in keeping with the modern world, more in keeping also with Luther's understanding of the place of art in the church? Does Eliade's sacred not lie behind us in an irrecoverable past, despite the many places in his book where he reminds us of the

way more primitive patterns that have survived that carry a trace of the sacred even into the most advanced industrial society? Or do these traces perhaps have more to teach us!

3. The Modern Divorce of Beauty and the Sacred

1

I began this seminar by calling attention to a seminar that Louis Dupré and I co-taught many years ago to work out our different understanding of the relationship of art and the sacred, I insisting on a more intimate relationship, Dupré on their essential difference.³⁶ And I have to admit that his position is supported by the realities of today's artistic and religious life. As I suggested in our first session: the history of Western art could indeed be written as a history of the progressive emancipation of art from everything foreign to its essence, although such a history would offer no more than an illuminating caricature and especially since the mid-sixties much has been happening in the art world that calls such a history into question. (And similarly a history of Christianity could be written as a history of a progressing inwardness that seeks the divine ever more decisively, not without, but within, and leaves art ever more decisively behind.)

Such reservations notwithstanding, here is how such a history of art might look: The first part might discuss the emancipation of art from religion; the second the emancipation of art from representation; the third the emancipation of art from the demand for all external meaning and content. Let me return to a remark by Frank Stella I read to you already in our first session. Made in a discussion broadcast in 1964 as "New Nihilism or New Art?" it helps mark the last stage:

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... I don't know what else there is. It's really something if you can get a visual sensation that is pleasurable, or worth looking at, or enjoyable, if you can make something worth looking at.³⁷

To repeat what I said in the first session: Such a painting is not meant to point beyond itself, is not meant to be taken as either symbol or allegory. Its point is not to say

³⁶ See Karsten Harries, "Art and the Sacred: Postscript to a Seminar," *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modern: The Thought of Louis Dupré*, ed. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schnier, S. J. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 189 - 203.

³⁷ Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 158.

something. What matters is that it occasion a pleasurable experience. To say that the work should not point beyond itself is to say also that it cannot be judged either true or false. And yet it is precisely this, the here explicitly renounced quality of pointing beyond itself, that would seem to be inseparable from all sacred art. As suggested by the broadcast's title, a conception of art such as that endorsed on this occasion by Stella entails the divorce of art from the sacred. What matters here is not that the work point us towards a higher reality, but that art objects provide an occasion for enjoyment.

Supported by the central strand of philosophical aesthetics and art history, by Baumgarten and Kant, Panofsky and Fried, to give just a few names, I want to call such an approach to works of art as first of all occasions for pleasure, perhaps pleasure of a quite distinctive, elevated kind, **aesthetic**. Such an aesthetic understanding of art leaves no room for religious art. On this view the point of art is to provide us with experiences that bear their telos within themselves and are thus set off from the rest of life, which has been bracketed, distanced. The autotelic character of aesthetic experience thus understood is reflected in the understanding of the work of art, which is to be a self-sufficient aesthetic object, a whole possessing the necessary closure.³⁸

Louis Dupré's understanding of art, especially of art today, tends towards the aesthetic. Thus he considers the aesthetic realm an autonomous province removed from what we usually mean by "reality." "What artists dimly felt in the past, they now bluntly assert, namely, that the work of art is not an imitation of nature, subject to an extrinsic code, but that it creates its own norms and reality." (*OD* 21)³⁹

I agree that the development of Western art can be understood as a movement tending towards the increasing autonomy of art, although this tendency has never gone unchallenged. In the course of the past three decades such challenges have indeed come close to defining a new mainstream, a development that may seem to give support to the distinction of post-modern from modern art. But all this cannot challenge the claim that *to the extent* that the aesthetic approach has governed the evolution of modern art, such art has to exclude the sacred.

³⁸ See Karsten Harries, *The Broken Frame. Three Lectures* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1989).

³⁹ Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972). Abbreviated in text as *OD*.

Should we be troubled by the implied dissociation of art and the sacred? Should we not insist rather that, just as science has only in relatively recent times come into its own, so has art? Some, no doubt, will object that, contrary to what is claimed by the aesthetic approach, the development that I have sketched here must lead 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, as Heidegger has noted, the search for essence is by its very nature circular.⁴⁰ Where are we to look for the essence of art? In works of art, of course. But how do we know what to count as a work of art unless we already know what art is? 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? 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 in the world, including what others take art to be. In this sense the aesthetic conception of art can be understood as a function of the modern world. My questioning of the aesthetic approach — and only given such questioning does my insistence on a more intimate tie between art and the sacred than Dupré is prepared to grant make sense — is bound up with a critique of what could be called the shape of the modern world.

2

If Dupré and I agree pretty much in our understanding of modern art, we also agree that art's claim to autonomy and its separation from the sacred did not always characterize it. Thus Dupré remarks that it did not characterize the art of archaic societies. I am no longer quite as confident of this as I once was: we may be projecting into archaic society dreams of a more integrated form of life. But more important is another point: With his remark on archaic art and religion, Dupré grants that it is possible for the two to be inseparably linked.

Nevertheless art and religion are intimately connected. At one time they were even indistinguishable. Primitive rites and archaic religious objects

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and int. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 18.

were also man's earliest artistic expressions. Art did not express an attitude independent of what we would now call religion. Indeed, it is not even correct to say that artistic achievements were for the purpose of expressing religious attitudes, for the terms art and religion had no separate meaning for man. (*OD* p. 229)

This suggests that if there is a sense in which we can say that the modern period has witnessed the emancipation of art from what is extrinsic to it, so there is a sense in which the modern period has witnessed the emancipation of religion from what is extrinsic to it. Religion may thus be said to have purified itself of art. This is how Hegel understood the superiority of Christianity over Greek religion and Dupré follows Hegel on this point:

Thus religion became caught in its own aesthetic *images*. The Greek gods, at least as we know them through Homer and Hesiod, were conceived as human ideals. The more perfect they grew, the more they lost their meaning as religious symbols, that is, as finite appearances which reveal an infinite *transcendence*. Ultimately their perfect containment within finite forms, their aesthetic potential, killed the Greek gods. Their very conception demanded an aesthetic treatment, long before poets and sculptors made them into actual works of art. Once they received it, they turned into sculpture and literature, and died to religion altogether. (*OD* pp. 169 - 70)

Dupré grants that art loses a great deal of its former significance when it loses its connection with religion, although presumably not something that really belongs to it, and thus he also insists that once religion and art come to be differentiated, it is essential that the difference between the two be asserted and preserved. It is not a degeneration of art that lets it sever its ties to religion. Quite the opposite: it comes into its own. And similarly it is the very dynamism of religious transcendence that lets religion leave art behind. From the very beginning Christianity thus has struggled to keep its proper distance from art. And in our seminar Louis Dupré insisted that once art and religion have come to be differentiated, it is essential that this difference between the two be asserted.

A number of points here invite questioning. I grant that religious experience is open to transcendence. But how should transcendence be understood? Just what is being transcended? Temporal reality? Reason? The dynamism of religious

transcendence, especially when one adds the attribute "infinite," carries with it the danger of a radicalization of transcendence that threatens to so empty it and therefore also God of all meaning that mysticism and atheism come to coincide. But must, should transcendence be thought in opposition to temporal reality, to sensuousness? Just the link of transcendence to both eternity and disembodied spirit I find questionable. Is this link in fact essential to Christianity? For the time being, I shall leave this question open. I shall return to it in our 7th session. But what I do want to insist on is this: to the extent that spirit is opposed to and privileged at the expense of sensuousness, it will be impossible to arrive at a full self-affirmation.

3

As I pointed out, Dupré's understanding of the relationship of art and the sacred is not so very distant from Hegel's. And it also invites comparison with some remarks Heidegger makes in the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art."⁴¹ Heidegger there considers the possibility of the death of art, linking that death to the rise of aesthetics and the rise of aesthetics to experience.

Almost from the time when specialized thinking about art and the artist began, this thought was called aesthetic. Aesthetics takes the work of art as an object, the object of *aisthesis*, of sensuous apprehension in the wide sense. Today we call this apprehension experience. The way in which man experiences art is supposed to give information about its nature.

Experience is the source that is standard not only for art appreciation and enjoyment, but also for artistic creation. Everything is an experience. Yet perhaps experience is the element in which art dies. This dying occurs so slowly that it takes a few centuries.⁴²

In thinking the possibility of art's dying Heidegger gestures beyond it.

When Heidegger here considers the possibility of art's dying, he is of course thinking first of all of Hegel:

⁴¹ Karsten Harries, *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's The Origin of the Work of Art* (New York: Springer, 2009)

⁴² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter, *Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 79.

In the most comprehensive reflection on the nature of art that the West possesses — comprehensive because it stems from metaphysics — namely Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, the following propositions occur:

Art no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth may obtain existence for itself.

One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of the spirit.

In all these relationships art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation something past.⁴³

Heidegger knows that much of the art that most draws visitors to museums today, just think of Van Gogh or Picasso, was created long after Hegel made his gloomy pronouncements. But he also knows that their evident success is not sufficient to refute Hegel. That is to say, such art is not what they both take to be art “on the side of its highest vocation.”

The judgment that Hegel passes in these statements cannot be evaded by pointing out that since Hegel's lectures in aesthetics were given for the last time during the winter of 1828-29 at the University of Berlin, we have seen the rise of many new art works and new art movements. Hegel never meant to deny this possibility. But the question remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character? If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so.⁴⁴

Heidegger here understands art “on the side of its highest vocation” as art “in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence.” Hegel has a very similar understanding of art. But it would seem that the truth that is “decisive for our historical existence” has not been established by art, but by science, by thought. And is not thought

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

the proper custodian of truth? Is this not why Socrates exiled the poets from his *Republic*?

Heidegger refuses to accept the finality of this judgment, even as he acknowledges its strength:

The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided; for behind this verdict there stands Western thought since the Greeks, which thought corresponds to a truth of beings that has already happened. Decision upon the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about the truth of what is. Until then the judgment remains in force. But for that very reason, the question is necessary whether the truth that the judgment declares is final and conclusive and what follows if it is.⁴⁵

But, if Hegel's judgment is supported by "Western thought since the Greeks," how can Heidegger say, "The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided"? Must such thought be challenged? Heidegger apparently thinks that such a challenge is of vital importance. And it would seem that the return of art "on the side of its highest vocation" would present such a challenge. The question is: is such an art possible in our modern world?

Such questions, which solicit us more or less definitely, can be asked only after we have first taken into consideration the nature of art.⁴⁶
(G5, 69/80)

4

Let me return to Heidegger's observation that Hegel never meant to deny the rise of many new works of art and art movements. This suggests the need to distinguish between two kinds of art: art "on the side of its highest vocation" and art as understood by aesthetics. How then did Hegel understand art? Apparently not as the aesthetic approach understands it. Hegel, Heidegger suggests, still understands art "on the side of its highest vocation" as the happening of truth. Just this the aesthetic approach refuses to do. And this refusal is a consequence of a development of thought that has shaped the

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

world we live in today. The shape of modernity supports Hegel's proclamation of the end of art in its highest sense. The aesthetic approach to art is an expression of this death.

But will Hegel's be the last word on the future of art? "Decision upon the judgment will be made, when it is made, from and about the truth of what is. Until then the judgment remains in force."⁴⁷ Crucial then in Heidegger's confrontation with Hegel is the issue of truth.

5

Before returning to Hegel, it is necessary to take a second and closer look at what I have called the aesthetic approach. This approach and the rise of philosophical aesthetics belong together. We owe the word "aesthetics" to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who thus named the philosophical inquiry into aesthetic experience, but also established aesthetics as a discipline, one of the main branches of philosophy.⁴⁸

But to give a bit more definition to what I mean by "aesthetic" let me turn here to a passage from Kant's "First Introduction" to the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant distinguishes two rather different meanings of "aesthetic." "Aesthetic" indicates for one what has to do with sensibility. The aesthetic is understood here as belonging to the object (phenomenon). Think of the green of the grass, the smell of the rose. These are its aesthetic, i.e. its sensible qualities. "From this meaning of 'aesthetic' we have to distinguish a second, where by means of the aesthetic mode of representation the represented is not related to the *faculty of knowledge*, but to the *feeling of pleasure and displeasure*."⁴⁹ I call the green of the grass soothing, the smell of the rose delightful. Here the aesthetic is understood as belonging first of all to the subject.

It is this second sense that is presupposed by the aesthetic approach. Aesthetic judgment so understood involves a reflective movement. "Reflective" here suggests a looking back from the object to the kind of experience it elicits. The philosophy of art understood as aesthetics thus has its foundation in a more subjective approach to art that

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁸ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954).

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, "First Introduction into the Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 409-410.

tends to reduce the work of art to an occasion for a certain kind of enjoyable experience. What is enjoyed is not so much the work of art, as the occasioned experience or state of mind. Aesthetic enjoyment is fundamentally self-enjoyment.

As the distinction between the pleasure we take in a good meal and the satisfaction we take in a beautiful picture suggests, the second sense of “aesthetic” invites a further distinction, between a broader sense that includes the merely pleasant and the beautiful, and a narrower sense, that now distinguishes properly aesthetic judgments from judgments about what makes, say, food or some caress delightful. This is how Kant came to use the term in the *Critique of Judgment*; and this is the meaning that has come to be taken for granted by aesthetics. As the distinction between the beautiful, the sublime — and we can add such other aesthetic categories as the interesting or the characteristic — suggests, not every aesthetic judgment so understood need be a judgment of beauty. To these different aesthetic categories correspond different kinds of aesthetic experience.

The philosophy of art understood as aesthetics has its foundation in a more subjective approach to art that tends to reduce the work of art to an occasion for a certain kind of pleasant experience. What is enjoyed is not really the work of art, but the occasioned experience or state of mind. And, to repeat, we should keep in mind that, as the distinction between the **beautiful**, the **sublime**, the **interesting** and the **characteristic** suggests, not every aesthetic judgment need be a judgment of beauty. Today’s artists would seem to be more concerned with the interesting.

6

It is evident that on the aesthetic approach as here defined the pursuit of truth and art belong to different provinces. Works of art should be enjoyable, where in this context it does not matter whether the judgment is one of beauty, sublimity, or the interesting — all are species of aesthetic judgments. Whether the judged works are true or false matters little. Art is a form of entertainment.

No doubt, often it is no more. As Hegel observed:

Beauty and art, no doubt, pervade the business of life like a kindly genius, and form the bright adornment of all our surroundings, both mental and material, soothing the sadness of our condition and the embarrassment of

real life, killing time in entertaining fashion, and where there is nothing good to be achieved, occupying the place of what is vicious, better at any rate, than vice. Yet although art presses in with its pleasing shapes on every possible occasion, from the rude adornments of the savage to the splendor of the temple with its untold wealth of decoration, still these shapes themselves appear to fall outside the real purposes of life. And even if the creations of art do not prove detrimental to our graver purposes, if they appear at times actually to further them by keeping evil at a distance, still it is so far true that art belongs rather to the relaxation and leisure of the mind, while the substantive interests of life demand its exertion.⁵⁰

Can art be more than entertainment? And if just entertainment, is it worthy of the philosopher's attention? We can of course use art to express moral and other important ideas, but in that case is it not profoundly superfluous? Like Heidegger, Hegel demands more of art.

Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind. It is in works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas of their hearts; and fine art is frequently the key — with many nations there is no other — to the understanding of their wisdom and of their religion.⁵¹

But today, Hegel suggests, art in its highest sense belongs into a museum.⁵² In this seminar I hope to say more about this conjunction of the death of art in Hegel's highest sense and the rise of the museum as an institution, also about the emergence of

⁵⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, in *Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vol. 12, p. 22; Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 5-6..

⁵¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 12, p. 22; trans. pp. 5-6.

⁵² For a more extended discussion of Hegel's understanding of the death of art see "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1974, pp. 677-696.

the museum as a leading building type, where Schinkel's *Altes Museum* in Berlin deserves to be singled out, given that Hegel lived quite near the museum and was bothered by its noisy workmen.

Does the emergence of the museum as a leading building type in the nineteenth century challenge Hegel's thesis that art has lost the significance it had in ancient Greece or medieval Europe, where architecture is very much included in that judgment? In a figurative sense to be sure, architecture in its highest sense, the kind of architecture mentioned by Heidegger, Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals, the ruined temple in Paestum and Bamberg cathedral, would seem to belong into a museum. Does this mean that Hegel is right? Can the museum perhaps take their place? Or does the modern world no longer have room for art "on the side of its highest vocation"?

7

According to Heidegger, "the truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided." That is to say, if Heidegger is right, the very shape of modernity, correctly described by Hegel, leaves no place for art in its highest sense. This is not to say that what Hegel asserts must be accepted as a last and final word. But for Heidegger it is clear that to challenge Hegel we have to take a step beyond modernity, have to become pre- or postmodern in some sense. On this view art in its highest sense and modernity do not go together. The spiritual situation of the age could be said to demand the death of such art.

Why should this be so? Hegel, as we shall see, links this death to the authority of reason which becomes the arbiter of what deserves to be called real or good. On this point Hegel is close to Nietzsche, who in *The Birth of Tragedy* blames the death of tragedy, and tragedy figures here as the paradigmatically ethical art work, on the Socratic spirit, which is characterized by its confident trust in reason to guide us to the good life. With this art must lose its ethical function. To be sure, art may continue to serve reason, but such service is not essential to the work of reason. And with this Heidegger agrees. But he, like Nietzsche, dreams of a possible return of "art on the side of its highest vocation."

What matters here isn't Hegel. Any critique of Hegel would itself be pointless, were it not for the fact that Hegel has given us a profound analysis of certain aspects of our modern world, aspects that do indeed imply the death of art in what both Hegel and Heidegger would consider its highest sense. Crucial here is Hegel's understanding of history.

History, if Hegel is right, cannot be understood as a sequence of events without rhyme or reason, but presents itself to us as an irreversible process, leading to an ever increasing freedom. Despite countless setbacks, history can be understood as the progress of freedom. As such it is also a process that has to bring with it an increasing spiritual and literal mobility. Is Hegel right? In its general outline the thesis seems difficult to dispute. The other side of this process is that the authority of such natural givens as distinctions of gender or race, or the place one happens to occupy, are granted less and less authority. With this the very meaning of "home" becomes problematic.

Following a tradition going back at least to Plato, Hegel understands the human being as a citizen of two worlds: he, too, like the animal, is part of nature, but not just another animal, but the *animal rationale*, the animal that by virtue of its reason raises itself above nature, becomes conscious of it, experiences it, including his or her own nature, as not simply given, but as material to be shaped and bent to his or her will. The spirit places the human being in opposition to nature, demands mastery over it. In something as simple as a child throwing stones into the water and enjoying the rings formed Hegel finds evidence of this drive. The human being here seeks to appropriate the natural given by transforming it in his own image and this means first of all in the image of his own spirit. History is understood as the progress of such appropriation. Art is part of the effort to make the natural and sensible our own, to rob it of its character of being a mute, alien other, and thus to help transform it into a dwelling place fit for human beings. The goal of art, too, is the humanization of the sensible, where humanization means spiritualization. In every work of art we can therefore distinguish a spiritual content and a material embodiment. It should be clear that so understood art prefigures science and technology, which allow for a far more effective mastery of the material and for that very reason overtake art and leave it behind.

8

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger chooses the Greek temple as the paradigmatic work of art, that is to say, as representative of that art which, according to Hegel, the spirit's progress has most decisively left behind. Hegel understands architecture as the original, the first, and that means also as the most primitive of all the arts. “It is architecture that pioneers the way for the adequate realization of the God, and in this service bestows hard toil upon existing nature, in order to disentangle it from the jungle of finitude and the abortiveness of chance.”⁵³

Like so many of his contemporaries, Hegel, too, thought that Greek art could not be surpassed as art. Marx later was to concur. Its defect, if we can speak here of a defect at all, is one that attaches to all art, indeed to the entire sensible dimension. Given the inwardness of modern man, our emphasis on reflection, thought alone can do justice to the Idea, by which Hegel thinks the reconciliation of spirit and nature. This is what lets him say that thought and reflection have overtaken the fine arts. Our approach to art is more thoughtful than sensuous. More and more we moderns approach works of art and more especially works of architecture as occasions for reflection.

If we accept any version of the presupposed understanding of history as spiritual progress, and the way spiritual progress here is tied to increasing inwardness, we have to accept also that art and more especially architecture have lost their sacred function. If anywhere the sacred now will have to be sought within, not without. That is Dupré's position. This is not to question that aesthetic objects will continue to be created and to delight us. It is not to say that art will not go on. But, given such an understanding of history, any attempt to return to architecture its sacred or ethical function, as I have attempted to do in quite a number of publications, must seem anachronistic: it fails to take seriously enough the shape of modernity, the way that shape is ruled by reason.

According to Hegel, art in its highest sense has to be considered a thing of the past. Some will mourn this, but, if Hegel is right, such mourning is as pointless as wishing to be returned to that wonder which was ours when we were children. Hegel is aware of the loss. He is too close to Winckelmann and to his friend and former roommate, the poet Hölderlin, not to know what has been lost. But he would ask those who deplore this death of art in its highest sense to consider the necessity of this death:

⁵³ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 90-91.

We should not blame it on certain shortcomings of the age. Art in its highest sense belongs to the past. And if this can be said of art in general, it is especially true of architecture as the first art, and therefore the art that is most decisively left behind by the spirit's progress.

9

Hegel's thesis on the end or death of art is hardly derived from a careful examination of the evidence provided by the history of art; it represents rather an at times willful fitting of the evidence into a schema that is derived from his own determination of art and architecture and their place in the history of the spirit. But regardless of details, that determination is difficult to get around: if we grant Hegel the importance he grants spirit and freedom, we grant him the substance of his case. If human freedom demands that the individual liberate himself from the accidents of what happens to be the case, then our real home should not be sought by looking towards a particular region or *genius loci*; rather our real home must be a spiritual home to which the sensible, and that means also art and architecture, cannot do justice. I remind you once more of the recurrent insistence on the inessential nature of what is considered the accident of location, place of birth, gender, race. Is any refusal to accept the death of art not born of nostalgia that should be resisted? I am very much aware that a charge of nostalgia can be brought against the position I am attempting to defend in this seminar and in many of my publications. That is why I am devoting our next to last session to a discussion of nostalgia. But here already the obvious counter to such nostalgia: Is it not reason alone that in the end should determine our ethos? Think of Kant's emphasis on pure practical reason and the categorical imperative. Hegel's philosophy, too, is born of the confidence that humanity has finally come of age, that human beings have finally asserted themselves as the masters of nature, including their own nature. On this interpretation the loss of art in its highest sense is not really a loss at all, but a sign of humanity's coming of age.

And yet, against Hegel, I would like to insist that the power of the human spirit has here been exaggerated in a way that returns us to the Tower of Babel, where modernity's tower of Babel is not a tower at all, but that spiritual architecture Descartes promised and hoped to build, that Hegel hoped to complete, and on which we are still

building even as it comes to look more and more like a ruin.⁵⁴ Hegel was unable to effect that reconciliation of spirit and nature that his philosophy promises. He could not effect it, because from the very beginning the spirit was given priority and the assumption was made that reality and the human spirit are finally commensurable.

Challenging this assumption, I would insist that they are finally incommensurable, would insist with Heidegger on the rift between our reason and nature, word and reality, insist also that meanings cannot finally be invented, but must be disclosed. It is sufficient to contemplate any concrete natural object, say a rock or a tree, to know about the inadequacy of all our attempts to describe it, to recognize that reality will finally always transcend and thus elude our grasp. Against any understanding of reality that makes our ability to grasp it clearly and distinctly its measure, I want to maintain that we know that something is real precisely because we are aware that we are unable to finally understand it. Reality transcends our understanding. Art is able to recall us to this transcendence. This conviction is at the core of my attempt to join art and the sacred.

Nietzsche might have said that art recalls us to the Dionysian ground of our existence. In Hegel's philosophy — and to us moderns — what I have here called the transcendence of reality announces itself first of all as the concrete, sensuous, arbitrary, contingent. The place that as a matter of fact I occupy to reason appears as a place that I just happen to occupy. The sex that is as a matter of fact my own to reason appears as a contingent fact that does not touch my essence. This goes for all my physical characteristics, also for my particular background. Reason lets me see the factual as the merely contingent, lets me see the world *sub specie possibilitatis*, from the vantage point of possibility. But if my biological and historical make-up are all understood as merely contingent facts, who or what is the "I"? When I take away all my supposedly accidental, contingent properties, what remains of me? In the end, as Kierkegaard saw, the self itself becomes empty, meaningless and abstract, a mere ghost of a self.

At this point, as Nietzsche put it, reason coils back on itself and begins to recognize its limits. Inseparable from such recognition is an awareness of what I shall call "material transcendence." With that expression I want to point in the same general direction as Kant with his "thing-in-itself," which is present to us only as appearance.

⁵⁴ See Karsten Harries, *Wahrheit: Die Architektur der Welt* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2012).

What invites talk of a thing-in-itself is the fact that, even if constituted by our language or concepts and as such appearance, what 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 concepts and words is limited. Everything real is infinitely complex and thus can never be fully translated into words. The rift between thing and word, between reality and language cannot be closed. Speaking that refuses to recognize this rift must degenerate into idle talk.

Language opens human beings to reality. Yet, as Heidegger emphasized, language conceals even as it reveals. Where this essential concealment is forgotten, language cannot but replace reality with a false, merely linguistic reality. To be sure, human being is essentially a dwelling in language. But the house of language is not a prison. Art may be understood as a way of opening the windows of that house, and that goes also for architecture. Needed is a new realism.⁵⁵

Art and especially architecture are needed to reintegrate the human being, whose essence is threatened by the shape of the modern world, determined as that shape is by an overemphasis on spirit, on logos. And it should be clear that the aesthetic approach cannot effect such a reconciliation.

⁵⁵ Cf. Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 131-143.

4. Religious Kitsch

1

I have suggested that there is a sense in which the modern period has seen 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 thereby lose anything that really belongs to it. And must not religion, too, insist on such a divorce?

What I have called the aesthetic approach is thus linked to what we can call a splintering of the modern life-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.⁵⁶ 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? It, 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? 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, instead treasure the religious art of the past and preserve it in countless museums, 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, and actually worshipped; the impression which they make is of a more 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.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See Hermann Broch, "Der Zerfall der Werte," *Essays*, vol. II, *Erkennen und Handeln* (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), p. 42.

⁵⁷ Hegel, p. 12.

Nietzsche might have agreed, but he would have questioned whether this places us at a higher level: according to him it was the Socratic faith in reason that has suffocated art in what was once its highest sense. And are both Hegel and Nietzsche not supported by the shape of our modern world?⁵⁸ A strong case can be made that art in what Hegel considers its "true sense" has indeed come 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."⁵⁹ "Thought and reflection have" indeed "taken their flight above fine art."

The question remains: have they not left with this also the whole human being behind? And is religion not supposed to encompass the whole human being. Has religion, when it becomes just a part of life, not also left religion behind?

2

But to repeat the question: must Christianity not distance itself from all such archaic views that would make religion and art inseparable? As I pointed out, from its very beginning Biblical religion has been shadowed by iconoclasm. Think of Moses smashing the golden calf. Israel's God is invisible.

Such attitudes carried over into the early Church. In this connection Arnold Hauser quotes Asterius of Amasia:

Do not make a picture of Christ; the humiliation of the Incarnation to which He submitted of his own free will and for our sake was sufficient for Him to endure — rather let us carry around in our soul the incorporeal world.⁶⁰

There is no need here to rehearse the history of Christian iconoclasm: that the marriage of art and Christian faith should have been an uneasy one from the very beginning is to be expected, given Christianity's emphasis on the spirit, on the one invisible God, who suffered no other gods.

And yet, this God incarnated Himself and thus closed the gap between spirit and body. Must we understand the Incarnation with Asterius of Amasia as a humiliation?

⁵⁸ See Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1974, pp. 677-696.

⁵⁹ Hegel, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, trans. Stanley Godman, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, n. d.), p. 138.

Should we not understand it rather as a mysterious necessity, demanded by both, body and soul, sensuousness and spirit? And if so, should we not join those who appealed to the Incarnation to defend art, this human incarnation? But modernity has difficulty accepting the Incarnation, which confronts us with the paradox that Mary, most definitely a human being, should be God's mother, daughter, and bride, just as it has difficulty granting more than an aesthetic significance to art understood as a human creation that gives birth to something divine. Even Christians today tend to relegate the Incarnation to a past that lies behind us. Christianity has become the religion of the no longer present, the dead God, the religion of a spiritual and increasingly empty transcendence. There is a sense in which the death of God is a presupposition of Christianity, a sense in which Christianity is the religion of the dead God.

We have inherited Christianity's suspicion of religious art. If we are no longer iconoclasts, this is because today we have difficulty taking the religious function of art seriously. Hegel forcefully makes this point:

... there is a profounder grasp of truth, in which the form is no longer on such easy and friendly terms with the sensuous material as to be adequately accepted and expressed by that medium. Of such a type is the Christian conception of truth; and above all it is the prevailing spirit of the modern world, or, more strictly, of our religion and our intellectual culture, which have passed beyond the point at which art is the highest mode under which the absolute is brought home to human consciousness. The type peculiar to art production and its products fails any longer to satisfy man's highest need.⁶¹

Louis Dupré, it would seem, would find little in this statement to disagree with. And is it not supported by the shape of our modern world?⁶² Could today's concept art not be cited as proof that art in what Hegel considers its "true sense" has come to an end, where by such art Hegel means art that "has established itself in a sphere which it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby merely one mode and form through which the

⁶¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Jubiläumsausgabe, ed. Hermann Glockner, vol. XII, pp. 30 - 31. Trans. by F. P. B. Osmaston in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty. Selected Readings from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 390 - 391.

Divine, the profoundest interest of mankind, and spiritual truths of the widest range, are brought home to consciousness and expressed."⁶³ "Thought and reflection have" indeed "taken their flight above fine art."

Given that flight it is difficult today to take seriously iconoclast controversies. We don't take art as seriously as such controversy presupposes. Dupré's understanding of both art and religion accepts this conclusion: on his view, not just thought and reflection, but religion, too, have left art behind. The question remains whether a religion that thus leaves art and sensuousness behind must not also leave the whole human being behind. — And then, to repeat the question, must it not also leave religion behind?

3

But has a great deal of religious art not been produced since the Enlightenment? Yet the religious art of the 19th and 20th centuries hardly can be said to refute Hegel. Quite the opposite: much of it strikes us as sentimental, as inauthentic, false. Consider Jacques Maritain's mournful response to the Renaissance:

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 into painting.⁶⁴

Theatricality is said to have replaced true religiosity. Whether the religious art of the Renaissance and the Counter-Reformation can indeed be dismissed quite so easily invites question. In my book on the Bavarian Rococo Church I have attempted to address that question.⁶⁵ But what about the religious art of the 19th century? Think of the Nazarenes,

⁶² See Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1974, pp. 677-696.

⁶³ Jubiläumsausgabe, XII, 27; Osmaston trans., p. 388.

⁶⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 52.

⁶⁵ Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). See also the reworked and expanded German

of the Pre-Raphaelites, of the religious art of a Bouguerau (*Pieta*, 1876)! Or of the recently deceased Thomas Kinkade, the self-styled “Painter of Light”, who may well have been, at least judged by number of sales, America’s most popular religious artist of the last hundred years. I would want to speak in this connection of **kitsch**, the topic of this and the following session. How are we to understand that today art, when it turns to religion, so often ends up producing kitsch.

But what is “kitsch”? The term seems to have made its first appearance in the art-world of 19th century Munich. The etymology is uncertain. Some say it derives from the English “sketch” — English tourists eager to take some artistic mementos home with them are supposed to have asked for sketches, quickly done paintings showing some icy peak or Alpine landscape complete with morning sun, milkmaid, and handsome young forester. Or perhaps some jolly monks drinking beer. The Munich painter Eduard von Grützner built a very successful career on just such paintings. Hitler was to call him vastly underrated, placing him even above Rembrandt. They did all like brown. But given the execution of such works, I do not find this derivation from “sketch” especially convincing. I am somewhat more attracted by another interpretation that derives it from the rather obscure German word *kitschen*, which suggests playing with mud, smoothing it out, a term that seems appropriate, given both the color and the texture of quite a few works produced at the time.⁶⁶ Someone familiar with academic painting of the nineteenth century will know how well the term fits much that was produced at the time. One of the first important painters to whom the term *Kitsch* was applied was Arnold Böcklin.

Be this as it may, it would seem that the kitsch label was first applied to a certain kind of genre painting. Presumably from the very beginning it carried the connotation of disapproval. Kitsch works seemed to show a lack of integrity on the part of the artist. The artist catered to the sentimental bourgeois consumer to whom he gave what he wanted.

Consider this description of a painting by Adolphe Bouguerau (*The Birth of Venus*, 1879) by the art critic John Canaday: “The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between

version, *Die Bayerische Rokokokirche. Das Irrationale und das Sakrale* (Dorfen: Hawel, 2009).

conception and execution.” What then is the problem? “The trouble with Bouguereau’s perfection is that the conception and the execution are perfectly false. Yet this is perfection of a kind, even if it is of [delete] a perverse kind.”⁶⁷

This suggests that within the category of Kitsch we can distinguish between more and less successful paintings. Kitsch, too, has its masterpieces. And these command increasingly high prices. Forty years ago it would have been an excellent idea to invest in a painter like Bouguereau.

The kitsch label suggests then a certain art felt to be false or inauthentic? Such inauthenticity is taken to betray an essentially inauthentic culture. As Clement Greenberg put it, “Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, ... is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money, not even their time.”⁶⁸ The suggestion is that kitsch, born of and answering to a loss of culture that Greenberg links to the industrial revolution and to the capitalism it made possible, while it may pretend to demand nothing of us except our money, ends up drowning us in inauthenticity.

But does such pathos not attribute to kitsch a significance it does not possess. What threat do garden dwarves and Bambi, while no doubt kitsch, pose? To be sure, we may deplore that there is not more interest in and support for what deserves to be called art, but is most kitsch not quite harmless? Suppose that ours is indeed a kitsch culture, just why must this be criticized? Because of its inauthenticity? But the valorization of authenticity invites question. It would seem to be itself of rather recent origin, presupposing an emphasis on the atomic self and a loss of community.

From its very beginning “kitsch” has been used as a term to condemn, initially a certain kind of too easily produced art, relying on formulas and mechanical reproduction, a mere simulacrum of authentic, genuine art, but, even more, to condemn the state of mind, the ethos that produced and welcomed such art: the kitsch-personality that

⁶⁶ *Trübner’s Deutsches Wörterbuch*, ed. A. Götze (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1943)

⁶⁷ John Canaday, *Mainstreams of Modern Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 154.

⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), p. 10.

precisely to find Ersatz for lacking values wants to be moved and edified without having to invest too much emotional capital in what it consumes and without really having to change. Both the producer and consumer of kitsch are here condemned, not just for having bad taste, but for having a taste that suggests something like irresponsibility or moral failure: the consumer of kitsch wants to be deceived, refusing to open his eyes to reality as it really is and to the demands it places on us, escaping from that reality to images of some nostalgically remembered and supposedly better world, perhaps of the good old world of the fathers, a world that selfishness and greed are supposed to have destroyed. The producer of kitsch exploits such willingness to be deceived and, like the old magician of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, "knowingly, willingly lies," substituting simulacra for what may once have been genuine. The old magician figures Wagner, and with his portrayal of Wagner Nietzsche gave us a description of the producer of kitsch, although Nietzsche did not yet use the term. The mention of Wagner here reminds us once more that kitsch cannot simply be equated with bad art.

Such an understanding of "kitsch" recalls what Nietzsche had to say about romanticism: "too much energy is being wasted on all sorts of resurrections of what has died. Perhaps the whole romantic movement is best understood from this point of view," where Nietzsche was also judging his own *Birth of Tragedy*.⁶⁹ Nietzsche might very well have agreed with Roger Scruton that "The romantic artist is attempting to invest human life with a religious aura, to rewrite those purely human experiences of conflict and passion as though they originated in the divine."⁷⁰ But Nietzsche invites us to question the way Scruton opposes the romantic artist to the creator of kitsch; he would have underscored the "as though": is "the vision of a higher life" that romanticism is said by Scruton to sustain "in the midst of bourgeois mediocrity" supported today by more than nostalgia for something already overtaken by the progress of reason and the world is has shaped? Scruton calls romantic art "a heroic attempt to re-enchant the world: to look on human beings as though they had the significance and the dignity of angels." Once again the "as though" deserves special attention. As Kierkegaard taught, we must beware of

⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, 159.

⁷⁰ Roger Scruton, "Kitsch and the Modern Predicament," *City Journal*, Winter 1999, http://www.google.com/search?q=cache:suDGSDR4q2kJ:www.city-journal.org/html/9_1_urbanities_kitsch_and_the.html+%2B%22Roger+Scruton%22+%2Bkitsch&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1

allowing the aesthetic subjunctive to obscure the indicative of reality.⁷¹ Do romantic attempts to re-enchant a disenchanted world not also lead to kitsch, a higher form of kitsch perhaps, but not as harmless as some plastic Jesus dangling from a dashboard or a plaster copy of the Venus de Milo?

The conjunction of kitsch, nostalgia, and romanticism invites the question: do those who invoke the culture of the past to condemn our post-culture as a kitsch culture not cling to something that no longer possesses genuine life? Are they not romantics in Nietzsche's sense? Nietzsche, as we know, later came to condemn not only Wagner, but his own *Birth of Tragedy*, despite all its attacks on Alexandrianism, appropriated by Greenberg in his critique of kitsch, as itself kitsch — although that word was not yet available to him — pretentious kitsch, to be sure, but kitsch nonetheless. The kitsch phenomenon is wide enough to embrace both much popular culture and what Nietzsche calls romanticism.

Human beings have long opposed some past golden age to the decadent present. That the distinctive ugliness of our disenchanted modern world should breed nostalgia for some bygone and supposedly more authentic, more moral, more beautiful world, for the values of genuine culture, is only to be expected. Is nostalgia then the mother of kitsch? Its father could then perhaps be said to be the industrial revolution and the capitalism it made possible. But the question returns: is such nostalgia and the kitsch that issues from it necessarily a bad thing?

3

Although “kitsch” originated as and remains first of all an aesthetic category, kitsch resists being discussed as *just* an aesthetic phenomenon, say as mechanically produced art or as art relying on well-established recipes or formulas and lacking therefore the originality and authenticity of genuine art. The same can be said after all of much other art that we would not consider kitsch: most art production through the ages has relied on routine or clichés. And, on the other hand, is there not kitsch that is undeniably original? Think of Wagner or of Salvador Dali's Christ of *St. John in the Cross*, voted Scotland's most popular painting and also condemned as kitsch. What lets

⁷¹ See Karsten Harries, "Transformations of the Subjunctive," *Thought*, vol. 55, no. 218, 1980, pp. 283-294. See also *Between Nihilism and Faith: A Commentary on*

us call kitsch “kitsch” is it first of all not its reliance on trusted recipes, nor its lack of originality — Dali’s painting is original, in more than one way — but that we experience it as born of and as catering to bad faith. Its representation of reality strike us, but not necessarily the owner or admirer of the kitsch object, as false, as not true to reality.

Kitsch thus would seem to differ from art for art’s sake precisely in its refusal to keep its distance from reality. Kitsch engages it, re-presents it in a way that elides what the kitsch consumer does not want to see, idealizes, and that means inevitably also that kitsch, even as it embraces, distorts reality, masking it with illusions of meaning. Dali’s Christ is a Christ without wounds or blood. Its distortion of reality can give kitsch a religious, ethical, and political significance that invites comparison with myth. Pretentious kitsch invites us to understand it as Ersatz for lost myth or alternatively as myth for a disenchanted world — an example of political kitsch is Alfred Rosenberg’s *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*. What lets us judge kitsch “kitsch” is it first of all that we experience it as born of and as catering to bad faith.

But this also helps to explain why today the category “kitsch” should be becoming increasingly elusive. Just like “dreaming,” “bad faith” is a contrast term: as dreaming retains its sense only as long as we can oppose it to waking, “bad faith” retains its sense only as long as we can distinguish it from good or genuine or authentic faith. “Kitsch” is thus an aesthetic category that demands to be discussed with reference to faith. Its history is bound up with the history of faith, its rise bound up with the Enlightenment and its questioning of religion in the name of reason. Nietzsche might have said, kitsch is a phenomenon that has its origin in the death of God of which, in *The Gay Science*, he has this to say: “Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition.”⁷² The distinctive perfume of kitsch may be said to be part of the odor of God’s decomposition.

But if, as Nietzsche claims, God is and remains dead, what then becomes of good faith? Today the very distinction between “good” and “bad faith” seems to be slipping away from us. And if so, must the same not be said of “kitsch”? This is one question any

Either/Or (Berlin and New York: DeGruyter, March 2010), Chapter 7: “Kitsch.”

⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, III, par. 125

thoughtful discussion of kitsch needs to address. Today the once so stridently negative connotation of the term “kitsch” seems to be fading. The philosopher Robert C. Solomon is not the only one to have written in defense of kitsch and sentimentality.⁷³ Nor is the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum the only artist to have embraced kitsch self-consciously — not ironically, as so many much more accepted artists have done in the past few decades, camping up their beloved kitsch, while keeping their avant-garde credentials — but in romantic fashion, in the name of a quite traditional humanism, difficult to square with the shape of our modern world, and for that reason easily condemned for its lies, for its nostalgia and sentimentality. Not so very different is the embrace of the “kitsch” label by Lisa Small, the Associate Curator of New York’s Dahesh Museum, dedicated to European academic art of the 19th and early 20th century, not in order to criticize that art, but in order to call into question that label’s all too easily taken for granted negative connotation. And then there is the already mentioned, recently deceased, self-assured, self-styled “painter of light” Thomas Kinkade, who was, as I pointed out, until his untimely death perhaps the commercially most successful American painter. More than that: his nostalgic paintings of rustic homes are beginning to be translated into housing developments; his version of kitsch is beginning to shape the built environment. As Dan Byrne, CEO of The Thomas Kinkade Company, puts it: “The Thomas Kinkade brand stands for the values associated with home and hearth, peace, joy, faith, family and friends. Partnering with HST in the creation of homes inspired by the artwork of Thomas Kinkade delivers on what collectors tell us inspires them most about Thom’s work — that they wish they could step into the world created in the painting. The Thomas Kinkade Company is pleased to align itself with such a visionary home builder.”⁷⁴ And what is wrong with an art that so self-consciously seeks to edify and is unafraid to rely on recipes drawn from the art of the past to achieve its end?

The changing fortunes of the word “edify” are instructive in this connection: once it meant simply to raise a dwelling or structure. Religious and moral thinkers

⁷³ Robert C. Solomon, “On Kitsch and Sentimentality,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (Winter, 1991)

⁷⁴ Press Release. Source: The Thomas Kinkade Company. New Housing Community in Columbia, MO Features Thomas Kinkade Homes.
<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20060814005221/en/Housing-Community-Columbia-MO-Features-Thomas-Kinkade>. Sept.24, 2013

appropriated the word — were they not raising spiritual edifices in which human beings might discover their spiritual home — Kierkegaard wrote *Edifying Discourses*. The term thus came to mean, "to improve morally or spiritually" by offering guidance and giving faith. Why then did this word come to acquire an increasingly negative connotation, as suggested by such synonyms as "preach," "indoctrinate"? Today "edifying art" suggests "kitsch," suggests attempts to embalm what has lost genuine life as if it were still alive. This is how long ago a Schopenhauer experienced the neo-Gothic churches rising in his day, as in bad taste, because born of bad faith: "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."⁷⁵ And does this not provide us with a definition of kitsch: production in bad taste, because born of bad faith, supported only by an association of ideas, but no longer rooted in the experiences of the sacred that once gave the greatest art its meaning?

But in the absence of such experiences, what alternative can we point to? Is bad faith not better than no faith at all, edifying kitsch better than modernist irony or abjection? Is it not part of our human condition that we should dream ever again of some lost and perhaps never to be recovered home? And can such beautiful dreams not cast a light into our world, compensate us for its deficiencies, perhaps even move us and that world slightly closer to what we dream of? In a world that makes it difficult for us to call it home, where too many demonstrate a cold heart, must one not welcome a bit of kitschy sentimentality, even when all too often it lacks the energy or the will or the means to transform reality? The romantic nostalgia of a Schiller, a Hölderlin, or a Nietzsche for a Greece that never quite was as they imagined, or of a Schinkel for an idealized Middle Ages fills many of us with a nostalgic longing for an age still innocent enough to make such nostalgia possible: today many have become nostalgic for nostalgia.

Consider the current vogue for the kitsch of the fifties. And have we not learned to love the Wagnerian kitsch of the 19th century. Think of paintings by Meissonier.

⁷⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 418.

Bouguerau, Böcklin, or Makart and of the age they represent. What our fathers or grandfathers, still filled with modernist fervor and conviction, were able to condemn wholeheartedly as inauthentic, sentimental, or false, may well suggest to us, despite, or rather because of its operatic theatricality, an innocence we have lost. Who, concerned about the uncertain future of Europe, haunted by memories of holocaust and war, will not look back with tenderness and nostalgia at what Hermann Broch called the *Backhendzeit*, the age of the Vienna fired chicken, at the decorated sheds of a city that convinced modernists experienced as the capital of decadence? Is bad faith not better than no faith at all? And if our age is indeed, as Broch thought, the age of the value vacuum, why call bad faith bad? What better faith is there?

3

Embracing reality, kitsch masks it with its prettified image. Just this embrace Clement Greenberg took to be a characteristic of kitsch. That distinguished it from what he considered the only authentic art still possible today, which, he insisted, had to keep its distance from reality and avoid representation. The Nietzschean presuppositions of his imperative still demand thoughtful consideration: "All values are human values, relative values, in art as well as everywhere. Yet there does seem to be more or less general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages of what is good art and what bad... this agreement rests, I believe, on a fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and values that can be found elsewhere. Kitsch, by virtue of its rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice."⁷⁶ Greenberg, too, insists that there are no absolute values. That seems to leave only the alternative of bad faith and a heroic nihilism, expressing itself in authentic and finally futile acts of self-assertion.

As Greenberg understood it, the avant-garde of his day responded thus to the same value vacuum that Broch, too, took to be a presupposition of kitsch, but it did so, not by covering it up with simulacra of past culture, but with a proud claim to a godlike self-sufficiency. "Retiring from the public altogether," the artist sought to maintain art's high level "by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute on which all

⁷⁶ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 13.

relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or besides the point.”⁷⁷ “The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape, not its picture, is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”⁷⁸ Lucifer presides over art and over modern authenticity so understood. And just as Sartre made the fundamental project of the human being the project to become like God, and declared God a contradiction and this project vain and doomed to failure, so Greenberg understood the project of the avant-garde artist as an attempt to substitute for the absent absolute the totally self-justifying art-work. And once again like Sartre, Greenberg recognized that all such attempts must fail: “But the absolute is absolute, and the poet or artist, being what he is, cherishes certain relative values more than others. The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God — and here I use ‘imitate’ in its Aristotelian sense — but the discipline and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the ‘abstract.’”⁷⁹ Greenberg criticized kitsch for aiming at the effect, not the process: the spectator here takes over from the creator. But he himself ended up describing the art of the avant-garde, supposed to offer authenticity a last refuge, in similar terms, as aiming at no more than the effect of autonomy, seeking Ersatz for absent divinity in illusions of plenitude. That Hermann Broch should have associated kitsch and art for art’s sake is hardly surprising. As Adorno knew so well, dreams of authenticity also open the door to kitsch.⁸⁰

But what is it that we find missing in kitsch? Is the turn to abstraction likely to help? The problem is particularly acute for modern religious painting. As Etienne Gilson points out in *Painting and Reality*:

Like those of his contemporaries who have understood what this situation means for their art, the creative Christian painters are attempting to achieve plastic purification. In the case of religious painting, however,

⁷⁷ Op. cit., p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997).

the additional difficulty arises that, inasmuch as it may be called upon to teach, or recall religious realities to the mind and to the heart, representational elements are necessarily included in a large number of its works.

Two answers have been found to this problem. The first one is to substitute for the subject to be represented certain plastic equivalents of its meaning. The difficulty then is to insert in the plastic form at least some fragments of representational elements of the plastic forms that direct the onlooker toward the intelligible meaning of the plastic forms at stake. A still more satisfactory compromise is simply to resort, to the genre of painting in which art is less hampered by the nonplastic elements of the reality it has to express— namely still life.⁸¹

Gilson give some examples of what he has in mind. He thus points to Leger's stained glass for the church of the sacred heart in Audincourt which offers us such religious still lifes. I find Gilson's choice of stained glass interesting. The artist here is able to exploit the symbolism of color and light. The turn to still life, too, seems to me natural, but such avoidance of the human also invites questions. Consider Chagall's frescoes for St. Stephen in Mainz. Chagall was not afraid to introduce the human element. And consider, to look in the other direction, Johannes Schreiter's very recent windows for the university church St Peter in Heidelberg.

Gilson recognizes the tension between the task of religious art and the turn to abstraction. But is there not a tension between all art for art's sake and art for the sake of life? The avant-garde artist's proud escape from the world in which we all have to make our way into abstraction is difficult to reconcile with a full self-affirmation. How much more life affirming and human would seem to be the beautiful lies on which the kitsch condemned by Greenberg relies. The question returns: just what is wrong with its illusions? If Nietzsche is right to claim that today the beautifully seductive and tranquillizing utterances about "the dignity of man" and "the dignity of labor" are no longer effective," that reason is unable to discover any absolute values, must human

⁸¹ Etienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 248

beings not themselves create whatever aesthetic constructs will allow them to experience their own lives as having dignity and to matter?

5. The Golden Calf

1

Last time I referred in passing to the story of Moses and the golden calf. Let me begin today by returning to that story:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him: "Up, make us gods, for who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be the feast to the Lord." And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." (*Exodus* 32, 1-6)

The story of the building of the tower of Babel here repeats itself. Aaron is the artist-priest, whose creativity seeks to remedy the plight of the people, to build community by putting an artifact made of gold, the golden calf, in the place of the divine message that does not arrive. And, as before, the attempted remedy fails disastrously: Israel's destruction is prevented only by Moses's pleading with God:

"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised and will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.' " And God repented of the evil which he thought to do to his people. (*Exodus*, 32, 13-14).

Kitsch, I want to suggest, following Hermann Broch, like the Golden Calf, puts in place of the absent divine, of what was once experienced as a transcendent reality that claims human beings, an artificial construction, a simulacrum. The kitsch work can thus look very much like, and by its very nature as a simulacrum may be difficult to distinguish from, the genuine article.

A question that must be asked here: is it even possible to draw such a distinction? Can we make sense of an experience of transcendence. Is experience not by its very nature such that it rules out transcendence? We shall have to return to that question.

And another question must be raised. As I asked last time: just what is wrong with the illusions kitsch provides? If Nietzsche is right to claim that today the beautifully seductive and tranquillizing utterances about “the dignity of man” and “the dignity of labour” are no longer effective,”⁸² that reason is unable to discover any absolute values, must human beings not themselves create whatever aesthetic constructs will allow them to experience their own lives as having dignity and meaning? Consider once more the story of the Golden Calf: when Moses delays to come down from the mountain to mediate between God and the people of Israel, the people, unwilling to bear the delay, demand of Aaron, who seeks to mediate between Moses and the people, that he fashion of gold a simulacrum of the absent divinity. Something finite, a human artifact, validated by the value of gold, is put in the place of the transcendent. Broch suggests that such replacement operations are a defining characteristic of all kitsch: the work of art, no longer the product of a struggle to re-present a reality that transcends the reach of our concepts, now replaces that reality with a human construct. Broch thus spoke of the kitsch personality, which, faced with what is all too often ugly and disgusting, demands a more beautiful, more meaningful world. And, as the Nolde painting suggests, the embrace of kitsch threatens human beings to lose their proper measure.

Broch locates the origin of kitsch in the Enlightenment and its exaltation of reason and freedom. Within him- or herself the individual claims to discover what could provide his or her life with meaning and measure.

This brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and
thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility that the

⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* 18, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 111.

Church had previously borne. The mind settled the account and became presumptuous and boastful, became presumptuous because it had been assigned this cosmic and divine task, and it became boastful because it was well aware that it had been given too much credit, that it had been burdened with a responsibility that exceeded its resources. This is the origin of romanticism; here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of artistic (and spiritual) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved.⁸³

Romanticism so understood is tossed back and forth between aesthetic exaltation and fear and trembling, between a sense that the free subject had opened up a path to the absolute and a nihilism that had left human beings adrift in a meaningless world.⁸⁴ Once it was religion that had allowed the individual to experience the world as a meaningful whole, as a cosmos. But the faith that supported such certainty could not survive the Enlightenment's liberation of humanity from the authority of the Church. The other side of such liberation is the experience of what Milan Kundera was to call the unbearable lightness of being. A new faith was demanded to restore a weight to things.

But where was such faith to be found? Could reason discover within itself the bond that would bind freedom and thus lead to true autonomy, as Kant had insisted? Broch speaks of "The religion of reason that the French revolution tried to establish when, having dethroned God, it saw the need of basing its virtue on something absolute and accordingly had to invent its 'Goddess of Reason. But as things proceed rationally in the kingdom of reason, this 'Goddess of Reason' was soon forgotten."⁸⁵ Reason soon turned against itself and demonstrated its inability to furnish the kind of certainty and bond demanded.

⁸³ Hermann Broch, "Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit," *Dichten und Erkennen. Essays*, vol. 1 (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1955), pp. 55-56.

⁸⁴ See especially *Nachtwachen*. Von Bonaventura (1804)

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

2

But could beauty not come to the rescue and take the place of the sacred, as not only the young Nietzsche had hoped?

This divine beauty is the fundamental symbol of all the symbolist schools and is at the root of their aspiration to set up a new religion of beauty (which one can detect both in the Pre-Raphaelites and in Mallarmé or George). Without calling into question the greatness of Mallarmé or the important artistic work of George, or even the admittedly considerably lesser value of the Pre-Raphaelites, we can safely say that the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess kitsch.⁸⁶

The statement invites challenge. Think of Clement Greenberg's critique of kitsch and his understanding of abstract art as a last refuge of authenticity. Consider once more the statement I read you last time:

All values are human values, relative values, in art as well as everywhere. Yet there does seem to be more or less general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages of what is good art and what bad... this agreement rests, I believe, on a fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and values that can be found elsewhere. Kitsch, by virtue of its rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice.⁸⁷

It would seem that the values Greenberg has in mind cannot be captured by speaking simply of beauty, for when we speak of beauty we do not necessarily, perhaps not even first of all, think of art, but of nature. What then are these values that are only to be found in art? They must, it would seem, have their foundation only in the creativity of the artist.

"Retiring from the public altogether," Greenberg writes, the artist seeks to maintain art's high level "by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute on which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or besides the point."⁸⁸ "The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁸⁷ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 13.

landscape, not its picture, is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.”⁸⁹ So understood the beauty of modern art is tied to its self-sufficiency. Kierkegaard’s aesthete comes to mind who finds in reality no more than material, occasions for his creative constructions. And so, it would seem, does Picasso. Does reality provide him more than occasions for his aesthetic constructions. Picasso stands in a completely different relationship to reality than, say, a Cézanne.⁹⁰ Cubism no doubt was indebted to Cézanne, but this debt cannot conceal the abyss that separates them.

By now it should have become clear that Greenberg and Broch, while both vehement critics of kitsch, yet have a very different understanding of what is at stake. While Greenberg finds in art for art’s sake an oasis in the desert of modern inauthenticity, Hermann Broch takes the pursuit of beauty for beauty’s sake to be the culmination of kitsch. At issue is the relationship of art to a reality that transcends the artist.

But, one can ask, what is the point of art, if not to generate beauty?

Broch himself raises this question:

One can raise the objection that every artistic act generates beauty. This is true, just as it is true that every cognitive act generates truth. But has there ever been a human eye capable of contemplating ‘the beauty’ or ‘the truth’? ... A scientist who puts no more than his own love of truth into his research will not get very far; what he needs is rather an absolute dedication to the object of his research, he needs logic and intuition; and if luck (which plays a rather more important part than the idea of truth in such cases) is in his favour, truth will appear all by itself when his work or experiments come to an end. The same is true of the artist. He, too, has to subject himself unconditionally to the object; his capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object (regardless of whether it presents itself as an interior or exterior object), to seek out the laws that it obeys — think of

⁸⁸ Op. cit., p. 5.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁹⁰ Karsten Harries, “Why Cézanne Matters,” *Object Lessons* (New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 2007), pp. 20-34.

Dürer's experiments with perspective, or Rembrandt's experiments with light — does not depend on the artist's love of beauty.⁹¹

What distinguishes genuine art from kitsch, according to Broch, is this "capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object." "Art is made up of intuitions about reality, and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions."⁹² This forces us to ask: just how are we think these "intuitions about reality," "the secret voice of the object"?

We may well feel that science and art have been brought here into too close a relationship. Both are considered explorations of reality. "Reality," to be sure, does not mean quite the same thing in the two cases: the reality of the scientist is an already objectified reality. Such objectification is the condition of a pursuit that remains ever open because the scientist knows that the reality he seeks to understand surpasses and grounds whatever truths science is able to establish.

The reality that calls the artist towards ever new expression also calls him beyond that objectified reality explored by science. Broch could have agreed with Heidegger's statement: "Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness."⁹³ Also with Heidegger's claim that such occurrence requires an openness to what transcends all our attempts at mastery, an openness to what Heidegger called the earth. Kitsch does not know such openness, such responsibility, which presupposes the ability to respond. What blocks it, according to Broch,, is precisely the insistence that the artist make beauty the end of his striving. I remind you once more of John Canaday's condemnation of a painting by Bouguereau: "The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between conception and execution." But is it in this respect not comparable to many a successful abstract work of art. Are conception and execution here not also in perfect harmony? And what does truth matter here? If so, how is truth understood now?

Kitsch, as Broch understands it, instead of exploring an ever-elusive reality, is content with what has been established and has come to be accepted and manipulates it to achieve the desired effects. Does the art of the past not teach us what is beautiful? How

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 56.

to achieve sublime effects? How to be interesting? Past achievements assume an authority that lends itself to the formulation of rules and recipes and to mechanical reproduction. “Reducing the infinity of God to the finitude of the visible, the faith of the mere moralist is dragged down from the sphere of the ethical into that of the aesthetic, the infinite demand of faith is debased into an aesthetic demand.”⁹⁴ “Aesthetic demand” here means a demand to produce a certain appearance, the sort of effect that precisely because it answers to quite definite, established expectations, invites the formulation of definite rules. Kitsch so understood, has its moral equivalent in pedantry: only a pedant believes that being moral reduces to following a set of rules.

“Aesthetic demand,” kitsch, and rationalism belong together. The kitsch producer knows what will let the consumer enjoy a certain experience or state of mind — and it does not matter whether the goal is erotic titillation, a religious state of mind, or patriotic fervor. The ultimate goal of kitsch is self-enjoyment, happiness so understood. Reality matters only to the extent that it offers occasions for such self-enjoyment. Kitsch thus renders those who fall under its spell irresponsible: no longer able to respond to the humanity of their fellow human beings.

From this perspective an abstract art that resolutely turns its back on reality to find solace in simulacra of divine self-sufficiency, i.e. the kind of art admired by Greenberg, seems less of a danger than kitsch that, in the spirit of Nietzsche’s pronouncement in *The Birth of Tragedy* that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can life be justified, turns to and embraces reality only to dress up and conceal it with its lies.

3

Most of us do not think of what we call kitsch — think once more of garden gnomes — as deserving the attention demanded by such obvious problems as the environmental crisis, mass starvation, war, genocide, disease. What harm is done, after all, when someone, instead of finding relief from the depressing world situation by listening to Beethoven, escapes to some trashy soap opera? To be sure, we may, with Kant, deplore the aesthete who allows the pursuit of self-enjoyment to trump duty to his fellow human beings. But have we not also have learned to live with and accept such failure as human, all too human. And does it really matter whether our aesthete escapes

⁹⁴ Broch, “Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst,” *Essays*, vol. 1, p. 341.

to the most demanding work of art or settles for kitsch? Is not the price of all aesthetic enjoyment a certain irresponsibility, an escape from reality? How then are we to justify the fervor of so many condemnations of kitsch? As long as kitsch offers no more than a momentary escape from reality, it seems no more blameworthy than other such escapes.

But kitsch is not so innocent when it invests reality with an aura of significance that has no foundation in reality. This recognition led Nietzsche to condemn his own *Birth of Tragedy*, which demanded just such an investment, when it claimed that only when represented as an aesthetic phenomenon does our existence appear justified. That demand presupposes that both religion and reason have failed us. And does that twofold failure not still determine our spiritual situation? To be sure, our science and technology have shown us that the Cartesian promise that the progress of reason would render us the masters and possessors of nature was anything but idle. But the Enlightenment's, and still Hegel's, conviction that reason would not only grant us mastery over nature, but also reveal to us what truly matters and thus allow us to feel spiritually at home in the world has been shattered, both by the history of the past two centuries and by critical reflection on the claims of reason. Did Nietzsche not have good reason to claim that we have art so that we would not perish over the truth, that the only justification of life is finally aesthetic? And if so, does this not demand that aestheticization of reality, of religion, morality, and politics that defines the kitsch personality? Could it be that, given our spiritual situation, we need illusion, need kitsch, be it high or low, Wagner or Kinkade, to defend ourselves against a world in which greed, terror, and money again and again trump whatever remains of Enlightenment faith in reason and culture?

The attempt to aestheticize reality has to lead kitsch to descend into life. The translation of Kinkade's paintings of homes oozing with faith, joy, and happiness into actual buildings, that I mentioned before, is a rather harmless if quite characteristic example. Far more disturbing is the descent of kitsch into the political arena. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's Wagner and Hitler films are significant in this connection. That such a blurring poses an incomparably greater danger than art that turns its back on reality to find solace in simulacra of divine self-sufficiency is shown by Menno Meyjes' film *Max*, which imagines the transformation of the young Hitler, in the film still a struggling artist, a dreamer responding to a Germany left shattered by World War One with kitschy images of a Germany that existed only in his dreams, into a politician. We see here how kitsch

can render those who allow it to rule their lives irresponsible, prevented by the aesthetic phenomenon that appears to justify their lives, from responding to the humanity of their fellow human beings. Walter Benjamin has taught us to associate such an aestheticized politics with fascism — and with kitsch and bad faith. But this does not answer the question: how are we to distinguish good from bad faith?

In *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* the architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt struggles with this question.⁹⁵ In the process he provides us with an eloquent description of a Nazi ceremony that took place in Munich on November 9, 1935, centering on the flag that in 1923 had fallen into the blood of one of the putschists killed in that failed coup and that had now been elevated into a sacred relic. Hitler understood very well the political potential of art, and so he commissioned the architect Ludwig Troost to transform Munich into a worthy setting of the new national cult. The buildings that provided the ceremony with a stage were indeed celebrated as an enormous success. Did architecture here not achieve that repetition of the Greek in the modern of which Nietzsche and also Heidegger in ‘The Origin of the World of Art dreamed? Heidegger first gave this lecture on November 13, 1935 to the Kunstwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft in Freiburg.⁹⁶ Four days before Hitler had given a powerful demonstration of what such a repetition of the Greek in the modern might mean in the 20th century.

The buildings were an instant success. The party ideologist Alfred Rosenberg applauded them as “the first attempt to realize the ancient Greek ideal.” The architectural critic Wilhelm Lotz praised the transformation of Munich’s Königsplatz because it showed for the first time in the modern age that “a deeper meaning can dwell in a city-square” as long as its origin is a spiritual principle and not in a desire for aesthetic variety in the built-environment or in a merely decorative intention. The Königsplatz had shown

⁹⁵ See Karsten Harries, Review: Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*, *American Historical Review*, December 1992, p. 1490.

⁹⁶ The translation by Hofstadter quoted above is of the standard edition of the essay, giving the text of three lectures given in Frankfurt am Main November 17, 24 and December 4, 1936 in Frankfurt. There are significant differences between the Freiburg and the Frankfurt versions, but the quoted passage remained substantially unchanged. Compare “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, *Holzwege Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 65 and *De L’origine de l’oeuvre d’art*,” *première version* (1935), texte allemand inédit et traduction française par Emmanuel Martineau, (Paris, Authentica: 1987), p. 46.

that it was still possible to create an architecture that emerges from inner principles of dedication and value instead of being derived from external contingencies of use.⁹⁷

A reader of Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" would have had little difficulty understanding such praise. Had Hegel's dire pronouncements that art and architecture had come to an end not been refuted, and not by philosophy but by architecture, by just that art the progress of spirit, according to Hegel, was supposed to have most decisively left behind? In retrospect it is easy to understand why an architectural theorist like van Pelt might have felt just the opposite: that his own convictions about architecture had been proven untenable by what Heidegger had theorized and what Hitler and his architects achieved.

Heidegger's vision of National Socialism certainly applies to architecture. A comparison of the different domains of ancient Athens and the foci of architectural activity in the Third Reich offers a premonition of this awful truth; an effort to match the Attic theatre with its Nazi counterpart transforms presentiment into unambiguous certitude. This conclusion wreaked havoc with my own project and led to repudiation and capitulation. In short the attempt to rediscover architectural principles in an age of historicism led to the ineluctable conclusion that Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) had realized the program of renewal proposed in the odd chapters of this book [by van Pelt].⁹⁸

Was van Pelt justified in drawing this gloomy conclusion? Did Hitler in fact realize the program suggested and called for in Heidegger's essay? Or is there something incompatible between what Heidegger had to say and what was carried out in Munich and elsewhere? Do the architecture of Troost and Speer, the sculpture of Thorak and Breker, the painting of Ziegler and Eber realize what in "The Origin of the Work of Art" is a vague presentiment? Do they achieve that repetition of the Greek in the modern of which Heidegger no doubt dreamed, as did Nietzsche before him, and as did, in their different ways, the authors of *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*?

⁹⁷ Robert Jan van Pelt, "Apocalyptic Abjection," in Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 328-329.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

It is not difficult to come up with a negative answer. Does van Pelt not himself give us the key to discriminating the genuine from the counterfeit?

The Nazi transformation of Munich into the necropolis of Germany assimilated the ideology of the Athenian cemetery and the Holy Sepulcher into the Nazi movement. Unlike the earlier examples, however, the German necropolis was only a sham. When Pericles reminded his fellow citizens of the city they had inherited from their fathers, and when the monks of Centula preached the resurrection of Christ, they had a reasonable or moral certainty that their pronouncements agreed with what their audience recognized as common sense. Their speeches did not contradict the way people in classical Athens or Carolingian Europe lived their daily lives. Considering the available evidence as fully and impartially as possible would lead a person from classical Athens to the ideals of the polis and a monk from Centula to the idea that Christ's death constituted a cosmic victory. Yet any German who watched the shamanic Munich rituals had to suspend reason. Only when submerged within the carefully manipulated atmosphere of collective hysteria did the proclamations make sense. However, this sense had no relationship with the proper common sense approach to the stela [or grave marker], which might restore a relationship to the past in our cities.⁹⁹

But even if this way of appealing to "the proper common sense" to draw a distinction between the genuine and the counterfeit promises to help us resist the gloomy lesson van Pelt drew from Heidegger's entanglement with the Nazis, Heidegger's essay calls all such appeals to common sense into question. "The Origin of the World of Art" presupposes that for us what once may have been a firmly established common sense has begun to unravel. Such unraveling leads to demands for either a return to the good old common sense of the past or for a new beginning. Heidegger's essay bends these two demands together: it calls for a new beginning, but this is presented at the same time as a creative repetition of the Greek origin of our Western tradition. Van Pelt's appeal to common sense presupposes a repudiation of Heidegger's claim that art is a beginning, an origin, that with genuine art a thrust enters history. What is truly original can, by

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 332-333.

definition, not be justified in terms of some already established common sense, a platitude in discussions of genius.

One conclusion one might want to draw is that originality, while it may be a virtue in art, is certainly not a virtue in politics, because by definition it has to challenge that common sense that is a presupposition of community. And if we should want to grant the importance of originality in art, we may have good reason to insist on the separation of the spheres of art and politics, resist that embrace of politics and art that provides a key to National Socialism.

But van Pelt's appeal to common sense raises a different sort of question: is common sense not itself something historically established? The common sense of Periclean Athens was not that of Carolingian Centula: what separated them was the rise and triumph of Christianity, which shaped the world of the Middle Ages. But every establishment presupposes an establishing. How would van Pelt have us understand the establishing of Christianity? Imagine how a secular, educated Roman of the first century would have responded to those who claimed that Christ's death on the cross constituted a cosmic victory and longed themselves for martyrdom. Could they not have used arguments against these early Christians rather like that advocated by van Pelt against the Nazis and their so-called martyrs? Measured by the common sense of such a secular Roman, what these Christians were willing to die for must have seemed nonsense and he would have been incredulous to hear one of his fellows predict that some day this nonsense would come to be accepted as a new common sense.

Heidegger was speaking of world-establishing art, quite aware that, given the common sense of our modern age, the very idea of art as a beginning in his sense had to be dismissed as nonsense. Van Pelt has given us a reason to accept that verdict, based on what remains the ruling common sense, even if this common sense is fraying. But his discussion also raises the question: what is the function of art when there is no longer a robust common sense; and when what was once a seemingly well established firmament of values is disintegrating, when appeals to ideals, and with it talk of heroes and sacrifice has come to have a hollow ring?

Van Pelt points to what distinguishes what is genuine from what is sham, when he suggests that the Nazis reoccupied places that they borrowed from both the Greek and the Christian tradition, when they "assimilated the ideology of the Athenian cemetery and the

Holy Sepulcher.” Especially important here is the rhetoric of martyrdom, of blood-witnesses, of sacred blood, of self-sacrifice for the sake of the flag that would reward the martyr with eternal life. It is a rhetoric no one raised in a Christian tradition would have had trouble understanding. Such rhetoric can be likened to a venerable vessel into which the Nazis now proposed to pour new wine, only they had no wine, they had in fact nothing substantial to pour into this vessel.

According to Kant and Schiller human beings have dignity, *Würde*, only in so far as they are more than merely natural beings, are also noumena: as free and responsible agents, human beings transcend their own natural being. But does that even make sense, given our modern understanding of reality? Does that understanding not force us to naturalize human beings in a way that has to deny them, too, any supposedly given meaning? But if so, is it not only the aesthetic representation of human beings that can give them dignity. Only the work of artistic genius, Nietzsche thus insisted In *The Birth of Tragedy*, can justify life and give it dignity. At the time he understood Wagner as such a genius. And it is only to be expected that Broch, following Nietzsche, should have understood Wagner as the greatest genius of kitsch. As such he is the artist who more than any other presides over the art of the nineteenth century and presides still, not just over much of the art, but also much of the politics of the twentieth. There is a sense in which he also presides over Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art.

4

Heidegger was not the only one who then dreamed of temple and cathedral, of an architecture strong enough to once again gather a multitude into a genuine community. Gropius comes to mind: Addressing the students of the Bauhaus, confronted at the time by all that the end of World War One had left in ruins, he invited them to understand themselves as part of a new elite, from which would grow a new belief, "a universally great, enduring, spiritual-religious idea" that would find its expression in an architecture worthy to take its place besides the great cathedrals. Here, too, the architect is asked not just to build, but to edify, to help create a new common sense. He is to shape space and time for future generations in a way that would recall individuals from that dispersal and atomization into which they are led by the modern world to an order in which they can once again recognize their place and vocation. Projecting the "miracle of the Gothic cathedrals," as he called it,

into the future, Gropius dreamed of an architecture that once again will be "the crystalline expression of man's noblest thoughts, his ardor, his humanity, his faith, his religion!"¹⁰⁰

Or Consider this celebration of the cathedral of Reims, written by the young Georges Bataille:

I too when I was living in the old city, saw this, this vision as lovely as our dreams of paradise. There was much too much noise then in the new streets, too much noise and garish light — but always the cathedral was there and always her existence was a triumph of stone. The two towers rose straight into the sky like long-stemmed lilies and the image of friendly crowds slipped under the portals into the company of saints gesturing for eternity in hieratic robes, where their faces showed a joy that stone never smiled. And in the central portal Our Virgin Lady beneath her high crown was so regal so maternal that all the company of the faithful could not help becoming joyous as children, like brothers, and all the stone was bathed in maternal and divine goodness....

And on September 19 shells tore through, killing children, women, and old people; fire crackled from street to street, houses collapsed, people died, crushed by the rubble, buried alive. Then the German set the cathedral on fire....•

But there is one light stronger than death: France. And France was not about to want the enemy to reenter Reims at whose gates the German divisions impotently and bloodily exhausted themselves.... In the cathedral's awful silence flickers a light that transfigures her vision; it is the flickering light of hope. Of course, she is stretched out like a corpse in the midst of plains that are a vast cemetery — without peace. But I realized that within her there was a great shout of resurrection. She is too sublime, too lofty in her frenzied soaring to give death's filth a hold on

¹⁰⁰ [Walter] Gropius, [Bruno] Taut, and [Adolf] Behne. "New Ideas on Architecture." In *Programmes and Manifestoes in 20th Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), p. 31.

her, and she cried out to all the surrounding dead that it is in life that they are buried.¹⁰¹

The noisy streets with their garish light are contrasted with the ever-lasting maternal cathedral. That contrast is raised to a higher power as Germany is opposed to France, death to life. France is said to be the one light stronger than death. Given that Bataille is speaking of a cathedral you might have expected here a reference to the crucifixion as assuring us that life will triumph over death: is the cross not said to have robbed death of its sting? But here it is not some transcendent reality, but France that is said to be the one light stronger than death. Something finite, the fatherland, is put in the place of sacred transcendence. Here we have the replacement operation that according to Broch is a defining characteristic of kitsch.

The passage cited is of course not representative: Bataille, too, soon was to turn against the sentiments expressed there and indeed against all architecture, which he came to see in the image of the prison, that is to say as denying that openness that according to Broch distinguishes art from kitsch. Such an understanding of architecture in the image of the prison may be read as a figure of art transformed into kitsch. Here is what Bataille was to write in 1929:

Architecture is the expression of the very soul of societies, just as human physiognomy is the expression of the individuals' souls. It is, however, particularly to the physiognomies of official personages (prelates, magistrates, admirals) that this comparison pertains. In fact it is only the ideal soul of a society, that which has the authority to command and prohibit, that is expressed in architectural composition properly speaking. Thus great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them. It is, in fact, obvious that monuments inspire social prudence and often real fear. The taking of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things: it is hard to explain this crowd movement other than

¹⁰¹ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture : The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 15-19.

by the animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters.¹⁰²

Architecture stands here for an order that denies us access to what really matters and should therefore be destroyed, even if such destruction threatens chaos and bestiality.

We may want to object: if we admit that monuments sometimes inspire good behavior, perhaps even real fear, is it also obvious that they therefore deserve to be abolished? Does this society, does the world, suffer from a surfeit of "good behavior"? And suppose we grant to a Nietzsche, Sartre, or Broch that what we call good behavior is supported by a morality that with the death of God lost founder and foundation, that such behavior is, as Sartre might say, in bad faith, would this mean that, for the sake of greater freedom, we should let loose the minotaur? To repeat: is bad faith not better than no faith? As Bataille recognized, this animus against the monuments that are said to be our real masters is inevitably also an animus against ourselves: To quote Denis Hollier, "This is precisely what, in Bataille's view, the mythical figure of Acepheus was intended to show: the only way for man to escape the architectural chain gang is to escape his form, to lose his head. This self-storming of one's own form requires, in fact, an infinitely more underhanded strategy than one of simple destruction or escape. The image of Acepheus [the headless man], thus should be seen as a figure of dissemblance, the negative image of an antimonumental madness involved in the dismemberment of 'meaning.' The painter André Masson drew this figure and Bataille wrote an aphorism to go with it: 'Man will escape his head as a convict escapes his prison.'"¹⁰³

But if we should not settle for kitsch and its simulacra, we also should not settle for such madness and claim that only such madness can open access to what really matters. And we must keep open such access if things and more importantly persons are to preserve that aura of uniqueness of which the age of mechanical reproduction would deprive them. Just in this age of mechanical reproduction art faces the task of helping to preserve that aura. At stake is nothing less than our humanity.

¹⁰² Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp., 46 - 47

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. xxi

6. The Legacy of Alberti

1

Let me return to the quote by Maritain in which he mourns the rise of Renaissance art.

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.¹⁰⁴

Maritain speaks of the theater. But how are we to understand the theatricality of Renaissance art. Maritain refers to the lie. The theater lies. Instead of reality it gives us its representation. We met with that charge already in Plato's *Republic*. Socrates here calls the painter an artist who is the creator of all things.

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

Who is he?

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

What an extraordinary man!

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

He must be a wizard and make no mistake.

Oh, you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all

¹⁰⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner, 1962), p. 52.

these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself?

What way?

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

105

The imitative artist is like someone, who, by turning a mirror in his hands, recreates the world. There is a sense in which the artist so understood, creating a second world, may be understood as a second god.

The Renaissance was to embrace this conception of the artist as the godlike imitator of appearances. The development of one point perspective had indeed allowed artists to carry the art of pictorial representation to a new perfection. And it is the art of perspective that allowed painters to create illusions, inviting observers to lose themselves in the contemplation of works of art that no longer needed to be referred to any reality outside themselves that Maritain is really thinking of with his condemnation. The rise of perspective and the understanding of the painting as a self-sufficient object belong together. For this reason Alberti's *On Painting*, which offered the first clear statement of the principles governing the new approach is the topic of this session.

2

Of special interest in this connection are Alberti's comments on the use of gold in painting. Here we should keep in mind that its use of gold is one of the most characteristic aspects of medieval painting, where we should think not only of the gold backgrounds, but of halos and the like. That this use of gold is an obstacle to creating convincing pictorial illusions should be evident. That is precisely why Alberti has to reject it.

¹⁰⁵ Plato, *Republic* X, 596c-e, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

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)¹⁰⁶

In a painting 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 does Alberti allow gold. It is excluded from the picture. As already mentioned, the gold backgrounds of medieval painting do tend to disrupt pictorial illusion. What then was their function?

The gold background denies the illusion, desired by Alberti, of experiencing the picture as if it were a window through which we see what lies beyond. 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.¹⁰⁷ This helps to establish **the visible as a figure of the sacred**. Everything sensible is to be experienced as the sign of something higher. Art helps to make 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

¹⁰⁶ References in text are to Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven and Londo: Yale University Press, 1966).

¹⁰⁷ See Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), pp. 15, 35-37.

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 *Sûge l'abîme*. 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.¹⁰⁸

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 is 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 him 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

Near the beginning of Part Two of Alberti's *On Painting*, we meet with the following astounding remark:

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

¹⁰⁸ Maritain, p. 29.

call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain (64)

I called the remark astounding: Why does Alberti think that he can celebrate painting by seeing its origin in the story of Narcissus?¹⁰⁹

To call Narcissus the inventor of painting would seem to cast the art of painting in a very questionable light. Consider this reference to Narcissus by Plotinus, who shares Plato's distrust of art and the so easily deceived eyes:

He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joys. When he perceives those shapes of grace that shown in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is, like a beautiful shape playing over water — is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depth of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So, too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depth loathed by Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Lower world, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here.¹¹⁰

The most obvious source for the myth to which Plotinus refers us is Ovid. He is certainly one of "the poets" of whom Alberti, too, must have been thinking, although he speaks of "the poets," in the plural. Ovid 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 in an inversion of love brought about by pride. But can this be how Alberti would have his readers understand his remark? How would that serve his stated purpose: to prove that

¹⁰⁹ 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.

¹¹⁰ *Enneads* 6, 1, 8.

"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 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 has to trouble any 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. This suggests that art is capable of consuming, i.e., of abolishing time. We get here a hint of the worth of painting, as Alberti understands it: its dignity is 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 was to insist, in time aesthetic experience promises to lift the burden of time. 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, but more precisely in that inversion of love brought about by pride of which Ovid's tale tells?

4

But let me return to the tale of Narcissus. 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.¹¹¹

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 Cephissus, god of the main river of Boeotia, while his mother is called Liriope, because the narcissus was considered a kind of lily (*leirion*). 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.¹¹² 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.

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:

¹¹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. and int. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1955), p. 87.

¹¹² Friedrich Wieseler, *Narkissos* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterischen Buchhandlung, 1856), p. 9.

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.¹¹³

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?

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.

4

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."¹¹⁴ "In painting animals" Zeuxis is said to have set "himself up almost as a god."¹¹⁵ 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

¹¹³ Ovid, p. 86.

¹¹⁴ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

in his own image from his memories of nature and his own origins."¹¹⁶ "Nothing," Alberti adds, "has ever been so esteemed by mortals."¹¹⁷

Plato's 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 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."¹¹⁸ And a bit later: "Thus the face of a man who is already dead certainly lives a long life through painting."¹¹⁹ 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.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this ill will against time is a refusal of the authority of procreative 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."¹²⁰ 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 to unyielding that none of those boys or girls dared to touch him."¹²¹ 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!

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, III p. 83.

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."¹²²

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

5

The association of modern art with the story of 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

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p. 86

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.¹²³

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.¹²⁴

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.¹²⁵

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

¹²³ Andre Gide, "Narcissus," *The Return of the Prodigal*, tr. Dorothy Bussy (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), pp. 4-5.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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 really assert himself in the world. 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 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.¹²⁶

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.¹²⁷

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. What Gide has to say here is pure Schopenhauer.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

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.¹²⁸

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, breaks, if only for a time, the rule of time, granting illusions of presentness.

This, however, raises the question: Must pleasure be placed in opposition to time?

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

7. Formal and Material Transcendence

1

As I pointed out, this seminar is a sequel to a seminar I taught together with Louis Dupré in the spring semester of 1975 to help us work out certain disagreements concerning the relationship of art and the sacred. In that seminar Dupré claimed that I was more pessimistic than he concerning the possibility today of a genuinely religious art. I replied that of the two of us, in this respect at least, he seemed to me the greater pessimist. In *Transcendent Selfhood* he was to repeat his claim, referring to the following passage from my book, *The Meaning of Modern Art*:

Modern art thus appears either as an attempt to restore to man lost immediacy or as a search for absolute freedom. In either case man has given up his attempts to discover meaning in the world of objects; if there is to be meaning it must have its foundation in something beyond that world. But it is no longer possible to give definite content to this transcendence.¹²⁹

He glossed it with this remark:

Though I have reservations about the pessimistic conclusion, a great deal of evidence supports the basic premises.¹³⁰

That disagreement concerning our respective pessimism — I think myself an incurable optimist — suggests that we are looking for something quite different. The passage Dupré cites does indeed claim that modern art has ceased to attempt "to discover meaning in the world of objects." But I did not claim in that book that modern art, as I there understood it, did justice to all art produced today. What I offered was no more than what I hoped would be an illuminating construct or model, if you will a caricature. The book did not claim that modern art as understood there, circumscribed what art might be and become in the future. Rather it called on art to discover — today I would say re-

¹²⁹ Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 153 - 154.

¹³⁰ Louis Dupré, "Images of Transcendence," *Transcendent Selfhood. The Loss and Recovery of the Inner Life* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 60. An earlier version of this chapter was distributed in our seminar. It bore the title "The Enigma of Religious Art" and did not yet include what is now this chapter's last section, "The New Meaning of Religious Art," which the cited passages help to introduce. Just this section seems to me to preserve something of the spirit of our discussions.

present, meanings that do not have their foundation in human freedom, that are discovered. Though God may no longer call us, this does not mean that human beings are not called at all. Listening to these meanings, I observed in that book, "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."¹³¹ In this sense I concluded with a call for an art "content to explore the meanings of the world."¹³² I don't consider this a pessimistic conclusion. But Dupré's gloss on the cited passage passes over the possibility of "discovering meaning in the world of objects," seizing instead on the phrase, "if there is to be meaning it must have its foundation in something beyond that world." To such a 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. 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.¹³³ I am suspicious of appeals to transcendence so 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 transcendence.

At the core of our disagreement was thus a very different understanding of transcendence and of its relationship to language and to the senses. In one of our last sessions Louis suggested that with his understanding of transcendence he wanted to go further than I was willing to go — and a book like *Transcendent Selfhood*, which concludes with a discussion of mystical experience, which opens the self to a transcendence that it bears within itself and must realize if it is not to become "*less than itself*,"¹³⁴ suggests how far Dupré would have the individual go.

¹³¹ *The Meaning of Modern Art*, p. 159.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ See Karsten Harries, "Questioning the Question of the Worth of Life," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol.88, no. 11 (November 1991), pp. 684 - 690.

¹³⁴ *Transcendent Selfhood*, p. 104.

But what really separated us was not so much that one of us wanted to go further than the other, but rather that we wanted to go in different directions. The word "transcendence" that we both liked to use, if in rather different senses, helped to blur what separated us. As Dupré reminds us, "The important thing to remember ... is that the term transcendent, so essential for religion, develops dialectically and takes various meanings in different contexts. It is always transcendent in relation to what surrounds it."¹³⁵

Whenever the word "transcendence" gets used we should thus ask ourselves just what is being transcended. The word comes from the Latin, *transcendere*, which means to climb over something, some obstacle for example, say a mountain ridge. Transcending you reach some beyond. Beyond what? First of all beyond the place where we find ourselves first of all and most of the time: this earth, subject to time, and thus to death and decay. For the ancients beyond that realm was one that could not be touched, although it could be seen, the superlunar, celestial realm, the realm of the sun and the stars, a realm, they thought not subject to death and decay, but still visible and subject to time. But if that realm could be reached by the eye, was there not a realm still higher, an invisible realm accessible only to the intellect? Plato's forms may be thought to belong to such a realm, now no longer subject to time at all, but eternal. And does not even the finite human intellect have its limits? Is there not a reality even higher than what the human intellect can grasp, an infinite reality to which our concepts cannot do justice? And is it not such transcendence that belongs to the Biblical God, who is said to be infinite? We get thus a ladder of transcendence that leads us out of the temporal and finite to the eternal and infinite.

But must transcendence be thought in opposition to temporal reality, to sensuousness? In opposition to the body? Should we not insist on just the opposite: that the link of matter to transcendence is essential to Christianity? I want to leave this question open. What I do want to reaffirm is this: to the extent that spirit and the eternal are privileged at the expense of the body and the temporal, it will be impossible to arrive at a full self-affirmation. Openness to a different sort of transcendence — I shall speak of material transcendence — is a condition of a full self-affirmation. With Heidegger we may want to say, is a necessary condition of authentic dwelling.

¹³⁵ *The Other Dimension*, p. 16.

I want to call "transcendent" 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."¹³⁶

3

Self-transcendence may of course and indeed must also be understood in a very different sense. Think of Petrarch, who, led by curiosity to climb Mont Ventoux, discovers the power of the human soul to transcend the here and now, the limits imposed on it by the body and the senses, which inevitably tie us to a particular point of view and thus to a particular perspective.¹³⁷ But the mind, in what Petrarch calls its agility, is not so limited: vast as the expanse that Petrarch could survey from his mountain is, the soul leaps to what lies beyond the Alps, to Italy, to the Pyrenees, which are too far to be seen; and the soul leaps further still, beyond the present to past and future, and finally to God. The soul cannot be assigned a place as readily as can the body.

That same sense of transcendence is presupposed by the mysticism of 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.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 146.

¹³⁷ Francesco Petrarca, "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux," trans. Hans Nachod, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr. (1948; reprint, Chicago University Press, 1971). See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 151-159.

¹³⁸ *Meister Eckhart's Predigten*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936-1976), "Adolescens, tibi dico: surge!" 2: 305. *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 134. Translation changed.

While I admit the possibility and recognize the seductive power of such self-transcendence, I also fear its anarchic potential. Like Heinrich von Virneburg, the Archbishop of Cologne, who accused Eckhart of heresy, I am suspicious of words that claim a freedom that must leave behind the familiar world with its norms and rules:

For if Life were questioned a thousand years and asked: "Why live?" and if there were an answer, it could be no more than this: "I live only to live!" And that is because Life is its own reason for being, springs from its own Source, and goes on and on, without ever asking why — just because it is Life. Thus if you ask a genuine person, that is one who acts [uncalculatingly] from his heart: "Why are you doing that?" — he will reply in the only possible way: "I do it because I do it!" ¹³⁹

To live well, Eckhart seems to be telling us, we should not have to ask for the point of life, for justifications, but simply open ourselves to and accept the mystery of life. And the same goes for the actions that make up life. They will be done spontaneously, from the heart. Such a person will not act the way he does because there is some commandment or law, he will follow his heart and for the sake of his heart suspend the claims the world makes on him. Freedom here collapses into an immediate spontaneity.

That Eckhart himself was worried about the possibility that his mysticism might invite a political and a moral anarchism is suggested by the following passage:

There are people, who say: "If I have God and God's love, I may do whatever I want to do." They are wrong. As long as you are capable of acting contrary to the will of God, the love of God is not in you, however you may deceive the world. The person who lives in God's love and by God's will takes his pleasure in whatever God prefers and refrains from any act contrary to his wishes, finding it impossible to omit what God wants, and impossible to go contrary to him. ¹⁴⁰

The good life is here understood as a life lived in such a way that the individual feels that he has no choice. He does God's will. In such a life there can be no tension between how one lives and how one ought to live, between inclination and duty. But this is a very formal characterization of the good life. Eckhart's kind of mysticism makes it difficult to

¹³⁹ *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 127.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193

give sufficient content to the idea of God to allow it to function as the measure of our human being or to retain that "unique power of integration" that Dupré attributes to the sacred.

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.¹⁴¹

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." As all definite content is recognized to be profoundly incompatible with the divine transcendence, the divine comes to be thought of as a "nameless Wildness," an abyss within the self. But God, once he has become so indefinite, threatens to evaporate altogether. God 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.

This development is essentially also a movement of introversion. The individual is cast back into him- or herself. In medieval mysticism we have one root of a very modern subjectivism. The text by Suso is thus strangely close to Sartre, who is of course a self-proclaimed atheist. 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. Dupré's understanding of self-transcendence, which likes to appeal to the Rhenish mystics, tends in this direction.¹⁴² Modern self-transcendence so understood does indeed invite 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 having.

4

I suggested that we can distinguish a material from a formal self-transcendence. To be sure, there seems to be a certain tension between "material," on the one hand, "transcendence," on the other. There are of course material objects that speak of transcendence. Just about every sacred work of art could serve as an example. But does "transcendence" not name something here that transcends the material. The way the sculptor worked the material, imbued it with spirit, made it speak of transcendence. But what does the material as such have to do with transcendence? Take a simple rock! What sense does it make to speak here of "material transcendence." We are given an answer by this passage from Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art":

A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments. If we try to lay hold of the stone's heaviness in

¹⁴¹ Heinrich Seuse, *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.

¹⁴² See *Transcendent Selfhood*, pp. 18 - 30.

another way, by placing the stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's burden has escaped us. Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelength, it is gone. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction.¹⁴³

An awareness of what Heidegger here calls the earth challenges the kind of understanding which tries to lay hold of the stone's heaviness by measuring it: an understanding that does not let the matter be, but seeks to master it, to overpower it by subjecting it to human measures. With my term "material transcendence" I gesture in the same direction.

What is transcended here 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, what 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" in *The Critique of Judgment* it is "unexhaustable." The rift between thing and word, between reality and language cannot be closed. Speaking that refuses to recognize this rift must degenerate into idle talk.

Language opens human beings to reality. Yet, as Heidegger emphasized, language conceals even as it reveals. Where this essential concealment is forgotten, language cannot but replace reality with a false, merely linguistic reality — and that holds also for religious reality. This is why religion cannot dispense with art, especially with art that does not rely on words, such as architecture. To be sure, human being is essentially a dwelling in language. But the house of language is not a prison. Art may be understood as a way of opening the windows of that house, and that goes also for poetry,

¹⁴³ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," pp. 46-47.

which should not be understood as a speaking that is privileged in that it offers particularly effective descriptions of things, but rather as speaking that re-presents the essence of language in such a way that it becomes conspicuous, and that means a speaking that opens up the rift between language and reality that is essential to language.¹⁴⁴

With my talk of a new realism in *The Meaning of Modern Art* I meant to suggest that art has the power to recall us to a sense of the gift of reality, where this means also that art discloses the rift between language and reality, a rift that is a presupposition of all meaning. 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 self. What it discloses is not just an assemblage of mute facts, but an inevitably meaningful configuration of objects of desire or things to be avoided. 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.

5

In this sense material transcendence seems to me a necessary, but not sufficient condition for what may be called "sacred transcendence."¹⁴⁵ What it lacks is precisely that "unique power of integration" that not only Dupré takes to be a defining attribute of the sacred. Sacred transcendence, I would like to suggest, is material transcendence experienced as possessing an integrating power.

Consider once more the story of Jacob's ladder, which served to establish the traditional symbolism of the church as House of God and Gate of Heaven — and some of this repeats what I said in our second session. Jacob came to "a certain place." Tired, he lay down to sleep, taking a simple stone for his pillow. And he dreamt

¹⁴⁴ Karsten Harries, "Poetry as Response. Heidegger's Step Beyond Aestheticism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 16, *Philosophy and the Arts* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 73 - 88.

¹⁴⁵ See "The Sacred as a Particular Category of Transcendence," *Transcendent Selfhood*, pp. 19 - 22.

that there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached the heaven: and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. Then Jacob awoke and said: "Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. (*Genesis*, 28, 11 - 17)

A particular place is experienced as filled with the presence of the divine. But this place, this Bethel, is not only God's dwelling place, but opens up to what is experienced as the integrating center of an ongoing, expanding, human community. It fills the individual with a hope that is not based on reason, that reason may indeed well find unreasonable. I shall come back to the topic of hope in the ninth session.

Jacob responds to this dream experience by rising and by raising the stone that had served him for a pillow from a horizontal into a vertical position. That this simple act "speaks" to us presupposes that the same stone "speaks" differently when in a horizontal position and when raised to become a vertical pillar. Jacob's pillar is the archetype of the church and a paradigm, not just of sacred architecture, but of sacred art, of art understood as a re-presentation of material that even before taken up by some artist, "speaks," a re-presentation that understands itself as a response to divinity, to some higher, integrating power.

This is how Heidegger understands the Greek temple's world establishing, where "world" does not mean a collection of mute facts but an order that assigns to persons and things their proper places:

In setting up the work the holy is opened up as holy and god is invoked into the openness of his presence. Praise belongs to dedication as doing honor to the dignity and splendor of the god. Dignity and splendor are not

properties beside and behind which the god, too, stands as something distinct, but it is rather in the dignity, in the splendor, that the god is present. In the reflected glory of this splendor there glows, i.e. there lightens itself what we called world.¹⁴⁶

In his discussion Heidegger links the world establishing of what he calls "great art" to an openness to what I have called material transcendence: the work is said to set up a world and to set forth the earth. But, as we saw, like Hegel, Heidegger, too, suggests that ours is an age when "great art, together with its nature, has departed from among men,"¹⁴⁷ had to depart, because the now ruling sense of reality makes our finite understanding the measure of reality and thus has to obscure what Heidegger calls the "earth" and what I have called "material transcendence." Much art today struggles to keep human beings open to this elusive dimension, without claiming the integrative power needed to establish a world in Heidegger's sense. But without such openness to the earth, without the experience of a positive, material transcendence, religious discourse has to degenerate into idle talk. To keep itself thus open religion must turn to art. Religion, I want to claim, needs art to preserve a sense of the sacred and thus to preserve itself.

Hegel suggests that ours is an age when "great art, together with its nature, has departed from among men,"¹⁴⁸ had to depart, because the now ruling sense of reality makes our finite understanding the measure of reality and thus has to obscure what Heidegger calls the "earth" and what I have called "material transcendence." To keep human beings open to this elusive dimension remains the task of architecture and art. And just because our sense of reality, shaped as it is by science and technology, tends to obscure what I have called material transcendence we especially continue to need art and architecture.

6

I have distinguished material from sacred transcendence in terms of what Dupré calls the latter's "unique power of integration." But if that is accepted, must we not associate something like sacred transcendence, not just with the establishment of a world, but with what Heidegger calls the thingliness of the thing? We fail to do justice to that

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 44.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., "Epilogue, p. 79.

thingliness when we approach it just in terms of Heidegger's "earth." What such an approach misses is what philosophy inadequately grasps when it understands the thingliness of the thing as what gathers a throng of sensations into a whole. As Heidegger puts it, We have "long been accustomed to *understate* the nature of the thing" by representing it "as an unknown X to which perceptible properties are attached. From this point of view, everything *that already belongs to the gathering nature of this thing* does, of course, appear as something afterwards read into it."¹⁴⁹ What is here called the "gathering nature of this thing" demands more careful consideration. How is it linked to what I called earlier the integrating power of the sacred? How is it linked to beauty?

Any successful naming of the essence of things presupposes that these must already have touched human beings more immediately. To find the right words we have to experience how some thing or things belong together, have to respond to some gathering or integrating power. Think of perceiving a family resemblance. We often perceive such a resemblance without being in possession of the concept that would explain it. The perception of how a work of art fits together is not so very different. Plato thus understands beauty as a descent of the idea into the visible. In the visible we experience the idea's gathering power. Baumgarten might have spoken of a clear, but confused perception of perfection, Kant of an aesthetic judgment. Following the poet Hölderlin, Heidegger speaks a different language: the gods themselves have to let us speak.¹⁵⁰ To name a god is to find a word for the ground of such a belonging-together of things. Heidegger therefore calls the divinities "the beckoning messengers of the godhead."¹⁵¹ Once again following Hölderlin, he will also speak of angels. Artists and poets respond to their message and make it public. Such ability to hear binds the imagination. But every attempt to thus name the gods and to make public what remains incomprehensible, in order to give human beings the measures they need to come

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., "Epilogue, p. 79.

¹⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken," *Vorträge und Aufsätze, Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000), pp. 156-1578; trans. "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 153

¹⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1981), p. 45.

¹⁵¹ "Bauen Wohnen Denken," p. 151; trans. p. 150.

together as a community, does violence to what surpasses comprehension. Again and again we are in danger of replacing gods with golden calves.

What is such talk of gods and angels to us today? Would we not have been better served, had Heidegger listened more to Kant than to Hölderlin? Are we not talking here about the productive imagination as the ultimate ground of empirical concepts, where the German *Einbildungskraft* points to the gathering together of some manifold that Heidegger connects with the word “logos”? As Kant recognized, we cannot look for the ground of such gathering in either the subject or the object. It surpasses our understanding and it is therefore not surprising that we should grope for it with inadequate symbols.¹⁵² But if such a shift in language would move the discussion into more familiar territory, by appearing to locate the power of integration in the subject, it also threatens to obscure what Kant recognized: that the ground of such integration transcends subject and object and must be sought in the supersensible to which theory has no access. Heidegger's self-consciously poetic use of words underscores the elusiveness of the measure-granting ground of human dwelling.

Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is unhoped for. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.¹⁵³

But if we can only await the divinities and if they are yet necessary for an authentic dwelling, must such a dwelling not elude us, hoped for perhaps, but something that cannot be willed. Heidegger asks us to dwell in the knowledge of the absence of the godhead's messengers, to resist the temptation to dance around some golden calf, warns us not to substitute idols for angels, measures we have made up for measures gained by interpreting the messages of the godhead's messengers. But if Heidegger rejects idolatry, how, in the absence of divinities, is our modern dwelling to find measure and direction? His suggestion that we wait for what has been withdrawn hardly allows for the content necessary for authentic dwelling, threatens to renders the idea of such a dwelling utopian.

¹⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, "Introduction" and pars. 49, 57, und 59.

¹⁵³ "Bauen Wohnen Denken," p. 152; trans. p. 150.

This much, however, has become clear: Heidegger opposes to our modern way of life a mode of existence that once gave human beings measure and ground in what we can call sacred order. Heidegger, too, would seem to dream of Greece and its gods. Or perhaps even more of that Catholic faith he lost and yet never quite left behind — otherwise how could he have said in the *Spiegel* interview: "Only a god can still save us."¹⁵⁴ Why does he speak in the singular of *ein Gott*, rather than in the plural of gods? Key here is Heidegger's understanding of authenticity, which calls for self-integration. This is why the authentic life, as Heidegger understands it, cannot finally be satisfied with a plurality of gods. As long as human beings hear only their voices, while God remains absent, dead, or mute, there is no escape from fragmentation and dispersal. Without God there can be no measure of the human being in its entirety. For Heidegger, too, there is a sense in which purity of heart is to will one thing, the title of one of Kierkegaard's *Edifying Discourses*. This the gods deny. To will one thing is possible only in response to the claim made on us by one God. Only such a God can become the theme of an all-embracing world, in which persons and things find their proper places, and thus allow for an interpretation of the totality of things as a cosmos.

Despite the terminology, we should not overlook how much separates such a view from the tradition. On the traditional view God created the human being in His image. This makes human being dependent on God. On the view outlined here human being in the world receives its measure in an ideal image of itself. To establish such an image and thus to give human being its measure is the task of art.

But how can human beings experience God as their measure, if they are given measures only through human work? Heidegger suggests that it is art that establishes God as God. But if God is to provide human existence with its integrating center, God must be more than just a poetic construct or an artistic fiction. Such fictions must be created in response to a power that issues from within, but also from beyond human being, and gathers human being-in-the-world into a meaningful whole. Heidegger's understanding of art as an establishment of the world and of God as the hidden center or

¹⁵⁴ "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, 31 May 1976, pp. 209. Trans. Lisa Harries, "Der Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger," *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon, 1990), p. 57.

theme of the world are thus not really different. Without this center we have worlds, but no world.

8. Beauty and Aura

1

As I suggested briefly, what I discussed in the preceding seminar as material transcendence and linked to Heidegger's concept of the earth also invites discussion in terms of Benjamin's concept of aura. I would like to begin this seminar with a today often repeated claim made by Walter Benjamin: in this age of their mechanical reproduction works of art have to lose the aura they once possessed.¹⁵⁵

That recalls Heidegger's claim that this age of the world picture leaves no room for what he considers great art, i.e. art that preserves its tie to the sacred. It also recalls Hegel's claim that today art in its highest sense, when it had its place besides religion and philosophy as an original way of articulating what concerns human beings most profoundly, belongs to a never to be recovered past. Like Heidegger, like Hegel, Benjamin, too, proclaims the loss of the aura works of art once possessed, where he, too, ties that aura to the sacred. But Benjamin in that essay seems to invite us to affirm that loss as a necessary byproduct of the progress of technology, progress that he recognizes to be essential to the progress of humanity: does technology, promising to render us the masters and possessors, not just of nature without, but of our own nature, not also promise true autonomy and happiness to all? This, to be sure, presupposes, as Benjamin reminds us, that a society is "mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ,"¹⁵⁶ instead of allowing technology to become an instrument used by those in power to reduce human beings to human material. Such maturity cannot simply be assumed.

Benjamin wrote these words in 1935, the very year Heidegger was also questioning this assumption in his lecture "The Origin of the Work of Art." At that time fascism seemed about to triumph in Europe, not only embracing technology, but exploiting art and its aura to transfigure technology into a modern idol. Thus while, according to Benjamin the "present conditions of production" were brushing aside "a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery,"¹⁵⁷ the continued potency of these very concepts was demonstrated by the way

¹⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217-251.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

they were used by fascism, it, too, eager to use technology as its organ, to brush away what it took to be the outmoded concept that human beings as such had dignity and demanded respect, to reduce them to mere material, to be organized or discarded by the artist-politician of genius, as he saw fit.

No doubt, it was horror at the fascist appropriation of the Nietzschean dictum, that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can human existence be justified,¹⁵⁸ that colored Benjamin's rhetoric in that essay. But was the continued potency of the aura that attaches to aesthetic phenomena not demonstrated by the triumph of the Nazis' aestheticization of politics over their Marxist rivals' politicization of aesthetics in the Germany of the Thirties, and not just there, but in Fascist Italy and elsewhere? Heidegger's essay "On the Origin of the Work of Art" can be read as perhaps the most thoughtful and for that very reason to someone, sharing Benjamin's convictions, particularly hateful expression of such a Nietzschean aestheticizing of politics. The conclusion of Benjamin's essay invites us to read it as a response. To be sure, Benjamin does not mention Heidegger here; his target here is the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti as a representative of Fascism:

'Fiat ars — pereat mundus,' says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of 'l'art pour l'art.' Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.¹⁵⁹

Politicizing art — where Benjamin was no doubt thinking of his fellow exile and close friend, the poet Berthold Brecht — here means placing art once again at the service of the true interests of human beings, not at the service of those who sought to exploit for their own ends that ill will against time, and therefore also against reality, that is a presupposition of the aesthetic approach to art.

¹⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), pp. 22, 52, 141.

Heidegger, to be sure, should not be confused with Marinetti. Was one target of Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" not precisely that aesthetic approach to art that has to culminate in 'l'art pour l'art'? On this point the essay's "Epilogue" is explicit.¹⁶⁰ Heidegger could have pointed out that, when a work of art comes to be understood as first of all an aesthetic object created for the sake of art or of beauty, it has lost its original world-establishing function, which Heidegger, too, links to ritual and religion. In their critique of the aesthetic approach to art Benjamin and Heidegger agree. But that critique lets them look in very different directions: following Hegel and Marx, and at the time very much influenced by his friend Brecht, Benjamin looks forward to a future in which human beings would no longer need art, either to compensate them for what reality denies them or to give voice to their deepest interests. The politicization of art envisioned by him presupposes that these interests are already known so that art could be put in their service. Heidegger, on the other hand, disagreeing with both Hegel and Marx, disagreeing with the Enlightenment, looks backward, back to that origin of art that, Hegel had insisted, the progress of reason has to leave behind, countering that this origin continues to present us with a continuing challenge. At issue here is the question whether reason and enlightened self-interest are sufficient to bind freedom and lead us to a life worth living.

In "The Origin of the Work of Art" the word aura does not occur. Still that essay invites consideration of the continuing significance of aura, which promises a key to the essence of what in that essay is called "great art." As I shall try to show, what Heidegger here has to say casts light on what is at issue in that loss of aura proclaimed by Benjamin: our continued need for art.

¹⁵⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 242.

¹⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks," in *Holzwege. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 67. "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 79.

2

As his work in its entirety shows, Benjamin, too, found it difficult to let go of what in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” he seems so ready to relegate to a never to be recovered past. In that essay this reluctance to jettison aura is hinted at by an example he offers, where it is significant that it is taken not from art, but from nature:

If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.¹⁶¹

The experience is familiar: the musical outline of some branch or a distant mountain range, observed on some warm, lazy summer afternoon, hints at some elusive magical other that will not yield its magic to the camera: the camera may well give me an image that preserves a trace of this magical moment, but it will not allow me to experience in the same way the beckoning call of those distant mountains, as if up there I would find home. The material object seen is experienced here as a figure of utopia. That figural significance gives the perceived its special resonance and depth.

Is it this figural significance of the perceived that the word “aura” is here meant to capture? The Greek “aura” meant “breath” or “breeze,” the Latin “aura” a gentle wind or current of air; “aura” thus came to name the subtle emanation of some substance, for example the special odor of a rose. In this sense an artificial rose can be said to lack the aura of the original. In all these cases “aura” names a perhaps elusive, but definitely physical phenomenon that can in principle be measured. Aura here has a material basis. That basis became more elusive, was spiritualized, when aura came to be understood in the 19th century as a “subtle emanation around living beings.” In that sense one might speak of the special aura issuing from a charismatic person or from someone we love. And is there not a similarity between the aura of the beloved and the aura of that distant mountain range? Does it not hint at a happiness that cannot be captured in words?

What Benjamin here has in mind would not appear to be a material phenomenon: this at least is suggested by his definition of aura “as the unique phenomenon of a

¹⁶¹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” pp. 222-223.

distance, however close it may be.”¹⁶² The chosen examples shift our attention away from smell and touch, senses that are more immediately involved with matter, to the more spiritual eye. Sight, to be sure, presupposes distance: whatever is seen is seen at a distance and in principle that distance can be measured. Benjamin’s invocation of a “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be,” forces us to link the phenomenon of aura as he here understands it, not to a physical, but to a psychical distance, where this psychical distance also has a temporal dimension as Benjamin points out in his elaboration of this thought in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939):

To perceive the aura of an object we look at is to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.

An important footnote adds this explanation:

This endowment is a wellspring of poetry. Wherever a human being, an animal, or an inanimate object thus endowed by the poet lifts up its eyes, it draws him into the distance. The gaze of nature thus awakened dreams and pulls the poet after its dreams.

Aura lets us dream of figures of paradise. To continue with the quote:

This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*, (These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises ‘the unique manifestation of a distance.’)¹⁶³

Looking at the distant mountain range we are drawn to something nameless and far removed from the cares and concerns that bind us to the here and now, lost in the immemorial past.

Psychical distance and its bracketing of the everyday and its temporality have been discussed ever since Kant as a defining characteristic of the aesthetic experience. That phenomenon was given authoritative expression by Edward Bullough in his “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle.” Bullough gives the example of the way we experience the world in a fog at sea, where everything seen seems strangely distant, even when close, everything heard strangely close, even when distant. The fog lets us become oblivious of our everyday cares and see things

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁶³ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, pp. 188 and 200.

“objectively,’ as it has often been called, by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the ‘objective’ features of the experience, and by interpreting even our ‘subjective’ affections not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon.” The thing is strangely transfigured, “seemingly possessed by human affections.” So transfigured the phenomenon acquires a flavor of “concentrated poignancy and delight,” as if illuminated by “the passing ray of a brighter light.”¹⁶⁴ The quasi-religious significance of aesthetic experience so understood is underscored by Jacques Maritain, when he says of beauty, following the medievals, that it possesses “the flavor of the terrestrial paradise, because it restores, for a moment, the peace and simultaneous delight of the intellect and the senses.”¹⁶⁵ Ever since Plato the beautiful has figured our spiritual home.

The promise of such a utopian home also seems inseparable from Benjamin’s experience of the aura possessed by his distant mountain range: it, too, seems to possess a spiritual significance. That something of the sort is indeed constitutive of aesthetic experience is hinted at by Bullough when he suggests that when transfigured into an aesthetic object a thing found in nature acquires a quasi-human presence: the aesthetic experience of natural objects involves a humanizing identification with them: spirit without now seems to answer spirit within. And is such a process of identification not also, as Hegel suggested, at work in all artistic creation? Benjamin, too, understands aura in terms of such an identification, which lets the natural appear as more than just natural. Nature seems to speak.

But is this not only an appearance, an illusion, something read into nature by the human observer? As Benjamin’s friend Theodor Adorno was to put it, “Aesthetic appearance means always: nature as the appearance of the supernatural.” But as he also insists: “art is not transcendence, but an artifact, something human, and ultimately: nature.”¹⁶⁶ So understood, the phenomenon of aura veils the perceived with an illusion

¹⁶⁴ Edward Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle,” *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 5 (1912), pp. 87-117, #4.

¹⁶⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, tr. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Scribner’s, 1962), p. 24.

¹⁶⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 78. Cited in Rajeev S. Patke, “Benjamin’s Aura, Stevens’s Description without Place,” *Benjamin’s Blindspot: Walter Benjamin & the Premature Death of Aura*, ed. Lise Patt. Topanga, California:

of transcendence. But does not reality demand eyes open to all that threatens to destroy dreams of happiness, open to hunger and disease, to injustice and exploitation. And was that not true especially in 1935, at a time when such long familiar scourges were being raised to an up to then unknown, higher level by the terror being rained on millions by leaders hungry for power and deaf to outmoded appeals to human dignity, very much attuned to the new means of domination and destruction made available by the progress of technology.

If, as his loving description of the distant mountain range and many similar passages show, Benjamin knew all too well the seductive call of the aura that seems to issue from works of art, from nature, and from persons, he also had good reason to be suspicious of the spiritual, quasi-religious significance “aura” so readily suggests. Had not Marx called religion “the opium of the people”: “at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering, ... the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.”¹⁶⁷ And since human suffering and oppression remain, even as that death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche would seem to deny to those truly of this modern age the consolation religion once was able to provide, cannot the artwork and its aura offer at least some compensation for what had been lost by offering a substitute, if only illusory transcendence? But, especially in 1935, the state of the world made an escape into the aesthetic seem irresponsible to Benjamin. What was needed, he insisted, was not the consolation offered by beautiful illusion that willingly turns its back on ugly reality, but active intervention that will change the world for the better. Precisely because he was unwilling to accept the distance that on the aesthetic approach must separate beautiful illusion from reality, Benjamin, in this respect quite representative of his generation, had to resist the aesthetic approach to art, which the phenomenon of aura so readily invited.

3

I have suggested that Benjamin’s “aura” invites interpretation as just another variant of the experience of the aesthetic object: has the aesthetic experience not been

Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2001, 81-98.

¹⁶⁷ Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, February, 1844.

described in terms of a distance that preserves the integrity and autonomy of the aesthetic object, a distance that lets the observer become fascinated and absorbed by the aesthetic object's unique presencing. Notwithstanding the death of God, such absorption in the beautiful promised a secular redemption.¹⁶⁸ The celebration of aura would thus seem to belong with the cult of beauty that is so much part of the aesthetic approach to art. Benjamin is a modernist in his resistance to that cult:

To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception (the perceiver being the advanced or conscious proletarian) whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' (that is, its Marxist communal egalitarian sense) has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction¹⁶⁹

The last quote expands on and at the same time demands reconsideration of aura as an aesthetic phenomenon. Key here is Benjamin's emphasis on the unique materiality of the auratic object, which is said to be challenged by the proletarian's "Marxist communal egalitarian sense." Such emphasis on the materiality of the auratic object has its counterpart in Heidegger's emphasis on the thingliness of the work of art. And once more in a way that invites comparison with Heidegger's discussion in "The Origin of the Work of Art," Benjamin here links aura to originality, where "the presence of the original" is said to be "the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity.

Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical — and, of course, not only technical reproducibility.¹⁷⁰

The way Benjamin links aura to a particular piece of matter invites further consideration. So understood, aura is destroyed by reproduction, where thinking of such essentially reproducible art-works as woodcuts and engravings — to which Benjamin himself calls the reader's attention in his essay — we may well wonder whether so understood the concern for authenticity does not lose sight of art character of art and distances Benjamin's understanding of aura from aura as understood by the aesthetic

¹⁶⁸ Cf.. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 147: "Presentness is grace."

¹⁶⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p., 220.

approach. For a defining characteristic of the aesthetic approach to art, captured by the rhetoric of “beautiful illusion” (*schöner Schein*), would seem to be precisely the dissociation of the aura of the aesthetic object from its materiality, from what Heidegger calls its thingliness.

Is Heidegger right? Must we not grant at least this much: whatever else works of art may be, they are also things. As the painter Frank Stella put it:

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.¹⁷¹

But is it really so obvious that the artwork must be a thing? In the case of a painting by Stella it seems natural to identify the thing, the material object, with the work of art. But when I see the same painting in a reproduction, am I not also encountering the unique work of art, perceive its special aura, if perhaps in a more or less deficient mode, depending on the quality of the reproduction? Just how important is the unique materiality or what Heidegger calls the thingly quality of the work of art? Have artists like Duchamp and Warhol not taught us what should have been evident all along: that this thingly quality is not essential to the work of art? And is this not what Benjamin himself insists on when he opposes to what he takes to be the backward looking auratic understanding of art to the forward looking political understanding that he associates with Marxism, where he too recognized the importance of Dada in destroying the matter-bound aura of the art work. Marcel Duchamp thus declared that he “wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting,” that he “was interested in making painting serve my purposes, and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was interested in ideas, not merely in visual products.”¹⁷² The politicization of art advocated by Benjamin is not so very different, although he had no doubt very different ideas, very different purposes in mind than the self-absorbed Duchamp.

¹⁷¹ "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.

¹⁷² Marcel Duchamp, “Painting ... at the Service of the Mind,” in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

Much recent concept art could be cited in support of what Benjamin has to say about the shift from an auratic to a political art. To be sure, there will always be some material thing that mediates the aesthetic experience, but that experience will leave the mediating thing behind and render it quite unimportant, no more than an occasion to engage the thoughtful observer. And what case can be made for the importance of some unique piece of matter? Kant already had called the importance of the thingly character of the work of art into question: for him the aesthetic object is in an important sense not a thing at all. And is he not supported in an obvious way by such arts as music or poetry? When we speak of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, are we speaking of a thing? If so, how is "thing" understood here? Can it be weighed or located in time and space? That can be said of some particular score and every performance takes place in space and time — but we would not want to identify either with the Fifth Symphony, which will continue to be when these are long gone.

To be sure, paintings are things, and for those of us who lack a sufficiently strong imagination, aesthetic experience depends on objects that present themselves to our senses. But does a pure aesthetic experience not surpass the material object and leave it behind, absorbed in the beauty of its optical appearance? The material thing, it would seem, is here like a gate that grants access to the beautiful forms that are the object of a purely aesthetic and that means for Kant a spiritual understanding. A distinction between material thing and aesthetic object is demanded by Kant's understanding of the disinterested character of aesthetic experience. Given such an aesthetic understanding of art, the technical reproducibility of works of art should pose no threat to their art character or aesthetic aura. It only threatens those who would fetishize the thing in the work of art.

Heidegger could be cited as an example. He, too, takes for granted that the work of art is more than just a mere thing. It does indeed seem obvious that an artwork is a thing that has been made: made to be appreciated as an aesthetic object. Artwork = (material) thing + (spiritual) aesthetic component. And isn't it the addition of this aesthetic component that makes something a work of art? Heidegger, however, claims, that such an understanding obscures the nature of great art, which stands in a different and more intimate relationship to things. Benjamin might say, Heidegger refuses to let go of a more archaic auratic understanding of the artwork that remains focused on its

thingly character. And Heidegger would have to grant this, aware that his emphasis on the unique materiality of the work of art cannot be reconciled with the modern understanding of the artwork as an aesthetic object, an understanding that subordinates the artwork's materiality to the beautiful illusion it creates. In painting this expresses itself as a subordination of materiality to opticality. With this our understanding of the aura of the artwork also has to shift. What now matters is no longer the material object, but the essentially reproducible content that finds expression in the particular thing. With this the aura of the artwork comes to be tied to the originality of the creative genius rather than to the originality of the material thing. Heidegger's emphasis on the thingly character of the work of art claims that something essential is lost in this aesthetic transformation of the aura that once belonged to works of art. And Benjamin would seem to agree, even if such agreement does not mean that he thinks it either possible or desirable to return to art its lost aura.

4

Benjamin recognizes that his matter-based concept of aura casts light not so much on the aesthetic approach to art as on an older understanding that placed art at the service of ritual:

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind.¹⁷³

And that older understanding, even if not in keeping with the spirit of the times, yet retains its hold on us. Benjamin thus finds it “significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”¹⁷⁴

Heidegger would have agreed, although more optimistic — or, should we say, more nostalgic? — than Benjamin, he seeks to preserve that archaic origin: he looks to it to distinguish what great art once was and perhaps still can be from the aesthetic art that is demanded by this age of the world picture. That distinction is said to show itself in the very different ways in which works of art are “set up”:

When a work is brought into a collection or placed in an exhibition we also say that it is “set up.” But this setting up differs essentially from

¹⁷³ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” p. 223.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

setting up in the sense of erecting a building, raising a statue, presenting a tragedy at a holy festival. Such setting up is erecting in the sense of dedication and praise. Here “setting up” no longer means a bare placing. To dedicate means to consecrate, in the sense that in setting up the work the holy is opened up as holy and the god is invoked into the openness of his presence. Praise belongs to the dedication as honor to the dignity and splendor of the god.¹⁷⁵

But the modern world picture, as Hegel, Heidegger, and Benjamin know, has no room for either gods or the holy: the world of temple and statue has perished. Although both may still have a place in our modern world as valued aesthetic objects, as such they have lost their basis in religious ritual. To be sure, we can grant Benjamin that

This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty.¹⁷⁶

This poses the question how to understand this modern cult of beauty: with Michael Fried as a secularized pursuit of grace, where the artist assumes the role of the priest?¹⁷⁷ Or as a nostalgic attempt to hold on to something that in fact has disappeared from our modern world — in other words, as an example of bad faith? More resolutely modern than any celebration of the artwork’s special aura would seem to be Kant’s understanding of beauty as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. It entails the reproducibility of what from an aesthetic point of view is essential in the work of art: its beautiful form. As Benjamin observes in a footnote:

To the extent to which the cult value of the painting is secularized the ideas of its fundamental uniqueness lose distinctness. In the imagination of the beholder the uniqueness of the phenomena that hold sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of the creative achievement.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Heidegger. “The Origin of the Work of Art,” pp. 43-44.

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” p. 224.

¹⁷⁷ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 147.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 244,

Such uniqueness transcends the material work of art, transcends the thing on which Heidegger placed so much weight. What matters about art, on this view, belongs to spirit rather than matter.

Just this, however, is challenged by Heidegger, when he takes one task of art to be the presentation of the earth. At issue is his conviction that an acceptance and preservation of the incommensurability of our understanding and reality is a condition of finding meaning in life, that meaning cannot finally be invented by us, but must be discovered. All meaning is a gift. In this sense I too want to claim, responding to clues I find not just in Heidegger but also in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, that an auratic appreciation of reality is needed to ground ethics and politics and that we need art to represent and thus recall for us the aura of nature, especially our own nature. This presupposes a rejection of the premises that support Benjamin's call for a politicization of art.

In a preceding session I suggested that it is sufficient to contemplate any natural object, say a rock or a tree, to know about the inadequacy of all our attempts to really get hold of its reality, sufficient to let us recognize that reality will finally always transcend and elude our grasp. I thus claimed that inseparable from our awareness of the reality of things is an awareness of what I called "material transcendence." The rift between thing and word cannot be closed and it is this rift that gives everything we experience as real its distinctive aura.

5

Benjamin would have objected to what he might well have called a fetishizing of matter incompatible with the positivist spirit of modern materialism. And thus he links the aura of the authentic work of art not so much to the unique, material thing it is, as to the way it is "imbedded in the fabric of tradition."¹⁷⁹ History and memory are given greater importance by him than nature. Reproduction is said to tear the artwork out of its historical context and thus to destroy its aura. This claim invites a broader application: in the age of mechanical reproduction, must not nature, too, and finally even human nature lose that special aura that distinguishes the original from its simulacrum? And if so, what

¹⁷⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 223.

are the implications of the loss of aura for ethics? This is perhaps the central question raised in this seminar.

Benjamin's loving description of the true collector — he knew what he was talking about, having been just such a collector himself — offers a pointer to just how much is at stake in the refusal to let go of the artwork's aura: human happiness.

O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure! Of no one has less been expected, and no one has a greater sense of well-being than the man who has been able to carry on his disreputable existence in the mask of Spitzweg's "Bookworm." For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for the collector — and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be — ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.¹⁸⁰

We may well ask: but what does it matter that I own this particular material object, this surviving exemplar of some rare edition, rather than some readily available and perhaps much more informative critical edition of the same text? Why should I care about the book's provenance, its previous owners?

Benjamin's portrait of the collector underscores the way aura grants to things an almost human presence.

Habent sua fata libelli: these words may have been intended as a general statement about books. So books like *The Divine Comedy*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and *The Origin of the Species* have their fates. A collector, however, interprets this Latin saying differently. For him, not only books but also copies of books have their fates. And in this sense, the most important fate of a copy is its encounter with him, with his own collection. I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.¹⁸¹

The acquisition of a book is here described in a way that suggests a marriage. It is like, not just meeting, but choosing to live with another person, to make that person part of our

¹⁸⁰ Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collecting," *Illuminations*, p. 67.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

lives, to live in them. The simile suggests that the aura some book or work of art possesses for the true collector is not unlike the aura that any person possesses whom we encounter and cherish as such. The true collector invests what he collects with his own humanity, experiences it as if it were a persons. That helps to explain its aura and his bliss.

It is indeed the person in the work of art, Benjamin suggests, that provides a last refuge to what remains of the cult value once possessed by works of art:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.¹⁸²

And is there not a sense in which it is the human countenance of a painting, say by Jackson Pollock, which, while offering us no more than traces, nevertheless is experienced as a kind of self-portrait that here, too, offers what once was the cult value of painting a last refuge? We get here a hint that the cult value of certain objects is tied to the way they place us in an ongoing human context. The loss of aura means spiritual homelessness. The age of mechanical reproduction threatens the triumph of nihilism.

As his discussion of the collector suggests, the paradigm behind all experiences of aura is for Benjamin the experience of another person:

Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes can apply equally to the look of the mind and to a glance (pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent.¹⁸³

There is to be sure a profound difference between experiencing the gaze of the other and experiencing the aura of a writer or a composer in one of his or her creations. When I

¹⁸² Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 226.

¹⁸³ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," p. 188.

experience the other person, the experience of his or her distinctive aura is the experience of an incarnation of spirit and matter so complete that there is no distance between the two. The mystery of aura is the mystery of such incarnation, which is fully realized when two lovers look into each other's eyes: "The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return."¹⁸⁴ But something of the sort is present in every experience of aura: to experience the aura of something is to experience it as if it were another person, capable of speech. Benjamin no doubt would have us underscore the "as if":

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transportation of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man.¹⁸⁵

On this interpretation it is the human subject who invests an essentially mute nature with something like spirit of soul. But must we who are truly of this modern world not recognize that such an investment is at bottom a self-deception? Today a child may still experience rocks and animals as animate, endowed with the power of speech; and fairy tales preserve traces of an older magical experience of the aura of all things. But is a presupposition of our science and technology not a reason that has to render nature mute and meaningless? Such a reason cannot make sense of the phenomenon of aura except as a projection of meaning into matter that as such lacks meaning.

But are human beings not part of nature? What allows us, or Benjamin, in this age of the technical reproducibility, not just of works of art, but increasingly of everything, to hold on to a fundamental distinction between the aura of human beings and the aura of works of art and natural objects? Are not even human beings today in danger of losing that special aura that distinguishes persons from their simulacra? Think of artificial hearts! Of cloning! What in principle distinguishes a person from a robot with a computer brain?

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

9. Beauty and Hope

1

Let me begin this seminar by returning to the example of an experience of aura that Benjamin offers us in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:

If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.¹⁸⁶

In that essay Benjamin invites us to oppose an understanding of beauty that links it to aura and here also to nature to another that severs that link and finds its paradigm in an aesthetic object that is essentially reproducible, in an artifact. That opposition demands further consideration.

We find an anticipation of it already in Plato. Consider this passage from the *Philebus*:

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?¹⁸⁷

The beauty of animals or representations of nature is here contrasted unfavorably with a beauty in which a timeless logos finds more direct expression. That beauty is grasped more adequately by the spirit than by the body; and thus it is more easily realized when we do not have to rely on our unsteady hands, but can make use of mechanical aids. Such beauty is essentially reproducible. What really counts is the idea. Especially in the twentieth century this Platonism has surfaced again and again.

We meet with this Platonic preference for the artificial, and precisely because of this supposedly more spiritual, also in Hegel. And do we not have to agree with him?

¹⁸⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” pp. 222-223.

¹⁸⁷ Plato, *Philebus* 51c–d, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

What modern aesthete would follow Kant in placing the beauty of nature decisively above the beauty of art? Did Hegel not have good reason to exclude the beauty of nature from his *Aesthetics*? Hegel justifies this exclusion by insisting that

The beauty of art is the beauty that is born — born again, that is — of the mind; and by as much as the mind and its products are higher than nature and its appearances, by so much the beauty of art is higher than the beauty of Nature. Indeed, if we look at it *formally*, i. e. only considering in what way it exists, not what there is in it, even a silly fancy such as may pass through a man's head is *higher* than any product of nature."¹⁸⁸

The young Hegel's response to the Alps is telling:

Neither the eye nor the imagination finds in these formless masses any point on which it could rest with pleasure or where they might be engaged or find something to play with. Only the mineralogist finds here material for insufficient conjectures concerning the revolutions of these mountain ranges. Reason finds in the thought of the permanence of these mountains or in the kind of sublimity that is ascribed to them nothing that impresses it, that demands wonder and admiration. Seeing these dead masses gave me nothing but the monotonous and in time boring idea: this is the way it is.¹⁸⁹

Nature is thought here by Hegel, in characteristically modern fashion, as material to be understood, appropriated, and used by us as we see fit. A crystal can be called beautiful, but the beauty of its geometric faces is really the product of our own spirit, which recognizes in their geometry something of itself. With greater justice a city, or just a ploughed field, can be called beautiful, for in both cases human beings have labored to impose an order on matter. Nature has been subjected to the human spirit. Considered just in itself, Hegel insists, nature cannot be considered beautiful.

Mind, and mind only, is capable of truth, and comprehends in itself all that is, so that whatever is beautiful can only be really and truly beautiful as partaking in this higher element and as created thereby. In this sense the

¹⁸⁸ Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, vol. 12, p. 20; trans. p. 4.

¹⁸⁹ Hegel, "Auszüge aus dem Tagebuch der Reise in die Berner Oberalpen (25. Juli bis August 1796)" *Werke*, 20 vols., ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971), vol. 1, *Frühe Schriften*, p. 618.

beauty of nature reveals itself as but a reflection of the beauty which belongs to the mind, as an imperfect, incomplete mode of being, as a mode whose really substantial element is contained in the mind itself.¹⁹⁰

Kant had a very different understanding of beauty: he leaves no doubt that for him the ground of all artificial beauty finally is the beauty of a nature that transcends our understanding. In this connection the following passage from par. 42 of the *Critique of Judgment* is of special interest.

What do poets praise more highly than the nightingale's enchantingly beautiful song? And yet, we have cases where some jovial innkeeper, unable to find such a songster, played a trick—received with greatest satisfaction [initially]—on the guests staying at his inn to enjoy the country air, by hiding in a bush some roguish youngster who (with a reed or rush in his mouth) knew how to copy that song in a way very similar to nature's. But as soon as one realizes that it was all deception, no one will long endure listening to this song that before he had considered so charming.¹⁹¹

The example raises serious questions about what Kant had said earlier in the *Critique of Judgment* about the disinterested satisfaction we take in the beautiful. Now interest would seem to come into play in a very significant way. The assumption here is that what is heard remains more or less indistinguishable from the song of the true nightingale. From a purely aesthetic point of view, it would seem, there should be no reason to rank one above the other. And does the discussion of the four moments not seek pure beauty in the form of the aesthetic object alone? But the judgment of the guests visiting Kant's inn is not adequately understood as based on the formal properties of the nightingale's song, is not a pure aesthetic judgment in Kant's sense. It carries with it an interest. But what is that interest? Might one not prefer the simulacrum, which demonstrates the skill of the human creator or performer? Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, "The Nightingale" comes to mind, a story about an emperor who comes to prefer a mechanical nightingale to the real nightingale, only to fall ill after the breakdown

¹⁹⁰ Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, vol. 12, p. 21; trans. p. 4

¹⁹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par. 42, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 169.

of the bejeweled simulacrum and to be restored to health by the return of the real nightingale. But what is at stake?

Hegel, it would seem, would have us prefer the simulacrum. Not Kant: Once we learn of the deception, he suggests, what we hear loses its aura; we hear the same melody without the former interest and pleasure, which shows that more is involved in our appreciation of beautiful nature than just the appreciation of beautiful forms. What matters to Kant is that these forms are experienced by us as products of nature, as not born of artifice. Something in nature here appears to respond to our intellect and its demands, and Kant here does not hesitate to invoke the medieval understanding of nature as a text: the beauties of nature present themselves to us as ciphers addressed to us.¹⁹² Spirit without, spirit of which we are not the author, seems to speak to our own spirit. Recall Bullough's suggestion that the aesthetic experience of natural objects involves a humanizing identification with them: spirit without now seems to answer spirit within. In beautiful nature we feel strangely at home. Beautiful nature thus figures some hoped for paradise. The experience of the beauty of the environment promises something like a genuine homecoming. It fills us with hope.

But what sense can we make today of talk of spirit dwelling in nature? A religious person might have an answer. But is such an understanding of nature not incompatible with the understanding of reality that presides over our modern world, governed as that world is by science and technology? Has the progress of science not closed the book of nature, replaced it with an understanding of nature as the totality of essentially mute facts, a resource, to be used by us as we see fit and are able? What room is there still for such Kantian hope in the realization of what we most profoundly desire? I shall return to this question in session 11.

More questions are raised by Kant's claim that "a *direct interest* in the beauty of nature ... is always the mark of a good soul," that the appreciation of the beauty of nature is akin to the moral feeling.¹⁹³ How are we to understand such kinship? One thing that links the two is that both involve something like a recognition of an incarnation of spirit in matter. To be sure, as Kant emphasizes, science can know nothing of such an incarnation. And, we may want to add, nor can we who live in this modern world. Does

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid., pp. 165, 167-168

such talk of incarnation of spirit in matter of spirit in matter not sound anachronistic? And yet such incarnation is a presupposition of any ethics. Morality presupposes that we experience others as persons deserving respect. But this is to say that I must experience her or him as more than just an object among objects, say as a very complicated robot governed by a computer so complicated that it successfully simulates human intelligence. The other must present him- or herself to me as spirit incarnated in matter. Were I to learn that what I took to be a person was just some simulacrum, I would no longer experience the aura that alone lets me recognize the other as a person, like myself. I would lose what lets me know that I am not alone. Edmund Burke touches on a matter of profound importance when, in his *Enquiry*, he links the pleasure we take in beauty to the “passions which belong to society” — where he distinguishes “the society of the sexes” from 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.”¹⁹⁴ I think of the mountains I am most familiar with as having personalities almost like people. Each has its special aura.

But has Benjamin not taught us to recognize the self-deception that supports such an experience? Children may experience natural objects as if they were persons, but hardly someone truly of this modern age.

2

Benjamin offers us as an example of an experience of aura a distant mountain range observed on some warm summer or a branch casting its shadow over you. Such an experience is characterized by a certain mood. It is as if spirit out there answered our own spirit. For a moment we feel strangely at home. I use the word “strangely” here because we have left behind our everyday world. If we can speak here of “home,” that home is at one and the same time both close and distant. Benjamin thus speaks of aura “as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” I invite you to think once more about the medieval understanding of the beautiful as a figure of paradise.

¹⁹⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. and intro. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Part One, Section VIII, p. 40.

Let me pursue this theme by presenting you here with a very different sort of example, a work of art, a pulpit my wife and I like to visit whenever we fly to Munich — recently about once a year. ‘ It has become with us a kind of ritual. The contrast



Oppolding, St. John the Baptist, pulpit (1765)

between the modern airport and the little church we like to visit striking. Although the trip takes only perhaps half an hour, the airport and the world to which it belongs seem

suddenly far away. In a way I find difficult to explain, visiting the church with its pulpit puts us in a good mood, makes us feel that all is still well with the world, makes us somehow more hopeful, and given the world we live in it seems important to hold on to hope.

The small church (1765) is surrounded by just a few farmhouses. The place is called Oppolding, no more than twenty miles from the Munich airport. Airport and church seem to belong to different worlds. The church carries us back into the 18th century. And an experience of the spirit of the place, the *genius loci*, is very much part of the experience of this pulpit, just as an experience of its embeddedness in nature is part of the experience of the aura of the call of the nightingale, as I could experience on a summer evening on a Danish island. In this connection we should consider how intimately Heidegger links the experience of what he considers great art to particular places, while for Benjamin the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility is as such essentially placeless. The relationship of beauty to place and of both to space deserves further discussion.

According to Benjamin the appreciation of the aura of some artifact depends on an appreciation of its embeddedness in its historical context, of its place in the ongoing story of humanity. That is certainly true of this pulpit. To really appreciate its special aura, we need not only to visit it, experience it in its place, but also have to have a sense of its historical place. Such awareness establishes a sense of distance, but also a sense of homecoming. We are separated from the world that created such works by the Enlightenment, and yet that temporal distance loses some of its significance when we allow ourselves to become absorbed by the church and its pulpit and by what they have to tell us.

We must understand its language, its spiritual significance, and this means also, and especially, the spiritual significance of the rocaille ornament on which its creator relied.

The pulpit is a capriccio in stucco, bound neither by the rules of representation, nor by those of architecture, hardly bound, it would seem, even by the serving function that would seem to be part of the very essence of ornament. What here is ornament? What ornament-bearer? The pulpit suggests a musical composition in three

movements¹⁹⁵: first the steep stairs, their ornamental railing introduced by a rising, shallow inverse C-curve capped by a hook or handle that promises the priest support as he begins his ascent, accompanied by the once interrupted, tripartite melody of the hand-rail, releasing him into the pulpit proper. No longer ascending, the hand-rail now gains the horizontal, first curving upward into a small hook, then falling back, its movement interrupted by rocaille forms spilling out of the pulpit, meeting a more vigorous rocaille rising from below, opening a gap in the heavy molding at the pulpit's base, the place of the molding here taken by a flower. The pulpit's "architecture" seems too weak to contain the play of rocaille, which animates, bends, and breaks through moldings and railings, asserting the vertical, preparing for the pulpit's last and climactic movement: the canopy which here has become a single rocaille that surges upward, crests, encircling the dove of the holy spirit, and disintegrates, returning to earth in two angel's heads and a garland of flowers. One thinks of water, of baptismal water — an appropriate association given that the church is consecrated to St. John the Baptist — but also of pentecostal fire, appropriate to a pulpit. Ornament here appears on the verge of transforming itself into a piece of abstract sculpture, a characteristic feature of the last phase of rococo ornamentation.

I called the pulpit a *capriccio*. "The term *capriccio* — like *fantasia* or *scherzo* — can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Initially it implied an either ignorant or purposeful blending of conventional practices and rules and was as likely to denote censure as it was praise."¹⁹⁶ In the case of this pulpit there is no suggestion of ignorance: the creator of these forms would seem to have been very much a master of his art, which

¹⁹⁵ The pianist Alfred Brendel likened it to a Haydn piano sonata: Video Interview. Zitiert nach: Alfred Brendel, "Ausgerechnet ich - Gespräche mit Martin Meyer", Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 2001.

"Dann noch etwas: Haydn ist in gewissen späten Werken der Rokoko-Komponist par excellence und nicht Mozart. Mozart ist immer der Klassizist. In einem Stück wie der letzten dreisätzigen C-Dur-Sonate Haydns oder der anderen Es-Dur-Sonate Hob. XVI/49 ist das Rokoko geradezu greifbar. Manchmal so, als ob in einer Landkirche plötzlich eine ungeheuer elegante Rokoko-Kanzel stünde. Ich denke da an eine besondere bayrische Kirche, die zu den Kirchen im Umkreis von Erding gehört. Es lohnt sich, hinzufahren und um den Schlüssel zu bitten: da ist von einem lokalen Maurermeister in Oppolding eine Kirche errichtet worden, und darin schwebt eine Kanzel, die man kaum zu betreten wagt." (S. 114f.)

he here pushes to an extreme that would seem to permit no further progress. The pulpit thus presents itself to us both as a consummation of rocaille ornamentation and by the same token as marking its end. Indeed, there is a sense in which the triumph of rocaille in works such as this pulpit figures the end of all ornament in its highest sense, i.e. of ornament understood not just as an aesthetic addendum that could equally well be different. Not long after that the question was raised: *In what style should we build?*, the title of a book by Heinrich Hübsch.¹⁹⁷ That title suggests that a threshold had been crossed in the understanding of ornament. We sense that this question would not have occurred to the creators of the church in Oppolding. That gives it an air of inevitability. The pulpit in Oppolding could be said to help mark the threshold that both joins and separates ornament from art for art's sake.¹⁹⁸ By the same token it occupies the threshold that both joins and separates an art for art's from an art for God's sake.

But can such capriciousness be reconciled with the seriousness often thought alone appropriate to divine worship. We can almost hear some sober, enlightened critic newly arrived from Leipzig or Hamburg censuring the intoxicated creator of these freely moving forms — and intoxicated here is not just a metaphor: a letter in the parish archive suggests that the creator of this pulpit was all too fond of wine. And what room does Dionysian intoxication deserve in a church? Does divine service not demand sobriety and discipline? But in this connection we should consider the strange similarities between Dionysus and Christ: both of course are associated with wine. Both are born of a human mother and a god. Both are martyred and killed only to rise again. Both represent a victory of life over death.

This pulpit seems to me to rank with the very best art the 18th century has produced. Art historians do not seem to have taken note. Of course, it is only a pulpit and pulpits do not figure prominently in most histories of art. To be sure, for many centuries the church had not only been the leading building task, but offered a framework for the other arts and in this context there can be no doubt of a pulpit's function and significance: as a platform serving the proclamation of God's Word it had been an

¹⁹⁶ Keith Christiansen, "The C. apicci," *Giambattista Tiepolo, 1696 - 1770*, ed. Keith Christiansen, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 349.

¹⁹⁷ Heinrich Hübsch, *In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?* (In which style should we build?) 1828.

essential part of the church's furnishings at least since the early Middle Ages. The marvelous pulpits of the Bavarian/Swabian Rococo thus have their place in a long tradition. Here one such pulpit. But in this pulpit it is the sculpture that impresses us. In



Weingarten, Benedictine Abbeuy Church, pulpit (1752) by Fidel Sporer

Oppolding it is the almost completely abstract art of the stuccoer. Ornament, even where it enlists the aid of sculpture, has generally been considered an art form of only secondary

¹⁹⁸ See Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

importance, hardly worthy of being ranked with the more autonomous work of the painter or the sculptor. The Bavarian rococo church invites you to invert that ranking, to place the ornament first.

What is a pulpit? A pulpit (from Latin *pulpitum* "scaffold", "platform", "stage") is a small stage on which a member of the clergy stands in order to read the Gospel lesson and deliver a sermon. It is thus a place where the Holy Spirit descends. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church The Holy Spirit, "reveals God, makes known to us Christ, his Word, his living Utterance, but the Spirit does not speak of himself. The Spirit who 'has spoken through the prophets' makes us hear the Father's Word, but we do not hear the Spirit himself. We know him only in the movement by which he reveals the Word to us and disposes us to welcome him in faith." The Catechism also lists the various symbols of the Holy Spirit in the Bible: Perhaps the most obvious one to recognize in this pulpit is the dove. "When Christ comes up from the water of his baptism, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, comes down upon him and remains with him." (Matthew 3:16)

Note how the passage links the symbolism of water to that of the dove. Water "signifies the Holy Spirit's action in Baptism." And there is something watery about the rocaïlle created by the artist, long anonymous, known just as the Master of Oppolding, now known to have been Johann Anton Bader, member a family renowned through several generations for its stucco work. In this connection we should keep in mind that the church is consecrated to John the Baptist.

The dove of the Holy Spirit is of course also familiar from traditional representations of the Annunciation. And the Virgin is figured by a shell. The pearl, which the medievals took to be the result of the wedding of earth and sky (dew or lightning) inside a shell, thus offered itself as a figure of Christ. Mary thus becomes the shell that holds the pearl that is Jesus, she, too, is the site of the descent of the Holy Spirit. Can we generalize and understand the rocaïlle which forms this pulpit as also a figure of Mary?¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ I have developed that connection more fully in *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) and in the revised and expanded German version, *Die Bayerische Rokokokirche. Das Irrationale und das Sakrale* (Dorfen: Hawel, 2009).

In this pulpit, I want to suggest, ornament has a spiritual significance: it symbolizes the descent of the divine logos into the mundane and temporal, if you wish, the wedding of heaven and earth. The joyous character of this wedding is symbolized by the roses you see in this pulpit. And that would seem to be the fundamental mood of this pulpit, as more generally of the Bavarian rococo: joy. Joy that triumphs over death. The joy of Easter and the hope connected with it.

As already suggested, this pulpit seems to me to rank with the very best art the eighteenth century has produced. Still, I have to admit that in several senses this a peripheral work of art. But precisely because of this it is a work that invites us to rethink the meaning of center and periphery. If talk of such an invitation is to be more than just a rhetorical flourish, one has to see why the pulpit and its creator deserve such praise, but also understand in just what sense both possess an only peripheral significance.

If the pulpit in Oppolding is peripheral as a work of art, peripheral, too, as I suggested, is and was the place: in more than one sense it was, even in the 18th century distant from the centers of eighteenth century Europe, from London, Paris, and Rome, peripheral even in provincial 18th century Bavaria: Oppolding was never more than a collection of just a few not terribly important farms; and, as expected, the church is tiny, indeed not even a parish church: just a *Filialkirche*, a church affiliated with the not much larger nearby parish church in Eschlbach, where the priests used to double as innkeepers, an indication of both the modest means and the spirit that gave birth to works like our pulpit.²⁰⁰ Just as we owe the Residenz in Würzburg and its splendid decoration, including what is perhaps the greatest painting of the eighteenth century, to the prince bishops of Würzburg, so we owe the unusual rococo decoration of Oppolding of which this pulpit is but a part, as of its mother church, Eschlbach, and the associated parish church in Hörgersdorf, to the "highly learned" — as he is referred to in a letter telling of his death — Ludwig Maximilian Dapsal von Rosenobel, who for more than forty years presided over the parish, having been transferred to Eschlbach at his own request.²⁰¹ Modest means forced Dapsal to assemble his artistic team, which he put to work in his three churches, from local artists.

²⁰⁰ Rümman, Schlüssel zur unbekannten Heimat (München: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1962), p. 168.

²⁰¹ Rümman, p. 168.

Hörgerdorf the largest of the three, although by no means large, also has the richest decoration, held together by the pictorial conception of the whole, focused on the high altar. The high altar's column architecture contrasts with Johann Anton Bader's extraordinarily free side altars, asymmetrical stucco compositions over a wooden core that, placed at an angle to better fill the corners and help ovalize the rectangular space, together bracket the high altar. Dapsal is said to have been highly learned and no doubt he was the author of the iconographic program of these altars, the one on the left holding a late Gothic madonna and consecrated to the Virgin, the one on the right consecrated to



Hörgerdorf, St. Bartholomäus, side altars by Johann Anton Bader, ca. 1760

St. Magdalen, depicted in the altar painting as resisting Amor. Striking is the attempt to give the stucco decoration a spiritual significance: the flowering lily that takes the place of a column in the left altar is thus a traditional image associated with the Virgin, symbolizing innocence. It grows from a fantastic base encircled by the apple-bearing snake underscoring what we see already in the altar's Gothic sculpture showing Mary as queen of Heaven, the Christ child in one hand, a scepter in the other, the sickle of the

moon at her feet. Born free of sin she has given birth to him who robs death of its sting, hell of its victory. In her nature is redeemed, transformed once more into a garden, and of both the Virgin and of the garden of paradise speak the flowers that not only cascade over the over the column on the right, but are found throughout this church. But Mary herself is figured by a garden and so it is only fitting that in this altar's gable, crowned by the sign of the Trinity with the eye of God, golden flowers should spell her monogram. Just one last detail, to illustrate the extent to which the iconographic program here forced a return of ornament to representation: tucked into a corner next to the base of the column is a stuccoed representation of the arc of the covenant, another Marian symbol.

The altar on the right answers in kind, where the place of the lily is taken by a potted agava, symbol of penitence. Tucked in between picture frame and column base we see here the tents of the Israelites, covered by the cloud of God. I could continue, but enough has been said to show that ornament here possesses a spiritual significance. And this, I would suggest, holds even for the seemingly so abstract play of rocaille: it too figures a garden. — That the Rococo did indeed associate rocaille decoration with a garden is demonstrated by an 18th century description of the stucco decoration in the Jesuit church in Landsberg am Lech, which it explicitly likens to the hanging gardens of antiquity.²⁰²

Was it also the learned Dapsal who insisted on the contrast between the "male" more architectural high altar and the "female" more ornamental side altars? Who understood rocaille as a figure of the Virgin? In this connection a small detail deserves our attention: the unusual re-presentation of the traditional hole in the nave vault, meant to allow for the exhibition of the dove of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: here it has become a miniature rocaille cupola, surrounded by clouds, inhabited by angels. Its proximity to the cartouche on the choir arch, it too supported by a plantlike rocaille arch, invites us to read the words on the cartouche, like the *inscriptio* of an emblem, as a key to the whole. The Latin text is taken from the 84th psalm:

How lovely is thy dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, yea, faints

²⁰² Wilhelm Braun, *Christoph Thomas Scheffler, Ein Asamschüler* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1939). p. 70.

for the courts of the LORD;

The special significance of this psalm for just this church becomes apparent as we continue:

my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at thy altars, O LORD of hosts,
my king and my God
Blessed are those who live in thy house,
ever singing thy praise!

The church of course is the house of God, but the psalm also invites us to think its altars in the image of the places where birds build their nests, invites us thus to think the church in the image of nature. Nature figures the lovely dwelling place of God we long for, which we are invited to think not just in the image of architecture, but even more in the image of a garden and by the same token in the image of the Virgin, who, supported by the authority of the Song of Songs, has long been figured by both architectural and garden metaphors.

This also helps us understand why Dapsal should have wanted the church's pulpit, too, to be not so much an architectural composition but as much as possible an ornamental fantasy, joining a more earthy rocaille base to heaven, here figured by angel-inhabited clouds, seat of the dove of the holy spirit. Like the church as a whole, but also like the Virgin, this pulpit, too, is the lovely place of the descent of the Holy Spirit. And did Kant not experience beautiful nature in similar fashion. In this respect Kant was very much a son of the 18th century. The *Critique of Judgment* followed the pulpit in Oppolding by only 25 years. Both works occupy the threshold that separates an age of faith from the age of reason and need to be understood with this threshold in mind.



Oppolding, pulpit, detail

3

In my thinking the pulpit in Oppolding occupies somewhat the same place as the Black Forest farmhouse does in Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking", it, too, dating from the 18th century. And like that farmhouse it invites the charge of nostalgia. The built environment testifies to the power of nostalgia. Just about every neighborhood furnishes countless examples. Often they invite the Kitsch label and as such condemnation. They seem to speak of a vain desire to recover a past that, while it may figure a state of both freedom and happiness, never quite was as remembered. Given too

much weight, nostalgia prevents us from responsibly engaging the present. The Enlightenment, to which we owe the term “nostalgia,” thus understood it first of all as something to be overcome, as a disease, an aberration, incompatible with humanity’s truly coming of age. Better to forget. As the poet Friedrich Hölderlin put it: “Kolonie liebt und tapfer Vergessen der Geist,” “the spirit loves colony and brave forgetting.”

Hölderlin touches here not only on the importance, but also on the difficulty of forgetting. Only such difficulty lets the poet call such forgetting “brave.” We find it difficult to let go of the past; is it not the past that provides needed orientation? Nostalgia and a desire to forget mingle. A presupposition of the founding of a new way of dwelling and thus also of building, of a colony, is that what once was home left those venturing into the new dissatisfied. They wanted something different, something new. And yet the colony remains bound to that home which left its founders dissatisfied and yet continues to claim them. And so, again and again, colonies have sought to preserve the image of home in the new environment, enacting a contest between nostalgia and the need to forget.

Nostalgia shows us two faces, one looks to the past, the other to the future. One seeks to return home; the other is content to leave home a dream. The former is destructive, the latter constructive. Every attempt to seize that dream, to actually return home must fail and suffer shipwreck on the reef of reality. Dreams of home, on the other hand, can cast a light over present reality that leaves us with hope for a better future.

Heidegger does not offer his farmhouse as an example of how we should build today. He knew that we cannot return to such a farmhouse. What he had said earlier of the temple in Paestum or the cathedral in Bamberg remains true in this case: “The world of the work that stands there has perished. World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer what they once were.” It would be irresponsible to build once again such farmhouses.

But must the same not be said of the way Heidegger would bind authentic dwelling to place, to landscape and home, that here has become image? Heidegger himself poses the question: “Is there still that quiet dwelling of man between earth and sky? Does the meditative spirit still preside over the land? Is there still home that nourishes roots, in whose soil the human being ever stands, i. e., is rooted

(*bodenständig*)?"²⁰³ We may want to ask: should there be such rootedness? Is it compatible with freedom? Again and again one senses in Heidegger a nostalgic longing for something lost, figured by field-path and bell-tower. And must the same not be said of my invocation of the pulpit. But should we not resist such nostalgia, accompanied by a lament over the way things and the earth have been neglected or, worse, violated by technology and, connected with it, over the rootlessness of modern man. : "All the things with which modern communications technology constantly stimulates, assaults, and presses human beings are today already much closer to us than the field surrounding the farm, the sky over the land, the hourly passage of night and day, closer than habit and custom in the village, closer than the tradition of our native world."²⁰⁴ Today these sentences seem quite dated: who of us still lives on a farm, surrounded by its field?

But granted that computer and television, car and airplane are much closer to us than field-path and bell-tower, that they help to determine the much more world-open way of our dwelling — does this not mean that we become homeless in our world when we attempt to keep our distance from technology? More free, more mobile than our parents and grandparents, do we not have to embrace technology if we are to find the "new ground and soil on which we can stand and endure in this technological world, unthreatened by it"?²⁰⁵ But Heidegger is not hoping for the recovery of some lost paradise. The conclusion of his lecture warns of all such dreams: what matters is not to return to some lost home, but to hope for such home in some unpredictable future.

But why should technology not offer us such a home. Must we agree with Heidegger, when he invites us to consider "that here, by means of technology, an attack on the life and the essence of the human being prepares itself, compared with which the explosion of the hydrogen bomb means little."²⁰⁶ Such discomfort with technology provides Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking" with its background.

I would like to conclude by returning to some lines by Hölderlin I cited above and that Heidegger, too, liked to cite:²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Martin Heidegger, "Gelassenheit," *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 17.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Martin Heidegger, "Andenken," *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1971), p. 85-89; Hölderlin's Hymne "Andenken", *Gesamtausgabe*,

For at home is the spirit
 Not in the beginning, not at the source. Home wears on him.
 Colony loves, and brave forgetting the spirit.

To find itself, the spirit must leave home, has to find its home abroad. Thus in his interpretation of Hölderlin's hymn "Der Ister" Heidegger calls the law of not being at home the law of coming to be at home.²⁰⁸ And yet home wears on us, does not leave us. And thus the sting of home stays with us, lets us seek, even abroad, in foreign parts, home. Is this not at bottom the same insight that let Ortega y Gasset, at the same conference where Heidegger gave his lecture "Building, Dwelling Thinking," compare technology with a fabulous orthopedic apparatus and demand of the architect, too, similar creations? We should not forget, however, that the creation of such an orthopedic apparatus presupposes not only that dissatisfaction with our in so many ways less than perfect bodies, emphasized by Ortega, but also knows about the body's indispensability. And similarly the spirit knows about the many imperfections of home, but also about its indispensability, knows about both. This is why it loves home even in the strange and unfamiliar, why it loves colony, the repetition of home in the foreign, but loves also the unexpected and never before seen that he is encountering in the new world he has now entered, knows that clinging to home stands in the way of such love and for this reason loves also brave forgetting. In this sense Heidegger can say that it is that home we have left behind and which yet does not let go of us, which calls us mortals into our dwelling. Centrifugal and centripetal tendencies war and compete in us human beings, in our dwelling — should war and compete, also in our building! Human beings would lose themselves were they not to remain on the way, in search of home, full of hope. Works like the pulpit in Oppolding help me to hold on to an in many ways quite irrational hope.

vol. 52 (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman, 1982), pp. 189-191; *Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister"*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol 54 (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman, 1984), pp. 156-170.

²⁰⁸ *Hölderlins Hymne "Der Ister"*, p. 166.

10. Beauty and Love

1

Let me begin by returning to the distinction Benjamin draws between an essentially reproducible beauty, appropriate to this age of mechanical reproduction, and an auratic beauty that never quite severs its ties to the sacred. Beauty here shows us, so to speak two faces. And beauty shows us these two faces already in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where in the discussion of the four moments Kant develops a formal understanding of beauty that renders its essentially placeless and reproducible — Greenberg found here the key to his understanding of the beauty of modern art — and another, auratic beauty, exemplified by his nightingale, that ties it to nature and place and preserves a tie to the sacred.

We meet with something very much like the tension between these two faces of beauty in the work of Jackson Pollock. Greenberg experienced that tension, appreciated the first, and was suspicious of the second, even as he obscurely sensed that it was Pollock's interest in the second that was the source of the strength of his art.²⁰⁹ This shows itself in a review of February 1, 1947, in which he calls Pollock, as a master of "recreated flatness," the equal of the great European painter Jean Dubuffet, only to qualify such praise with the comment: "where the Americans mean mysticism, Dubuffet means matter, material, sensation, the all too empirical and immediate world — and the refusal to be taken in by anything coming from outside it. Dubuffet's monochrome means a state of mind, not a secret insight into the absolute; his positivism accounts for the superior largeness of his art." Greenberg seemed to leave no doubt that he preferred Dubuffet's positivist approach. In Pollock he sensed something else. And Greenberg was right, Pollock did mean mysticism. But that for Greenberg was a temptation that Pollock had successfully left behind with his turn to abstraction. "Pollock has gone beyond the stage where he needs to make his poetry explicit in ideographs." And despite his words in praise of Dubuffet's positivism, Greenberg does not deny that Pollock's art moved and spoke to him as Dubuffet's did not, even if he found it impossible to say what this was: "What he invents instead has perhaps, in its very abstractness and absence of

²⁰⁹ See Elizabeth L. Langhorne, *Jackson Pollock — Kunst als Sinnsuche*, trans. Karsten Harries (Wallerstein: Hawel Verlag, 2012), p. 15.

assignable definition, a more reverberating meaning.” And so he concluded that it was Pollock, not Dubuffet, who had “more to say in the end,” where we are left to wonder just how Greenberg would have us understand this “more” to which positivism apparently cannot do justice.²¹⁰

Following Greenberg, T. J. Clark in his *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*²¹¹ also recognizes these two aspects of Pollock’s art, he, too, suspicious of the Pollock who pursues the sacred. Significantly he calls the chapter that deals with Pollock “The Unhappy Consciousness,” the often invoked title of a section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* that explores the suffering of the individual longing for a transcendent other that he cannot grasp and yet feels to be his true home. But while Hegel would convince us that the progress of spirit leaves such unhappiness behind, according to Clark it describes the spiritual situation of modernity, more especially of an artist such as Jackson Pollock, a “petty-bourgeois artist of a tragically undiluted type — one of those pure products of America (of Riverside, California) we like to believe will go crazy strictly on their own class terms” (p. 300).

Hegel emphasizes the broken character of the unhappy consciousness, caught between dreams of plenitude and ceaseless change. Clark finds Pollock’s art, more especially his drip paintings, similarly broken. “Pollock’s drip paintings, when they started, and maybe even as they continued, were alternately *Alchemy* and *Sea Change*—*Alchemy* always failing, *Sea Change* never” (p. 302). We may well wonder in just what sense Clark takes *Alchemy* always to fail? Does Clark not consider the painting that bears the title “Alchemy” dazzling and enchanting (see p. 302), the kind of work that lets us recognize Pollock as a “great painter” (p. 316)? Clark is of course not just speaking of this one painting. “Alchemy,” Clark informs us, “may originally have meant just ‘pouring’. Zosimus [Zosimos of Panopolis, an Egyptian [or Greek alchemist and Gnostic mystic] put the blame for the whole business on the fallen angels, teaching secret arts to the women they married. Now here is a metaphor Pollock could ride to the bitter end” (p. 302). But if originally “alchemy” may have meant just pouring, first of all it refers to the

²¹⁰ “Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock,” in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), vol. 2, pp. 124-25.

²¹¹ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). Page reference in text are to this

art of transmuting base matter into something spiritual and precious. So understood it offers itself as a metaphor for all art, although the thought that such art should take the form of pouring gives it a special twist. Must that effort always fail? Or only the alchemy of the modernist artist?

I welcome Clark's suggestion that titles such as "Alchemy" were partly meant to provoke Clement Greenberg, to gain some distance from him (see p. 317). Alchemy was part of the surrealist dream Greenberg despised. But did Pollock's painting "made up of minerals utterly untransmuted and untransmutable, most of them mud brown and tar black" (p. 302) succeed in anything resembling a spiritualization of matter? Clark's materialism, it would seem, has no room for such alchemy. We are left with the opposition of mute matter and the solitary self. And yet Clark knows that Pollock's art, from beginning to end, is ruled by dreams of overcoming such opposition, dreams of homecoming, darkened by rage at a world that denied him what he desired. There is a point to likening Pollock to Faust. As Clark observes, Pollock's art never "stopped being Gothic; and the heart of its Gothic-ness, clearly, was its veering between sexual rage and euphoria; and Clark recognizes the way it was fuelled by what he calls "dime-store totemism and *New Yorker* psychoanalysis" (p. 358), by a sexual mythology he calls embarrassing, without denying its importance. Insisting that such art inevitably fails, Clark did not want to question its greatness: is it not precisely in striving and failing that modernist painting according to Clark attains its highest dignity?

But what then about *Sea-Change*, said never to fail? Clark suggests that the title, taken from *Ariel's Song* with the help of Lee Krasner and Mary and Ralph Manheim, was "meant to encourage viewers to look at it through Ariel's eyes. Which is to say, look through the paintings' superficial roughness and materialism, and see them as magic-spells or disguises of some sort, fanciful, filigree, made out of nothing" (p. 300), works, and here Clark cites Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, "about nothing," held together only "by the internal strength" of their style (p. 299). As William IX of Aquitaine said of the poem Clark places at the head of this chapter: "I shall make a poem out of [about] nothing at all:/ it will not speak of me or others,/ of love or youth, or of anything else,/ for it was composed while I was asleep/riding on horseback" (p. 299). Clark tells us that when he first came across these lines he "naturally imagined them in Jackson Pollock's mouth. They put me in mind of modernism; or of one moment of modernism, which I

realized I had been trying (and failing) to get into focus ever since I had read *Harmonium* or looked at *Le Bonheur de vivre*" (p. 299). I, too, am reminded of a moment of modernism, of that moment exemplified by Malevich's *White on White*, a moment Nietzsche captured when he wrote of the world-weary modern bourgeois, ready to retire from the world, that he would rather have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose. The shadow of Schopenhauer lies heavy on such art. But I cannot imagine these lines in Pollock's mouth, and not just because of all that separates the medieval aristocrat from the modern petit bourgeois. I can imagine Pollock instead trying to step out of that shadow, shouting: "no nothing, damn it! Alchemy!" Clark no doubt would insist on the futility of all attempts to escape bourgeois reality by turning to "the dislocated, the inarticulate, the outdated, the lacking in history, the *informe*" (p. 307). Did not the *Vogue* photographs demonstrate such futility by showing how easy it was for the bourgeois world to embrace what was supposed to be experienced as radically other?

2

We meet with these two aspects of beauty, also in Nietzsche. Consider this 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 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.²¹²

Beauty, Nietzsche suggests here, is intimately tied to love, and that for Nietzsche means to sexual desire. This contrasts with Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested perception. But, 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

²¹² 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.

beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested perfection and yet brings to it a much more passionate involvement with art.

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."²¹³

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 usual "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

²¹³ *Genealogy* III, 6, pp. 104-105.

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*.²¹⁴

The essential point made here had already been stated by Nietzsche's Zarathustra in his sermon "On Immaculate Perception,"²¹⁵ 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. (p. 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 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

²¹⁴ *Genealogy* III, 6, pp. 105-106

and jealous, the monk in the moon, lecherous after the earth and all the joys of lovers. (pp. 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. (p. 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. 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. Nietzsche refuses to admit this ideal, which he links 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. (p. 244)

²¹⁵ References are to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

To this ideal of a contemplative eros Nietzsche, or rather his Zarathustra, to oppose to 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. (pp. 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 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. (p. 235)

The recognition of the two faces of beauty is as old as philosophical reflection on beauty. We meet with it already with Socrates. Thus in his *Symposium* Xenophon has Socrates link the two. That beauty is to be understood as the object of love is pretty much for granted. But the case is complicated by the following passage, where Socrates is complimenting Callias for his love of the beautiful young Autolycus:

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.²¹⁶

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.

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."²¹⁷ ...

²¹⁶ 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. 615 - 617.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

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 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.²¹⁸

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, heterosexual love. The heavenly love and the beauty that corresponds to it, lets us be silent, calms us; with 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.

This distinction between two kinds of beauty not only frames Xenophon's *Symposium*, but provides a key to Plato's *Symposium*, well. That beauty is the object of

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 635.

love is once again taken for granted. And love is tied to the loss of an original plenitude that in our present temporal state we try to recover. As befits a comic poet, Aristophanes begins by describing this loss in humorous terms:

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 trans. Walter Hamilton)

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 humans dream of a plenitude denied to us. The similarities between the Aristophanic and the Biblical accounts make 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*.

Aristophanes 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 a plenitude of which we dream and are yet denied by our fallen state. Socrates, or rather his Diotima, thus describes love 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 and eternity, mediates between the two. 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.

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, from the first to the second face of Aphrodite.

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 thus makes us want to do something. It is for this reason that Plato ties love to a desire to give birth, be it to a child, be it to a work of art or to the state. In all these cases the individual wants to overcome his own ephemeral being, create something that will resist time, establish being within becoming. But all such creation must leave us finally dissatisfied. All sensible beauty therefore calls us to an ecstatic flight beyond this world and its time, calls us to the higher mysteries of the *Symposium*.

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. 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. So understood, 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 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)

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.

4

The distinction between a lower and a higher love appears in the Christian context as the distinction between eros and agape, one selfish and tied to the earth, the other selfless and oriented towards God. And yet the two inevitably get entangled. The *Song of Songs* is perhaps the key text for those who want to explore that entanglement. To illustrate what is perhaps the standard Christian understanding of the text here a passage from Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

It seems to me that this little book is an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And so deeply indeed does she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church.²¹⁹

The bride of the Song has also been taken to be a figure of Mary. Take this passage from St. Louis de Montfort, who takes up this theme at length:

Our Blessed Lady is the true terrestrial paradise of the new Adam, and the ancient paradise was but a figure of her. There are, then, in this earthly paradise, riches, beauties, rareties, and inexplicable sweetnesses, which Jesus Christ, the new Adam, has left there; it was in this paradise that He took His complacence for nine months, worked his wonders and displayed His riches with the magnificence of a God. It is in this earthly

²¹⁹ Origen. "Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs." R. P. Lawson, trans. (*Ancient Christian Writings* 26, Westminster: Newman, 1957) p. 21. I owe this reference to Judith Dupré, who used it to introduce a term paper for a course I taught on the Bavarian rococo church, to which she gave the title "Heaven on Earth: The Virgin in the Garden at Steinhausen."

paradise that there is the true tree of life, which has borne Jesus Christ, the Fruit of Life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which has given light unto the world. There are flowerbeds adorned with beautiful and varied blossoms of virtues, diffusing odors which delight the very angels. There are meadows green with hope, impregnable towers of strength, and the most charming houses of confidence.²²⁰

Illuminating in this connection is the first encyclical Benedict XVI issued.²²¹ It begins by reminding us of the many ways we use the word “love”; amid these many meanings one, however, stands out, love between man and woman, “where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness. This would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison. So we need to ask: are all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?”

The Greek word for that love is *eros*. But Benedict points out, this word is not found in the New Testament. Instead we meet with *philia* (the love of friendship), “used with added depth of meaning in Saint John's Gospel in order to express the relationship between Jesus and his disciples,” and especially *agape*, which occurs rather infrequently in Greek usage. A new understanding of love announces itself here. Looking back at the *Symposium* we can say, the higher mysteries of *eros* lead to a devaluation of the lower mysteries. With the Enlightenment this Christian transformation begins to be seen in increasingly negative terms.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity had poisoned *eros*, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice. Here the German philosopher was expressing a

²²⁰ St. Louis de Montfort., *True Devotion to Mary*. Trans. Fr. Frederick Faber. Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1941), p. 261. I owe this reference to Margaret Blume, who used it to introduce a term paper for a course I taught on the Bavarian rococo church, to which she gave the title “The Bavarian Rococo Church’s Words on Philosophy.”

²²¹ Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, and all the Lay Faithful on Christian Love

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

widely-held perception: doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?

The Greeks, Benedict points out, understood eros as a divine power that seizes the individual. The *Symposium*, as we saw is suspicious of a too earthly eros in that it can prevent one from entering into the higher mysteries of love. Benedict makes essentially the same claim for the Old Testament: "An intoxicated and undisciplined *eros*, then, is not an ascent in "ecstasy" towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man."

Summing up his survey, Benedict concludes,

First, there is a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or "poisoning" *eros*, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.

Benedict thus affirms that man is essentially body and spirit. He loses himself when he surrenders to either one or the other. And for a "first, important indication" of how love "can fully realize its human and divine promise," Benedict turns to the *Song of Songs*. As he points out,

According to the interpretation generally held today, the poems contained in this book were originally love-songs, perhaps intended for a Jewish wedding feast and meant to exalt conjugal love. In this context it is highly instructive to note that in the course of the book two different Hebrew words are used to indicate "love". First there is the word *dodim*, a plural form suggesting a love that is still insecure, indeterminate and searching. This comes to be replaced by the word *ahabà*, which the Greek version of the Old Testament translates with the similar-sounding *agape*, which, as we have seen, becomes the typical expression for the biblical notion of love. By contrast with an indeterminate, "searching" love, this word expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the

other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.

Love, Benedict points out, “is indeed ‘ecstasy’”, not, however, as a surrender to a supremely beautiful moment, as Faust seeks it,

but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.

How then does Benedict understand the relationship of Greek eros to Christian agape? The question mirrors another: How are we to understand the relationship of the lower to the higher mysteries of eros? His answer is that love and therefore beauty is fundamentally one. The one Aphrodite shows us two aspects.

11. Beauty and Faith

1

Let me begin by returning to the contrast between an understanding of beauty that in time seeks to abolish time and another that is essentially future directed. As I showed, we find that tension already in Plato's *Symposium* as the tension between a contemplative and a procreative eros. It reappears as the tension between Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's opposed understanding of beauty. Consider once more the passage in the *Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche distances himself from Schopenhauer — and also from Kant.

What vehemence of diction! What image of torment and long despair! What an almost pathological antithesis between "a moment" and the usual "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").²²²

The beautiful is understood by Nietzsche, appealing to Stendhal, as a promise of future happiness. As such it fills us with hope. But if such hope is not to be idle and to leave reality behind, I must believe that what I hope for will become reality. I must have faith in the future. Such future-directed faith contrasts with the present-orientation that is implicit in Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction, where interest is taken by Kant to be directed towards the future and towards reality; interest does not to want to leave reality alone, but wants to transform it. Nietzsche challenges Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested perception. And in the case of both Stendhal and Schopenhauer, he

²²² *Genealogy* III, 6, pp. 105-106

suggests, the appreciation of the beautiful is in fact tied to interest and thus future directed, with the one as a promise of future happiness, where Nietzsche here thinks such happiness first of all as erotic fulfillment, with the other as a promise of an escape from that dissatisfaction that Schopenhauer takes to be inseparable from human existence, where Nietzsche once again thinks such dissatisfaction, at least in the case of Schopenhauer, in erotic terms.

We meet with a variation on this theme of the two aspects of eros even in Pope Benedict's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. Having reviewed some of the many meanings of love, the Pope remarks as I pointed out, that among these one stands out: love between man and woman, "where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness. This would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison." Nietzsche might very well have agreed, but insisted that this happiness is very much of the earth, and if sexual union carries with it a promise of future happiness, this is also a happiness of very much of this earth, a happiness that looks forward to a life with the other, looks forward to future life, to children. Consider I this connection the end of the opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

And recall once more the way Diotima corrects the young Socrates' understanding 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)

Eros may think that it finds satisfaction in the mere contemplation of the beautiful. And such a state does seem to define the top of Diotima's ladder of love.

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. (211e)

But while we may dream of such a state and perhaps for a moment seem to reach it, it is not given to us mortals to abide in it. Perhaps a god can be thought to exist in such a state, but a timeless existence is incompatible with mortality. Mortals may long for a

plenitude beyond time, dream of eternal life, of a bending together of eternity and time, of paradise, but such satisfaction is incompatible with life. Paradise is denied to us and all expressions of it conceal a contradiction, such as eternal life. The closest we mortals can come to such state, Diotima suggests, is as procreators, as creators, projecting ourselves into future that we shall no longer experience.

2

As I pointed out, we find the tension between two kinds of beauty also in Kant. On the one hand we find the aesthetic understanding of the beautiful developed in the four moments, which would have us understand the beautiful as object of a disinterested satisfaction, thus opposing it to both the pleasant and the good, which both always arouse an interest in us, one tied to the body, the other to reason. Whenever the beautiful is linked to the moral, however, interest has to reenter. And Kant will insist on that link. The first understanding divorces the beautiful also from the sacred, although in its seeming self-sufficiency, beauty so understood is capable of usurping the place of the sacred: the beautiful provides Ersatz for the sacred. This is essentially Schopenhauer's position. Or recall Fried's "presentness is grace"!

The second draws the beautiful into the vicinity of the sacred. Of special interest in this connection is par. 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant discusses thus the beautiful as a symbol of the moral.

First the question: what does Kant mean by symbol? Kant introduces his discussion by emphasizing the need for intuition.

Establishing that our concepts have reality always requires intuitions. If the concepts are empirical, the intuitions are called examples. If they are pure concepts of the understanding, the intuitions are called schemata. But if anyone goes so far as to demand that we establish the objective reality of rational concepts (i.e., the ideas) for the sake of their theoretical cognition, then he asks for something impossible, because absolutely no intuition can be given that would be adequate to them. (p. 225)

What are these ideas of reason that can find neither examples nor schemata? Kant is thinking especially of the ideas of an immortal soul, of God, and of freedom. But if the reality of these ideas cannot be established, Kant nevertheless insists that reason has a

profound interest in just these ideas, in fact needs to believe in their reality. And they can be given symbolic expression.

From the example and the schema we thus have to distinguish the symbol.

All *hypotyposis* (exhibition, *subiectio ad aspectum*) consists in making a concept [but Kant is not thinking here of empirical concepts, which can be exhibited in examples] sensible, and it is either schematic or symbolic. In schematic hypotyposis there is a concept that the understanding has formed, and the intuition corresponding to it is given a priori. In symbolic hypotyposis there is a concept which only reason can think and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, and this concept is supplied with an intuition that judgment treats in a way merely analogous to the procedure it follows in schematizing; i.e., the treatment agrees with this procedure merely in the rule followed rather than in terms of the intuition itself, and hence merely in terms of the form of the reflection rather than its content. (p. 226)

At the heart of the Kantian symbol is thus analogy. Between the symbol and what is symbolized there is no similarity; there is, however, a similarity between the ways we reflect about the symbol and the symbolized, about vehicle and tenor. The later terms are of course drawn from discussions of metaphor, but then Kant's symbol is really a metaphor. Consider the following:

Thus a monarchy ruled according to its own constitutional laws would be presented as an animate body, but a monarchy ruled by an individual absolute will would be presented as a mere machine (such as a hand mill); but in either case the presentation is only symbolic. For though there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill, there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and how they operate [*Kausalität*]. (227)

Kant goes on to point out how common such symbols are in ordinary language. And that also holds for philosophy. Kant points to its reliance on terms such as *foundation*, *depend*, *substance*.

Discourse about God, Kant insists, can only be symbolic. Such symbolic discourse is said to steer a middle course between deism and anthropomorphism: the

former, by omitting everything intuitive, says too little and ends up allowing “us to cognize nothing whatsoever, not even from a practical point of view” (228); the latter, by attributing to God such properties as understanding and will, says too much, creating its God in the image of man.

Religious art needs to be essentially symbolic.

3

Having explained his use of “symbol,” Kant develops his understanding of the beautiful as symbol of the morally good.

Now I maintain that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good; and only because we refer [*Rücksicht*] the beautiful to the morally good (we all do so naturally and require others also to do so, as a duty) does our liking for it include a claim to everyone’s assent, while the mind is also conscious of being ennobled, by this [reference], above a mere receptivity for pleasure derived from sense impressions, and it assesses the value of other people too on the basis of [their having] a similar maxim in their power of judgment. The morally good is the intelligible that taste has in view, as I indicated in the preceding section; for it is with this intelligible that even our higher cognitive powers harmonize, and without this intelligible contradictions would continually arise from the contrast between the nature of these powers and the claim that taste makes. (228-229)

The beautiful now appears as essentially metaphorical. Beauty presents itself to us as a metaphor of the morally good. And it is only as such, Kant now insists, that our appreciation of it is coupled with the demand that everyone share such appreciation.

The morally good is tied by Kant to the transcendent intelligible substrate of both humanity and of nature, demanded by the antinomies, more especially by the antinomy of taste.

That antinomy reads as follows:

- (1) Thesis: A judgment of taste is not based on concepts; for otherwise one could dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).
- (2) Antithesis: A judgment of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise regardless of the variation among [such judgments], one could not even as

much as quarrel about them (lay claim to other people's necessary assent to one's judgment. (p. 211)

For Kant it is the experience of the beautiful, as he had analyzed it earlier that leads us into this antinomy and thereby opens a window to transcendence.

Kant solves the antinomy by pointing out that the word "concept" is used in different senses in thesis and the antithesis.

There is only one way for us to eliminate the conflict between the mentioned principles, on which we base all our judgments of taste (and which are nothing but the two peculiarities of a judgment of taste that were set out in the analytic): We must show that the concept to which we refer the object in such judgments is understood in different senses in those two maxims [or principles] of the aesthetic power of judgment, and show that it is necessary for our transcendental power of judgment to adopt both these senses (or points of view in judging) but that even the illusion arising from our confusion of the two is natural and hence unavoidable. (p. 211)

Where there is a legitimate quarrel, there must be a truth of the matter and all truth, Kant insists, is based on concepts. But this would seem to conflict with the very nature of aesthetic judgments, which refer the judged back to some subjective state. The resolution of the conflict is spelled out as follows:

A judgment of taste must refer to some concept or other, or otherwise it could not possibly lay claim to necessary validity for everyone. And yet it must not be provable from a concept, because while some concepts can be determined, others cannot, but are intrinsically both indeterminate and indeterminable. Concepts of the understanding are of the first kind; for them there can be a corresponding sensible intuition whose predicates determine them. On the other hand, reason has a concept of the second kind: the transcendental concept of the supersensible underlying all that intuition, so that we cannot determine this concept any further theoretically. (p. 212)

It is not immediately clear how the rational concept of the supersensible can provide a particular aesthetic judgment with that basis needed to support its claim to universal validity. For that it is all too general. All it can do is provide a basis for the assertion that

aesthetic judgments can claim universal validity. And this Kant takes to be sufficient to establish that the concept of beauty stands in an intimate relation to that of the supersensible, that in confronting the beautiful we confront it, as it were, as if it were the appearance of the supersensible.

Kant also suggests that all sensible intuition has as its basis the transcendental rational concept of the supersensible. This suggests that all sensible intuition has its basis in an aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic experience, so understood, returns us to the basis, the *arche* of all experience. This is made explicit in the following passage:

And yet there can be no doubt that in a judgment of taste the presentation of the object (and at the same time of the subject as well) is referred more broadly [i.e. beyond ourselves], and this broad reference is our basis for extending such judgments [and treating them] as necessary for everyone. Hence this extension must be based on some concept or other; but this concept must be one that no intuition can determine, that does not permit us to cognize anything and hence does not allow us to prove a judgment of taste; such a mere concept is reason's pure concept of the supersensible underlying the object (as well as underlying the judging subject) as an object of sense and hence as appearance. (p. 212)

How convincing is this? We can grant, given Kant's analytic of the beautiful, that the concept in question "must be one that no intuition can determine," also that "reason's pure concept of the supersensible underlying the object" is such a concept, but does the latter do justice to the specificity of judgments of beauty? We may want to follow Kant and say that judgments of beauty refer us to the supersensible. And we do have a concept of the supersensible. But is this to say that this concept is the basis of our judgments of beauty? Does it not at most make room for that basis?

We are given a pointer by Kant's solution of the antinomy:

However all contradiction disappears if I say this: A judgment of taste is based on a concept (the concept of the general basis [*Grund*] of nature's purposiveness for our power of judgment), but this concept does not allow us to cognize and prove anything concerning the object because it is intrinsically indeterminate and inadequate for cognition; and yet this same concept does make the judgment of taste valid for everyone, because

though each person's judgment is singular and directly accompanies his intuition) the basis that determined the judgment lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be considered the supersensible substrate of humanity. (p. 213)

Kant here states that the ground of the aesthetic judgment should perhaps — and the somewhat hesitant “perhaps” is significant — be sought in “what may be considered the supersensible substrate of humanity.” That concept names the dimension in which the ground of some specific aesthetic judgment must be sought.

Kant suggests that the antinomy rests on a natural illusion.

What is needed to solve an antinomy is only the possibility that two seemingly [*dem Scheine nach*] conflicting propositions are in fact not contradictory but are consistent, even though it would surpass our cognitive power to explain how the concept involved [i. e. how what the concept stands for] is possible. Showing this [consistency] will also allow us to grasp [the fact] that and [the reason] why this illusion remains so even when it ceases to deceive us once we have resolved the seeming contradiction. (p. 213)

The translator's clarification following “concept,” “i.e. how what the concept stands for”, points to a lack of clarity in Kant's use of *Begriff*: it is not the concept of the supersensible that underlies all intuition, but the supersensible.

The natural illusion Kant here speaks of is the same natural illusion that invites us to make definite what must remain indeterminate, e.g., when we speak of God.

Kant sums up the preceding discussion as follows:

Eliminating the conflict between the claims and counterclaims of taste is the best we can do. It is absolutely impossible to provide a determinate, objective principle of taste that would allow us to guide, to test, and to prove its judgments, because then they would not be judgments of taste. As for the subjective principle — i. e., the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us — as the sole key for solving the mystery of this ability [i.e. taste] concealed from us even as to its sources, we can do no more than point to it; but there is nothing we can do that would allow us to grasp it any further. (pp. 213/214)

Kant understands the antinomy of taste as a decisive rejection of the empiricist and the rational understanding of beauty. Neither can do justice to it.

The antinomy I have set forth and settled here is based on the concept of taste in the proper sense, i.e. as an aesthetic power of judgment that merely reflects; and I reconciled the two seemingly conflicting principles [by showing] that *they may both be true*, and that is all we need. If, on the other hand, we assumed, as some do, that the basis determining taste is *agreeableness* (because the presentation underlying a judgment of taste is singular), or, as others would have it, that it is the principle of *perfection* (because the judgment is universally valid), with the definition of taste formulated accordingly, then the result would be an antinomy that we could not possibly settle except by showing that the two opposed (but opposed [as contraries,] not as mere contradictories) propositions are both false. (214)

Neither the empiricist nor the rationalist would, to be sure, be terribly impressed by these considerations, as Kant recognizes: The antinomy can be avoided, he points out, either by denying “that the principle of taste is based on any a priori principle whatever,” or by assuming “that a judgment of taste is actually a disguised rational judgment about the perfection we have discovered in a thing and [in] reference of its manifold to a purpose, so that basically the judgment is teleological, and we call it aesthetic only because of the confusion that here attaches to our reflection.” (p. 219) The antinomy gives us no reason to reject either of these approaches. That burden falls back on the analytic of the beautiful.

What matters to Kant here is the way the antinomy forces us to look to the supersensible:

So we see that the elimination of the antinomy of aesthetic judgment proceeds along lines similar to the solution of the antinomies of pure theoretical reason in the *Critique [of Pure Reason]*, and we see here too — as well as in the *Critique of Practical Reason* — that the antinomies compel us against our will to look beyond the sensible to the supersensible as the point [where] all our a priori powers are reconciled, since that is the only alternative left to us for bringing reason into harmony with itself. (p. 214)

The harmonious play of understanding and imagination in the experience of the beautiful lets us thus seek its ground in the supersensible. The beautiful recalls us to that supersensible ground, which is presupposed by all sensible experience.

3

But let me return to the analogy between the beautiful and the good. Kant calls our attention to four specific points:

1. The beautiful pleases immediately in reflective intuition, while the moral pleases immediately in the concept. It presents itself as being as it should be. This analogy suggests Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who understood the beautiful as perfection grasped clearly, but not distinctly. Our finite reason cannot comprehend an infinite nature as a perfect whole. But the experience of the beautiful offers an analogous experience, and so Baumgarten calls taste the analogon of reason (*analogon rationis*).²²³ Kant's aesthetic idea suggests a similar analogue to the idea reason forms of nature as such a perfect whole. (Cf. Leibniz)

2. The beautiful pleases without an interest. In this respect it seems to differ from the moral, which, as pointed out, according to Kant, is always tied to an interest. The moral person is interested in realizing what the categorical imperative demands. He faces an ought. However this ought and therefore his interest presuppose that he stands between reason and sense, is a citizen of two worlds. If here were an angel or a god, i.e. only a citizen of the kingdom of ends, he could content himself with disinterested admiration of this divinely ordered realm. The beautiful offers itself to us a metaphor of the perfection of this kingdom. It was in this sense that the medievals could say that the beautiful gives us a foretaste of paradise.

3. The harmonious play of the free imagination and the lawful understanding resembles the harmony between the free will and the universal law of reason. With respect to this third point we should perhaps ask whether, when the beautiful is understood as the symbol of the morally good, this should not be understood rather to mean as the symbol of the highest good? In the experience of the beautiful the human being is not granted his highest good, but something analogous to such a restoration occurs. One again this recalls much older discussions of the beautiful, if not as

²²³ *Metaphysica*, par. 640.

translating us into the City of God, as yet doing something analogous. Just this makes the beautiful also a temptation. Perhaps this is a reason Kant does not develop this aspect of the analogy, which could also be developed with reference to the temporality of the aesthetic experience, where we would want to pay special attention to the notion of an entirely disinterested satisfaction.

4. In judging both the beautiful and the good, we privilege principles that demand a universal assent, although in the case of the beautiful this principle is subjective and not represented by means of a universal concept, while in the case of the moral it is so represented.

The closing remarks of this paragraph should be referred back to what Kant, in par. 42, had written about the way nature, as it were, speaks to us (see p. 169): Taste builds a bridge from the sensible to the moral. Here we should note how Kant, who earlier had spoken of the symbol as relying on the analogous way we reflect on some intuitions, now links it to the analogous way we feel about nature and the way we feel when we make certain moral judgments.

4

In this connection it is helpful to consider Kant's understanding of the beautiful as the expression of the aesthetic idea, which goes significantly beyond the discussion of the beautiful provided in the four moments and has enormous implications.

We may in general call beauty (whether natural or artistic) the expression of aesthetic ideas; the difference is that in the case of beautiful [*schön*] art the aesthetic idea must be prompted by a concept of the object, whereas in the case of beautiful nature, mere reflection on a given intuition, without a concept of what the object is [meant] to be, is sufficient for arousing and communicating the idea of which that object is regarded as the *expression*.
(p. 189)

In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant calls the product of the imagination an idea. Earlier he had placed the term "idea" in a 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 aesthetic idea.

... by an aesthetic idea I mean a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it. It is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) to the rational idea, which is conversely a concept to which no intuition (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate. (p. 182)

The aesthetic idea shares this with the idea of reason: both strive for something that transcends the limits of experience. Both are alike further in trying to present us with something complete: take Leibniz's idea of the cosmos as a perfect whole — another idea of reason. The aesthetic idea presents us with an analogous completeness. Both are born of a dissatisfaction with the arbitrary and accidental. The aesthetic idea thus presents itself to us 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 in this sense beyond comparison. And being beyond comparison it strikes us as having to be just as it is, and not wanting to be somehow different.

5

The indefinite concept that underlies the beautiful as purposiveness without a definite purpose is linked by Kant to the supersensible substratum of both humanity and nature. The beautiful gives a sort of demonstration of that substratum. Nature as understood by science presents itself as ruled by necessity. But when nature is experienced as beautiful, it is experienced as being as we would have it be. The antithesis of freedom and necessity is thus overcome.

Kant's understanding of the supersensible is here inseparably linked to thoughts of God. But does Kant really believe that God exists? Consider par. 87:

The moral law is reason's formal condition for the use of our freedom and hence obligates us all by itself, independently of any purpose whatever as material condition. But it also determines for us and a priori, a final purpose, and makes it obligatory for us to strive toward [achieving] it; and that purpose is the highest good in the world that we can achieve through freedom. (p. 339)

This gives us reason to wonder how Kant would answer the question of God's existence. What is clear is that Kant is not saying that it is as necessary to assume that God exists, as it is to accept the validity of the moral law. The former assumption becomes necessary only with the introduction of the highest good as a goal we must strive for.

The subjective condition under which man (and, as far as we can conceive, any [other] rational [and] finite being as well) can set himself a final purpose under the above law, is happiness. Hence the highest physical good we can [achieve] in the world is happiness, and this is what we are to further as the final purpose as far as we can, [though] subject to the objective condition that man be in harmony with the law of morality, [since] our worthiness to be happy consists in that harmony (p. 339)

Key here is the idea of happiness. Happiness builds a bridge between nature and morality. And that bridge must be built if we are not to despair over the point of acting morally. Belief in God is thus an expression of a profound hope or optimism, while the pessimist will find little in Kant's remarks to convince him.

Kant is convinced that "in order to set ourselves a final purpose in conformity with the moral law, we must assume a moral cause of the world" (340). But this proof is not trying to say that it is as necessary to assume that God exists as it is to acknowledge that the moral law is valid, so that anyone who cannot convince himself that God exists may judge himself released from all obligations that the moral law imposes. No! All we would have to give up [if we could not convince ourselves that God exists] is our aiming at that final purpose that we are to achieve in the world by complying with the moral law (in other words, our aiming at the highest good in the world: a happiness of rational beings that harmoniously accompanies their compliance with moral laws). (p. 340)

Kant does not to make the authority of the categorical imperative depend on the existence of God. But optimism concerning our ability to make progress towards the highest good requires something like faith in God.

It is the confidence or faith that the idea of the highest good is not an impossible fiction that lets us assert the existence of God.

Reason determines us a priori to strive to the utmost to further the highest good in the world. (p. 343)

But this does not at all help us to understand nature theoretically.

Has the moral proof of God, if it does indeed deserve to be called a proof, given us insight into the way nature is? What good is that proof? Kant's here sees its function as mainly negative, as restricting the claims of reason.

Restricting reason, as regards all our ideas of the supersensible, to the conditions of its practical employment, has an unmistakable benefit concerning the idea of God. For it keeps *theology* from soaring to the heights of THEOSOPHY (in which transcendent concepts confuse reason) and from sinking to the depths of DEMONOLOGY (which is an anthropomorphic way of conceiving the supreme being); and it keeps *religion* from lapsing either unto *theurgy* (a fanatical delusion that we can receive a feeling from, and in turn influence, other supersensible beings) or into *idolatry* [*Idolatrie*] (a superstitious delusion that we can make ourselves pleasing to the supreme being by means other than the moral attitude). (p. 351)

We may well wonder what room this leaves for religion as commonly understood. Kant would put an end to all attempts to philosophize about the nature of the supersensible. For theory God is a vain hypothesis. Consider once more what Kant says about hypotheses:

If something is to serve as a hypothesis to explain how a given phenomenon is possible, then at least the possibility of this something must be completely certain. All I have to waive if I make a hypothesis is [the claim that I am] cognizing actuality. (In an opinion that we offer as probable this claim is still made.) More than that I cannot give up: at least the possibility of what serves as the basis for my explanation must not be open to any doubt, since otherwise there would be no end to empty chimeras. (p. 359)

But in that case there would also seem to be no support for the claim that there are persons. Yet the categorical imperative would have no application if we did not encounter persons and cared for their welfare. So it would seem to depend on our ability

to make teleological judgments, for to judge some entity a person is to make a teleological judgment. And such judgments must give us some insight into reality. Do they give us objective knowledge? Or do they rest on faith?

Kant pleads for something like moral faith:

Faith (as *habitus*, not as *actus*) is reason's moral way of thinking in assenting to [*Fürwahrhalten*] what is not accessible to theoretical cognition. It is the mind's steadfast principle to assume as true [*wahr*] what we must necessarily presuppose as a condition for the possibility of [achieving] the highest moral purpose, and to assume this because of our obligation to this final purpose, and despite the fact that we have no insight into whether [achieving] this purpose is possible, for that matter whether this is impossible. (p. 365)

A question that must be raised here is: what meaning can we now give to "true." We cannot understand it as correspondence to the objects. Correspondence to the "things in themselves" then? But just how are we to think that?

Kant thinks that such faith is necessary, given the aim of reason:

Yet faith is not without an adequate basis, as, e.g. an opinion is, but has a basis in reason that is *adequate for the aim of reason* (although that aim is only practical): For without faith the moral way of thinking lacks firm steadfastness whenever it fails to fulfill theoretical reason's demand for proof (that the object of morality is possible) but vacillates between practical commands and theoretical doubts. (pp. 365-366)

We should be aware here of how close Kant gets to the Nietzschean "if God is dead, everything is allowed," notwithstanding what he had said earlier about the authority of morality not depending on belief in God. Kant's pragmatic justification of faith hardly will persuade someone assailed by theoretical doubts.

Of special interest is the following passage:

What always remains very remarkable about this is that among the three pure ideas of reason, *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality*, that of **freedom is the only concept of the supersensible which (by means of the causality that we think in it) proves in nature that it has objective reality** [my emphasis], by the effects it can produce in it. It is this that makes it

possible to connect the other two ideas with nature, and to connect all three with one another to form a religion. Therefore, we have in us a principle that can determine the idea of the supersensible within us, and through this also the idea of the supersensible outside us, so as to give rise to cognition [of them], even though one that is possible only from a practical point of view; and that is something of which merely speculative philosophy (which could provide also merely a negative concept of freedom) had to despair. (p. 368)

Freedom, by its effects, opens a window in nature to the supersensible. And we should note that here Kant asserts that it proves that the supersensible has objective reality, even as such cognition is possible only from a practical point of view.

Kant does think that we have a cognition of human beings. This presupposes that the concept of a person is a concept of the understanding after all.

If I determine the causality of man, in view of certain products that are explicable only [as arising] through an intentional purposiveness, by thinking this causality as an understanding in man, then I need not stop there [i. e. at the mere thought] but can attribute this predicate to him as a very familiar property of his and cognize him through it. For I know that intuitions are given to the concept and hence under a rule. I know that this concept contains only the common characteristic[s] (and omits the particular) and hence is discursive, and that the rules for bringing given presentations under a consciousness as such are given by the understanding even prior to those intuitions, etc. Hence I attribute this property to man as a property through which I *cognize* him. Now if I want to think a supersensible being (God) as an intelligence, then for a certain point of view in my use of reason this is not only permitted but also unavoidable. But I am in no way entitled to flatter myself that I [can] attribute [an] understanding to this being and cognize this being through it as through a property. (p. 379)

As Kant tells us in the Introduction: key to the *Critique of Judgment* is the project of finding the bond that prevents nature and morality from being separated by an abyss that could not be bridged. Beauty promises such a bridge, even if it does not build such a

bridge in a way that would allow us to claim for it what Kant calls objective reality. But our experience of persons does build this bridge in a way that lets Kant claim its objective reality.

And can we not claim with a similar right that a blade of grass, i.e. an organism, has objective reality? And that the world in its entirety is a purposive whole, which is inevitably also a thought of God?

6

One final consideration is relevant in this connection: Let me return to the passage on p. 351:

Restricting reason, as regards all our ideas of the supersensible, to the conditions of its practical employment, has an unmistakable benefit concerning the idea of God. For it keeps *theology* from soaring to the heights of THEOSOPHY (in which transcendent concepts confuse reason) and from sinking to the depths of DEMONOLOGY (which is an anthropomorphic way of conceiving the supreme being).

That is to say: we should not make God into a phenomenon. This should recall an earlier passage, in which Kant had insisted that discourse about God should be symbolical.

When speaking about God we have to be content with symbols, i.e. with metaphors. But in what sense then can we claim truth for such symbolic discourse?

Note that our idea of a person, too, is an idea of reason. But we do of course want to say that we experience persons as persons. Kant even speaks here of an objective knowledge. Morality presupposes some such knowledge. But this is to say that we must be able to experience the other person as more than just an object among objects, say as a very complicated robot governed by a computer so complicated that it successfully simulates human intelligence. The other must present him- or herself to me as spirit incarnated in this particular matter. I must experience that person's special aura. Were I to learn that what I took to be a person was just some mechanical reproduction, I would no longer experience the aura that alone lets me recognize the other as a person, like myself. I would lose what lets me know that I am not alone. Edmund Burke touches on a matter of profound importance when, in his *Enquiry*, he links the pleasure we take in beauty to the "passions which belong to society" — where he distinguishes "the society

of the sexes” from 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.”²²⁴

But even if we grant that the recognition of persons presupposes an experience of aura that is more than just a registration of mute facts, that here we experience incarnations of spirit in matter, what justifies Kant's claim that the recognition of beauty in nature, too, presupposes an openness to meaning of which we are not the authors? Kant might answer that even though science cannot know anything resembling an incarnation of spirit in matter, its pursuit of truth nonetheless presupposes experiences of the intelligibility, or as he would put it, of the purposiveness of nature. Kant's theory of knowledge thus has its foundation in his aesthetics. And this claim can be generalized: the very self-assertion that leads human beings to oppose themselves to nature as its masters and possessors presupposes, not just sensation, but a perception of significant patterns or family resemblances, as Schopenhauer, and following him, Wittgenstein were to put it. All concept formation presupposes perceptions of meaning in matter, of meaning that cannot be manufactured, but must be received as a gift. Kant takes such perception to be an experience of beauty, understood as purposiveness without a purpose. There is thus an intimate link between my ability to appreciate the beauty of the natural environment and my ability to experience the other as a person. Both are perceptions of spirit incarnated in matter, answering to our own spirit. Both give us to understand that we are not lost in the world, but at home in it.

In the “Introduction” to the *Critique of Judgment* Kant is thus concerned to show, not only that aesthetic judgments are a presupposition of the work of science, but also that they build a bridge between nature as known to science and morality. To build that bridge they have to provide us with an understanding of nature that is wider than the understanding of nature at which science aims, have to provide us with experiences of meaning incarnated in matter. That is to say, ethics, too, presupposes an appreciation of the aura of persons and thing — can we say of their sacredness?

²²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. and intro. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Part One, Section VIII, p. 40.

12. Nostalgia

1

In the preceding seminar I called attention to the fact that Edmund Burke, in his *Enquiry*, links the pleasure we take in beauty to the “passions which belong to society” — where he distinguishes “the society of the sexes” from 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.”²²⁵ Kant must have appreciated this link. As did Burke, he, too, holds that, as the impulse to society is part of human nature, so is an impulse in communicating one's feelings. “Only in society,” Kant claims, “is the beautiful of empirical interest.” (p. 163) If Kant is right, Robinson Crusoe would not have planted a beautiful flower garden just for himself. To create something beautiful is to create it for others to appreciate. Such creation builds community and Kant suggests that the progress of culture can be measured by the extent to which a society had progressed from concerns with the merely charming to a concern with beauty.

But in the end, when civilization has reached its peak, it makes this communication almost the principal activity of refined inclination, and sensations are valued only to the extent that they are universally communicable. At that point, even if the pleasure that each person has in such an object is inconsiderable and of no significant interest of its own, still its value is increased almost infinitely by the idea of its universal communicability. (p. 164)

But Kant is reluctant to place too much weight on such a merely empirical interest as the conclusion to this paragraph shows:

This much we can surely say about the empirical interest in objects of taste and in taste itself: in such an interest taste caters to inclination, and no matter how refined this inclination may be, still the interest will also easily fuse with all the [other] inclinations and passions that reach their

²²⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. and intro. J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Part One, Section VIII, p. 40.

greatest variety and highest degree in society; and if our interest in the beautiful is based on these, then it can provide only a very ambiguous transition from the agreeable to the good. But whether taste in its purity, may not still be able to further this transition — this we may have cause to investigate. (pp. 164-165)

Clear is that what really interests Kant is the power of art and of beauty to build a bridge from the agreeable to the moral and that finally means for him also to the religious.

Kant opens his discussion by calling attention to a difference of opinion concerning the question whether interest in the beautiful is the mark of a good character: Much speaks against this, Kant observes. Not without reason, Kant tells us, it has been claimed that

virtuosi of taste, who not just occasionally, but apparently as a rule are vain, obstinate, and given to ruinous passions, can perhaps even less than other people claim the distinction of being attached to moral principles. And hence it seems, not only that the feeling for the beautiful is different in kind from moral interest (as indeed it actually is), but also that it is difficult to reconcile the interest which can be connected with the beautiful with the moral interest, and that it is impossible to do this by an [alleged] intrinsic affinity between the two. (p. 165)

His own position is given in the following paragraph:

Now I am quite willing to concede that an interest in the *beautiful in art* (in which I include the artistic use of natural beauties for our adornment, and hence for vanity's sake) provides no proof whatever that {someone's} way of thinking is attached to the morally good, or even inclined toward it. On the other hand, I do maintain that to take a *direct interest* in the beauty of *nature* (not merely to have the taste needed to judge it) is always the mark of a good soul; and that, if this interest is habitual, if it readily associates itself with the *contemplation of nature*, this fact indicates at least a mental attunement favorable to moral feeling. But we must carefully bear in mind that what I mean here is actually the beautiful *forms* of nature, while I continue to set aside the *charms* that nature tends to

connect so plentifully with them; for an interest in these, though also direct, is yet empirical. (pp. 165-166)

Noteworthy here is Kant's preference for the individual who admires the beauties of nature by himself, without the empirical interest in sociability. Such a person loves nature, delights, not just in its beautiful forms, but in the existence of a wild flower, a bird, an insect. He lovingly lets them be what they are. What lets us judge such a person highly is not an aesthetic, but an intellectual judgment: we cannot think of the beauty of nature without taking an interest in it, an interest that is akin to moral feeling: here we have a sense that, though we cannot discover the purpose behind what we experience, it yet strikes us as purposive. The supersensible here exhibits itself as in harmony with our faculties. Aesthetic experience here opens the door to a natural religion.

Kant here still belongs with the baroque celebration of nature as a divine gift, where I am thinking both of the Protestant and the Catholic baroque. In this connection it would be interesting to look in some detail at how nature figures in Lutheran hymns and in Catholic church architecture. And here we have also a crucial difference between Hegel and Kant. Hegel is almost exclusively interested in the beauty of art.

Unexpected is the way in which, despite his attempt to set aside the charms of nature, Kant nevertheless allows the charming to mingle with the beautiful in the case of natural beauty.

The charms in beautiful nature, which we so often find fused, as it were, with beautiful form, belong either to the modifications of light (in coloring) or of sound (in tones). For these are the only sensations that allow not merely for a feeling of sense, but also for reflection on the form of these modifications of the senses, so that they contain, as it were, a language in which nature speaks to us and which seems to have a higher meaning. Thus a lily's white color seems to attune the mind to ideas of innocence.... A bird's song proclaims his joyfulness and contentment with its existence. At least this is how we interpret nature, whether or not it has this intention. (p. 169)

I would question the exclusion of the other senses, such as smell and touch. But what interests me is the way Kant here returns explicitly to the old view of nature as a book.

Nature speaks to us, “as it were.” It provides us with what we can call natural metaphors of moral qualities. I would want to expand on this suggestion, which it seems to me, may well force us to call quite a bit of what Kant has previously said in the *Critique of Judgment* into question. Consider, e.g. his point that the sublime mood of not feeling at home is a mark of moral sensibility, Heidegger might say of authenticity. The intellectual interest in the beautiful, on the other hand, is an interest in being able to experience the world as our home. And interestingly, this leads here to that descent of pure beauty to the charming, and that means also to the body, of which Kant is so often suspicious.

Kant’s understanding of beautiful nature not only raises questions concerning his understanding of pure beauty, as developed in the four moments of the *Critique of Judgment*, but also the one-sided emphasis on pure reason in his moral philosophy. Here too something like a descent of the overly formal categorical imperative into the sensible is needed. Needed is, we might say, a schematism of pure practical reason.²²⁶

2

I have a great deal of sympathy with Kant’s analysis. Indeed, the way I experience beautiful nature is not all that dissimilar from the way he must have experienced it. And no more than he did, do I think here first of all of sublime nature, in which we feel first of all homeless, not of wilderness, but of nature that very much bears the traces of human beings that for many years made their living in and off that land. Many landscapes have given me that sense: Maine, Virginia, Tuscany, Vieques, e.g. But the landscape that I associate most readily with such an experience is in my case Bavaria. That of course is highly subjective; it depends on my personal history, with memories that connect me with that particular landscape. My fondness for certain landscapes thus invites the charge of nostalgia. And is nostalgia not to be condemned for failing to confront the challenge of the present. Nostalgia is of course the topic of today’s session, which raises the question: to what extent does religion, at least since the Enlightenment, have its foundation in nostalgia? And if this is admitted, does this necessarily imply critique? What is nostalgia?

But before I explicitly address this question in more detail, let me remain somewhat personal and return to the Bavarian landscape. That this landscape gives expression to the sacred shows itself in an obvious way, linked to the way history has shaped it, a history that reminds us both of a bygone age and of a bygone faith. Today that history is part of the special charm of that landscape, a charm the tourism industry has not overlooked. Marketing cannot afford to overlook the significance of nostalgia. And that is also important in the marketing of religion.

What am I thinking of when I speak of the Bavarian landscape as an expression of the sacred? I could begin with crosses: crosses in fields, crosses in graveyards, crosses on mountain tops. All of these, especially the last invite us to think of death and resurrection, of life triumphing over death. Every mountain bearing a cross presents itself to us thus as a figure of Golgotha.

I am also thinking of the way statues invite us to pause and reflect: statues in fields, statues on houses, especially of the Virgin, or on bridges, here especially statues of St. John of Nepomuk, the patron saint of bridges because he was thrown off the Vltava bridge in Prague for refusing to divulge what the Bohemian queen had told him in confession.

And I am thinking of farmhouses that place themselves in a religious context. But first of all I think of the rococo churches that with their characteristic onion domes dot this landscape. One is not surprised to discover that they made a deep impression on Kandinsky when he got to know this landscape and that they made their way into many of his paintings just before World War One.

I do not have time here to go into the history of the Bavarian rococo. But let me refer at least briefly once more to the tiny church in Oppolding and to its pulpit. Just what is it that lets me take such an interest in this particular work? First of all it would seem to be its aesthetic appeal, its very special beauty. But that says much too little and does not do justice to its very special aura. That aura, as Benjamin recognized, is tied to a special place and a special time. Important no doubt is the physical proximity, but also the spiritual distance from the Munich airport. Consider how our experience would differ if we were to experience it, say, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, like an 18th

²²⁶ As my mentor, the Kant scholar George A. Schrader used to emphasize

century temple of Dendur, In this particular church the pulpit transports us into a different world, a world with a very different rhythm, a world that reckoned differently with time. But that is misleadingly expressed. That church does not really transport us into that world. The world that built that church has perished, never to return.

Important here is the period, the middle of the 18th century. In this respect my invocation of the pulpit invites comparison with Heidegger's invocation of his Black Forest farmhouse, dating from the very same period. Heidegger's use of that example, as so much in his, or for that matter my own writings, also invites the charge of nostalgia. To be sure, neither Heidegger nor I are advocating a return to the 18th century. That would be silly. And yet agree with Heidegger that there is something important that we can learn from such a farmhouse or from my pulpit. But what do they have to teach us?

In more than one way they place us on the threshold of our modern world. First of all historically: they bring us back to a way of life that had not yet replaced God with reason to provide life with a ground. But not just historically does it place us on the threshold of our age of reason, that is to say, of our modern world. In buildings such as these a bygone world carries something like light into our modern world by hinting at a dimension that transcends and eludes the reach of our reason. But again, is this not nostalgia? But what is nostalgia. Is it necessarily to be condemned?

3

Not too long ago I directed an excellent dissertation on nostalgia, which has now turned into a wonderful book. I very much recommend it to you.²²⁷ In this book, *Nostalgia: Origins and Ends of an Unenlightened Disease*, Helmut Illbruck traces the history of "nostalgia", a term first coined by Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical student in Basel, in his dissertation of 1688. So, like "aesthetics," "nostalgia" is a word whose birth we can locate with precision. The book's subtitle places nostalgia in relationship to the Enlightenment, the age of reason, suggesting a certain incompatibility between nostalgia and Enlightenment.

²²⁷ Helmut Illbruck, *Figurations of Nostalgia: From the Pre-Enlightenment to Romanticism and Beyond*, Dissertation Comparative Literature, 2007. See now

The first chapters follow the history of “medical nostalgia” in great and often amusing detail. Hofer coined the technical term “nostalgia” in his dissertation, joining *nostos*, meaning a journey back home, and *algos*, meaning pain, to name what in the vernacular was called *Heimweh*, and which he had come to understand as a potentially deadly, wasting disease that, he thought, had not been properly recognized by the medical profession and that may admit no remedy other than a return to the homeland (p. 3).

Illbruck describes two cases that came to Hofer’s attention in some detail:

The first was a young student from Bern. Studying at Basel, he suffered from dejection, developed a continuous fever and other severe symptoms suggesting imminent death. When the attending apothecary discovered that the student was suffering from homesickness, he advised that the student be sent home in a litter, even though death appeared so close. Not unlike Odysseus, who only upon approaching Ithaca is able “at last” to sleep “serene, his long-tried mind at rest” (Odyssey, book 13), the student’s anticipation of being returned home soon seemed to effect an instant and quite miraculous change already: being on the road for only a few miles already soothed his pain, and even before arriving in Bern he had completely recovered (p. 37).

Our apothecary obviously made a brilliant diagnosis.

The second case is somewhat less impressive, but still telling.

The second patient was a young peasant woman from the Basel district, who had been admitted to the hospital after a fall. She remained in the hospital and refused all food and medication, for even after recovering all she could do was to moan constantly, “I want to go home.” Within a few days after her parents took her home she recovered completely, with no medication. (pp. 37-38)

Hofer’s dissertation was a great success, suggesting that it spoke to what was perceived to be a serious problem, a fact that invites us to reflect on the significance of the date of this dissertation: the age of Enlightenment was just beginning to dawn. Already in 1710

the dissertation was republished in a revised edition, testifying to its timeliness. In this edition Hofer replaced *nostalgia* with what he considered a more accurately descriptive term, *pothopatridalgia*, “made up of *pothos* (the longing), *patris*, *patridos* (of one’s fathers, the home) and *algos* (the pain).” (p. 13) It is hardly surprising that this term did not catch on.

Hofer was Alsatian, his subjects were Swiss. And the Swiss were indeed especially associated with this ailment, a significant fact, because the Swiss were the most sought after mercenaries of the time and nostalgia was a frequent cause of desertion. Hofer noted in his revised dissertation that an outbreak of nostalgia was often linked to a playing of the *Kühe-Reyen*, a “certain rustic cantilena, to which the Swiss drive the herds to pasture in the Alps.” (p. 79) Rousseau tells us that the playing of the tune had to be forbidden by royal decree, testifying to the power of music to move our hearts (p. 87). Given that nostalgia presented a very real problem, it is not surprising that various theories were proposed suggesting different causes and remedies. Was it the Swiss climate that was most significant, the milk the Swiss drank, the air pressure? But as Illbruck points out, nostalgia proved remarkably resistant to all attempts to provide the kind of physiological explanation the 18th century was so fond of.

The story changes when we turn to the late 18th and 19th centuries, when nostalgia comes to figure in both poetry and philosophy. In the spirit of the Enlightenment Kant thus understands nostalgia negatively, as originating in a troubled imagination that seeks to recover what cannot be recovered. According to him it is thus not so much a particular place that the nostalgic really longs for — and he, too, finds his paradigm with the Swiss — as lost youth, transfigured in memory and associated with “the simple pleasures of life”.²²⁸ (p. 127) When the nostalgics finally return home, they are generally disappointed, blame the changes that have taken place, but are cured. The problem for Kant then is not so much one of place, as of time. But Kant does find it worth noting that nostalgia afflicts more those who grew up in regions that, while poor in money, are socially more firmly knitted together. The nostalgic has not yet made *patria ubi bene* his motto. This suggests the possibility of understanding nostalgia as implying a legitimate

²²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie*, B86/A85

critique of an increasingly money centered society. So understood one might ascribe to it a forward-looking function. A Marxist analysis of nostalgia suggests itself.

Kant understood enlightenment as the coming of age of humanity. The nostalgic does not want to grow up. Schopenhauer was to follow Kant in this understanding, but sees this necessarily vain attempt to return home in a different light, as closely related to artistic genius, which similarly cannot feel at home in the world; and Schopenhauer finds such an inability to feel at home at the heart of religion, especially Christianity.

Nostalgia is born of a dissatisfaction with present circumstances. Crucial in this connection is Illbruck's insight that what we are nostalgic about is both something very definite and yet at the same time indeterminable: particular places figure a transcendental home that never was nor can be. That is not so very distant from the medieval understanding of beauty as a figure of paradise. That Schopenhauer should have linked nostalgia and artistic genius is thus not surprising. I find the thesis hinted at by the title of Illbruck's book, that nostalgia or homesickness attends the Enlightenment as its bad conscience and dark other convincing. And, as we are not done with the Enlightenment, we are not done with nostalgia.

It is not surprising that Schopenhauer, who found the human condition as such unsatisfactory, since our desire for true happiness will in principle remain unmet due to the essential temporality of our being in the world, would have understood nostalgia as a natural expression of our unhappiness with our situation. First of all such unhappiness will be focused on the present. And here the thought naturally offers itself that it is not, as Schopenhauer thought, the human condition as such that is to blame, where a Christian might say, the condition of fallen humanity, but rather the way that a particular historical situation had distorted reality. A Marxist would associate it with capitalism. Frederic Jameson thus observes: "It is scarcely surprising that out of the alienating structures of nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism we should look back with a (not necessarily unrevolutionary) nostalgia at such moments in which life, and form, are still relatively whole, and which seem at the same time to afford a glimpse into the nature of some future nonalienated existence as well."²²⁹ Such interpretation demands specification. What historical periods offer us such "moments in which life, and form, are still

relatively whole”? In keeping with his time Marx was thinking first of all of Greece. Attempting to explain the appeal of this art, Marx appeals to the joy we experience when we observe children: “A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child’s naiveté, and must he not try to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?”²³⁰ Why does Marx here call “the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding”? This is to suggest, not only, in the tradition of Winckelmann, Schiller, and Hegel, that art will never again be as beautiful as it was in ancient Greece, but also that humanity will never again unfold itself quite so beautifully. Is human progress bought at the price of beauty? At the price of feeling at home in the world? Of a loss of world, as Hannah Arendt might put it?

Schopenhauer, to be sure, would have us challenge claim that there ever was or can be the kind of non-alienated existence of which the Marxist dreams. The passage I quoted raises the question: to what extent is this judgment of Greek art itself grounded in a particular historical situation that constructed a Greece that answered to what it longed for. And to what extent is the childhood we nostalgically recall another such construction, present to us not so much in what we might call the historical indicative, as in the aesthetic or perhaps mythic subjunctive?

And does nostalgia provide us with an insight into art as such? Does it work as well for a masterpiece from some other period, say a sculpture by Gislebertus or a painting by Grünewald? But the general point does seem defensible: what moves us in great art, both as memory and as promise, is the idea of a fuller humanity. Nostalgia is part of such appreciation. Here nostalgia is not divorced from hope, just as thoughts of the paradise we lost intertwined with the expectations of paradise regained. If this is accepted, it becomes impossible to consider art simply an expression of a particular historical situation. All great art transcends the limited circumstances that gave birth to

²²⁹ Fredric Jameson, “Introduction,” Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, trans. Helen Lane, p. xvii.

²³⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), “Introduction,” p. 111.

it, reaches beyond any historical period. In such art something else finds expression: it testifies to the human power of self-transcendence that is but an expression of human freedom and lets us dream up figures of what Kant called the highest good, figures of plenitude.

4

I noted a certain ambivalence in Kant's discussion of nostalgia. On one hand it is criticized for refusing to confront present reality. The nostalgic instead finds refuge in a never to be recovered past. But Kant also suggests that the nostalgic recalls a way of life that in certain ways contrasts favorably with the money-centered environment in which he now finds himself. Schopenhauer finds reality as such unsatisfactory. That gives a certain legitimacy to the nostalgic's dreams of another reality. But Schopenhauer, too, is critical of nostalgia that would have us return to a past that lies irrecoverably behind us. Schopenhauer took the religion of his day to be supported by such nostalgia. Consider his critique of nineteenth century Neo-gothic architecture.

Our pleasure in Gothic works certainly rests for the most part on the association of ideas and historical reminiscences, and hence on a feeling foreign to art. All that I have said of the really aesthetic aim, about the meaning and theme of architecture, loses its validity in the case of these works.²³¹

Schopenhauer had little patience with the then growing vogue in favor of Gothic architecture, which had come to be associated with an age of faith. To be sure, he was well aware of how Gothic architecture might be justified along the lines he himself had sketched in his remarks on architecture.

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 to it no purpose other than that of bringing to clearer perceptiveness some of those

²³¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 417.

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.²³²

In the conflict of verticals and horizontals Schopenhauer locates the very essence of architecture:

its sole and constant theme is support and load. Its fundamental law is that no load may be without sufficient support, and no support without a suitable load; consequently, that the relation of these two may be the exactly appropriate one. The purest execution of this theme is column and entablature; hence the order of columns has become, so to speak, the thorough-bass of the whole of architecture. In column and entablature, support and load are completely separated; and in this way the reciprocal effect of the two and their relation to each other becomes apparent. For even every plain and simple wall certainly contains support and load, but there the two are still amalgamated.²³³

Once again the Greek temple is held up as paradigm of architectural purity and once again it is easy to criticize this view by showing how very much in keeping it is with the taste and conventions of the day. Schopenhauer was a conservative, and not just in politics.

But in the 19th century the classical paradigm was increasingly challenged by another that would have us look back to the Middle Ages. Why should a Christian

²³² Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol.1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 214.

²³³ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, p. 418.

church look like a Greek temple? Before admitting Gothic architecture as an equally valid paradigm, Schopenhauer insists, we should remind ourselves that

the conflict between rigidity and gravity, so openly and naively displayed by ancient architecture, is an actual and true one established by nature. On the other hand, the entire subjugation of gravity by rigidity remains a mere pretense, a fiction testified by illusion.²³⁴

Schopenhauer knew that such "pretense" was able to communicate to countless believers a sense of eternal security, of safety from the vicissitudes of the temporal and earthbound: "Death, where is thy sting?" Gothic verticality seemed to shout. But Schopenhauer is unable to take seriously the vertical's apparent victory over the horizontal in Gothic architecture.

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.²³⁵

Despite all self-assertion, human beings are vulnerable and mortal, and full self-affirmation requires the recognition of the limits set to our self-assertion. Gothic architecture is governed by what Schopenhauer rejects as a false ethos. He would have architecture be more open to the tragic condition of human being, figured by the contrast between the heaviness of entablatures and the assertiveness of supporting columns, between verticals and horizontals, by the Greek temple. After the Greeks, architecture, according to Schopenhauer, knows no genuine development. On this point he agrees with Hegel.

5

Nostalgia does indeed offer us a key, not just to Neo-gothic churches, but to much to much 19th and 20th century religion and art. Consider the art of the Nazarenes and Pre-Raphaelites. Much of this invites the Kitsch label. But has modernism, which turned with such vehemence against the nostalgia of the preceding decades, really left nostalgia behind? The opposite is suggested by Lyotard.

²³⁴ Ibid., pp. 417-418.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 418.

In "Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern," Lyotard presents us with an account of postmodernism that situates it within modernism. How then does Lyotard understand "modernism"? Artistic modernism, Lyotard claims, moves within the orbit of the sublime: "the aesthetic of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) find its impetus, and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms"²³⁶ What distinguishes the postmodern from the modern appropriations of the sublime is that the former has shed modernist nostalgia.²³⁷ Nostalgia is thus made constitutive of modernism.

What does modernist nostalgia long for? According to Lyotard, too, it longs for lost reality. "Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality, — a discovery linked to the invention of other realities" (p. 9).²³⁸ This formulation presupposes that in an important sense reality has not been lost. And how could it have been lost? First of all and most of the time we do not doubt our body's reality, the reality of those we live with, of the things we encounter. How then are we to understand reality's "lack of reality," this background condition of modern art?

Lyotard hints at the answer when he claims that modern art longs for "the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience" (p. 16), longs for the incarnation of what can be thought and dreamed of in what can be seen and experienced, an incarnation so complete it would absorb us in a way that would leave no room for questions such as: What is this work about? What does it mean? Absorption and presence have become key words in discussions of modernist painting. Much here recalls Schopenhauer. Modern art appears here as an expression of modernity's unhappy consciousness, unhappy precisely because never quite at home in the world, with things, which it projects against a background of a dream of plenitude that renders what happens to be the case arbitrary and contingent. Full presence would defeat arbitrariness and contingency. Nostalgia for

²³⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982 - 1985*, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Prefanis, Virginia Spate, and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 10.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

lost plenitude, lost presence, is on this view the dominant mood of modern art. Frank Stella thus dreamed of an art so lean, accurate, and right that it would allow us just to look at it.²³⁹ This would allow the observer to become a pure eye, would let us experience the artwork as a presence no longer haunted by unfulfilled possibilities, by absent meaning. The painting will of course never be lean enough; it still means, even if it means only to present itself as simply being. Thus we experience the painting as a presentation of a finally unrepresentable presence. To use Lyotard's language: the artwork seeks to show "that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see nor show."²⁴⁰ Just this, according to Lyotard, "is at stake in modern painting" and it is to characterize this vain pursuit of presentations of a reality that remain unrepresentable, the supposedly futile pursuit of the incarnation of meaning in matter long associated with the term beauty, that Lyotard invokes the category of the sublime. Here his characterization of the aesthetics of sublime painting: "As painting, it will evidently 'present' something, but negatively. It will therefore avoid figuration or representation; it will be 'blank' [blanche] like one of Malevich's squares; it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will give pleasure only by giving pain."²⁴¹ Modernist sensibility refuses representation and figuration because it senses in all that art might represent a lack of reality, an arbitrariness, an absence of what might make things weighty enough to be worthy of the artist's celebrating representation.

But according to Lyotard what has been called a lack of reality need not be understood as a lack at all. It may be considered an opportunity. This change in mood characterizes postmodernism, as Lyotard understands it. Postmodern art is modern art that has shed modernist nostalgia for plenitude and weightiness, for absorption and presence, for God and reality.

If it is true that modernity unfolds in the retreat of the real and according to the sublime relationship of the presentable with the conceivable, we can (to use a musical idiom) distinguish two essential modes in this

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

²³⁹ "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.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

relationship. The accent can fall on the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence experienced by the human subject and the obscure and futile will that animates it in spite of everything.²⁴²

But such nostalgia can also be shed:

Or else the accent can fall on the power of the faculty to conceive, on what one might call its 'inhumanity' (a quality Apollinaire insists on in modern artists), since it is of no concern to the understanding whether or not the human sensibility or imagination accords with what it conceives — and on the extension of being and jubilation that come from inventing new rules of the game, whether pictorial, artistic, or something else.²⁴³

Within modern art Lyotard thus distinguishes two strands, one ruled by *melancholia*, melancholy, the other committed to *novatio*, innovation. Thus he opposes the German expressionists to Braque and Picasso, Malevich to the later Lissitzky, de Chirico to Duchamp. And thus we may want to oppose Stella to Rauschenberg or Anselm Kiefer to Gerhard Richter.

Opposition to such *melancholia* defines postmodern art, which is said by Lyotard to have rid itself of that nostalgia for the lost center that governs modernism, nostalgia that still dreams of Mediterranean landscapes, of temples and Roman fountains, of laurel, roses, and oranges, of ruins haunted by the now absent gods, or of churches such as Oppolding. Turning its back on such nostalgia, postmodern art is glad to play, eager to explore whatever is new and unexpected, celebrating a freedom that refuses to recognize whatever boundaries are supposed to hold it as an increase in being and joy.

6

Helmut Illbruck concludes his book with a defense of nostalgia.

To repeat must not be a simple return to the past but a repetition that brings the event to be repeated back into the present capable of opening a future.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴³ Ibid.

... The repetition becomes compulsive, the return obsessive, if we want to — in the course of returning — undo the path that has brought us into the present. ... The task remains to think nostalgia and its desire to return as an enabling task, even if or rather because nostalgia's true home or end has never yet been a discrete present. (p. 250)

There are two kinds of nostalgia. One that demands that we return home; it wants to go back in history, turn back the clock. The other is forward looking, is content to dream of home, to hope that something of the promise of that dream will be realized. In this connection we should think once more of those nostalgics who were cured before they actually returned home. The thought of the possibility of coming home was sufficient to restore them to health. What mattered here was not being at home, but the mere hope that such a return was possible. That is not altogether unrelated to Kant's understanding of the highest good. The highest good is of course an idea of reason to which nothing in reality corresponds. But this idea is a postulate required by morality. And it finds expression in transfigurations of reality that lift it out of historical into something like mythical time. The home the nostalgic dreams of has this quality. Every attempt to seize it, to actually return home must inevitably fail. But the dream of home can also cast a light over present reality that fills us with hope for a better future.

13. Conclusion

1

When introducing this seminar I suggested that the world we live in has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our lives. I also claimed that the sacred needs art and art needs the sacred; and further, that we have a continued need for a sense of the sacred and for sacred art. The last claim seems to be challenged by the reality of modern life. Do we not get by quite well without a sense of the sacred? And the preceding claim, that the sacred needs art, also invites challenge — I remind you of the work of Louis Dupré. The first claim, on the other hand, that the world we live in has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our lives, seems difficult to deny, even though there has recently been talk of a “return of religion” in modernity. In conclusion let me return to these claims.

2

Let me begin with the first, the claim that the world we live in has relegated the sacred to the periphery of our lives. There are of course those who would question this claim. Defying expectation, the Enlightenment has in fact not quite led to the withering of religion. Look, e.g. at the threat radical Islam poses today. Or at the role religion plays in this country. The continued and often troubling potency of religion in the modern world, both at home and abroad, invites a rethinking of the Enlightenment project and its possible shortcomings. Reason would seem not quite to have led us to the good life. Jürgen Habermas has played a prominent part in this discussion of the present age as a “post-secular” age.²⁴⁴ Such a term suggests that we have crossed another threshold, separating secular modernity from our own age.

²⁴⁴ See Jürgen Habermas. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Habermas, Jürgen, et al., *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); with Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller, trans. Brian McNeil, C. R. V. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006). For a searching discussion of these issues I am indebted to the dissertation by Eric Bugyis, *Postmetaphysical Madness: A Critical Diagnosis of Habermas' Postsecular Pathology*, Yale, 2013.

But “post-secular” hardly describes what is going on in the Islamic world. Here we are dealing not with a passage of a modern, secular to a post-secular culture, but with the collision of a pre-Enlightenment, and that is to say pre-modern mindset and a decidedly modern world, which, with its technology — where we should think both of the digital revolution and of the arms industry — today embraces the globe. I find it impossible to think that here a threshold has been crossed. Dissatisfaction with the modern world is evident and this invites reflection. As so often before, it leads to attempts to turn back the clock in the face of the threat modernity poses to traditional values.

And what about the importance of the power of religion in this country, which would seem to make it the great exception among advanced industrial societies. Is it born of a similar dissatisfaction? As I pointed out in our very first session, experiences of the sacred would seem to have little to do with this phenomenon.

I thus find talk of this being a post-secular age highly problematic, even as the claims I made at the beginning of this seminar presuppose sympathy with such talk. Did they not also imply a plea for a post-secular culture. But I do not think that the threshold leading to such a culture has been passed. Before we can cross the threshold supposed to separate this secular from a post-secular age, we first have to see that threshold. But where is to be found? Expressions such as “post-modern” and “post-secular” betray something we can call the bad conscience of modernity, a sense that in ever more effectively asserting ourselves as the masters and possessors of nature, to use this Cartesian expression, we are betraying our own being. Consider once more the Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the former essentially free, the latter ruled by causality. In modern philosophy, think of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* or of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, that distinction reappears as the opposition of an increasingly worldless subject and the world, now understood as the totality of mute facts, which we have to appropriate and mold in accord with our desires. In the world known to science neither subjects nor values are to be found.²⁴⁵ That is to say, science would have us understand

²⁴⁵ See Karsten Harries, “The Theory of Double Truth Revisited,” *Politics of Practical Reasoning. Integrating Action, Discourse, and Argument*, ed. Ricca Edmondson and Karlheinz Hülser (Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 205-225 and the more

human beings as very complicated robots with computer brains. To be sure, I do not experience myself as such as such a robot. Cast into the world that is as it happens to be, I nevertheless face possibilities, face my own future being as a task. Within these limits, I bear responsibility for my future being. But if the world is essentially mute, how am I to meet that responsibility? Does human freedom not demand that the individual liberate him- or herself from the accidents of whatever happens to be the case? Must our real home then not be a spiritual home to which nothing sensible can finally do justice? Consider once more the recurrent insistence on the inessential nature of what is considered the accident of location, birth, gender, race. Is the attempt to discover one's home in a particular place not born of a nostalgia that we who are truly of this age should not allow to rule our lives and build us our homes? Our aggressive appropriation and transformation of the environment appears from this perspective as but an aspect of humanity's coming of age. Are there not many today who feel already more at home in cyberspace than in any natural environment? The death of sacred art and architecture is but a corollary of this development.

But the presupposition of such reflections must be challenged. Presupposed is the opposition of an essential spiritual self and its accidental material properties, which is also the opposition of spirit and matter, of subject and object. The Cartesian subject is to the object it understands as the Albertian eye is to what it sees, as if it were a picture in which the observer has no place.

The self-understanding that goes along with this presupposition finds striking expression in this letter by a young German woman to the editor, written in 1961 to *Die Zeit*, explaining why she could not consider herself guilty, despite the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis. It is not difficult to understand her reasoning.

You write that we should feel ashamed of all these atrocities as 'Germans,' without qualifications, simply because of our being German. You appeal here to a sense of nationality that the youth of today does not share anymore (I am 32 years old). ...

It was the overbearing national consciousness of our parents that drove them blindly into the arms of the Nazis. And they not only

burdened themselves with guilt, they also bear the burden of shame, of disgrace and of severe punishment. But it would be unjust and stupid, even backward, for us, the heirs of this guilt, to be ashamed of these atrocities as Germans. (Only because we happen to have been born in Central Europe).

Our relationship to these matters is far more human, a deep agonizing compassion with the victims of the Nazis, and also horror and shame about the deeds of which human beings are capable.²⁴⁶

This young woman feels shame, but as a human being only, not as a German. But she escapes from seeing herself guilty as a German by seeing herself as accidental: “Only because we happen to have been born in Central Europe.” But if this is an accident, and there is no doubt that I can look at it as such, just as I can consider the fact that I am married to this person an accident, which objectively it no doubt is, as is my own existence, then all the bonds that tie me to a greater whole must be considered as essentially accidental, as must my own bodily being. But are we not then in danger of losing ourselves? As Karl Jaspers put it: “I betrayed myself when I did not will absolutely to take upon me my people, my parents, my love, for it is to them that I owe myself.”²⁴⁷ In willing myself absolutely I must choose those who made me what I am, must take upon me their moments of triumph, but also their moments of disgrace.

The choice faced by this young woman is one that, in ever different ways, we all face. We can choose ourselves as selves that just happen to have been cast into the world in this particular way, but in their essence transcend it. This is an essentially abstract self that in the end must lose all content, becoming more and more like an empty vessel waiting to be filled. Or we can choose ourselves as essentially embodied and mortal, placed in space and time by our biology and history. In the former case, as Kierkegaard’s Judge writes in *Either/Or*, the individual “shuts himself up” and in so willing “suffers damage to his soul.”²⁴⁸

But is this really a choice we face? Is such talk of facing an *Either/Or* justified? The young woman whose letter I cited certainly did not feel that way. She thought

²⁴⁶ A letter in *DIE ZEIT*, April 1961, Nr. 7, p.38.

²⁴⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Springer, 1932), vol.1, p. 245.

²⁴⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2 vols. Trans. .F. and L.M. Swenson, Lowrie, and Johnson (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), vol. 2, p. 225.

herself speaking for her generation, a generation that had left the guilt of the parents behind, that had come to understand itself as essentially human. And would most of us not tend to agree with her without having to give the matter much thought? Her self-understanding is in keeping with the spirit presiding over the world we live in, with the spirit of what Heidegger called “The Age of the World Picture.”

What is the alternative to us?

But the presupposed world picture entails nihilism. It increasingly lets us understand everything as contingent, finally even our own self, as just happening to be the way it is, i.e. *sub specie possibilitatis*, or, to cite Kundera, as unbearably light. It leaves no room for the sacred, for to experience something as sacred is to experience it as more than just an accident, as not possibility other than it is. The sacred has weight.

3

Let me return to the Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, i.e. to the opposition of a worldless subject and the world understood as the totality of mute facts. The book of nature has here been closed. The sacred has fled from it.

In its essence this is already the understanding of nature with which we meet in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. In nature so understood neither persons nor values can be found. Kant of course followed the *Critique of Pure Reason* with the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which insisted that pure practical reason provides the individual with a sufficient answer to the question: what ought I to do? But the Cartesian bifurcation of the person into a material object and a free subject is here preserved.

That bifurcation is finally unacceptable, for if in nature so understood persons are not to be found, where does this leave us, where does it leave ethics? What possible application might any possible moral imperatives have? Does ethics not presuppose that we experience human beings, ourselves and others, as both parts of nature and as free responsible actors. And without substantial relationships to others, what is the self? That is to say, the account of experience and of nature found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* cannot be considered adequate. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant challenges thus the reductive understanding of nature that continues to preside over our science and continues to help shape our understanding of reality. It is precisely Kant’s insistence on the whole, the whole person, the whole of nature, that places him on the threshold of our

modern world, where we should perhaps say that with Kant this threshold looks ambiguous. Kant's understanding of nature in the *Critique of Judgment* looks both forward and backward, backward to the traditional Christian understanding of nature as God's creation, i.e. as sacred, and forward to an understanding of nature that still awaits us and perhaps also to a postmodern sense of the sacred. The aesthetic provides the key to such an understanding.

Let me return once more to Kant's two nightingales. Let us assume with Kant that the song of the artificial nightingale, when considered purely formally, cannot be distinguished from that of its natural counterpart: so understood the aesthetic object would seem to be the same in the two cases. And yet: the song of the real nightingale, Kant rightly insists, has an aura that its simulacrum does not possess. The loss of that aura lets us become quickly bored with the latter, let's us dismiss it as no more than rather superficial entertainment. What has changed? Obviously the context.

What then is it that gives the real nightingale its special aura? How are we to understand this sense that what we are experiencing is not something artificial, that it is not a product of human ingenuity that here speaks to us, but some other spirit incarnated in nature? Whatever it is, it must be a bit like feeling the heaviness of the stone. What we experience weighs on us, touches us. In the visible we experience something invisible. To be sure, the initial appeal of the counterfeit nightingale suggests how easily we are deceived here.

What gives the song of the genuine nightingale its special aura is not so very different from what gives a special aura to some individual we encounter: we are touched. In the visible something invisible manifests itself. What that invisible is we cannot really say. We can say with Buber²⁴⁹ that we encounter a Thou. Or with Levinas invoke the infinite.²⁵⁰ To genuinely encounter another person is to meet with an incarnation of the infinite. Such an encounter cannot be reduced to just looking at an object. We are touched by the other in a way that place a demand on us and does not leave us disinterested observers. The others plight thus weighs on us; the other's joy lifts us. We want the other to be. Our sense of responsibility is answered by the other's

²⁴⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner Classics, 2000).

²⁵⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

ability to respond. Suppose a person we thought we loved turned out to be a mechanical puppet — the case of E. T. A. Hoffmann's Olympia — our love would disintegrate.

Beauty alone, as Kant's example of the two nightingales teaches us, leaves us dissatisfied. Representations or reproductions of beautiful nature, no matter how faithful, fail to preserve the aura of the original, even if its beauty is preserved. That is the lesson of Kant's nightingale: the beauty of nature, including human nature, lets us feel at home in the world as artificial beauty is unable to do. To feel at home in the world we have to feel that spirit without answers to our own spirit, have to experience nature as a gift. The infinity of our own spirit is answered by something infinite without. Similarly a lover will experience the beloved as a gift. Some words by Kierkegaard's judge in *Either/Or* come to mind:

The man's most besetting weakness is that he has made a conquest of the girl he loves; it makes him feel his superiority, but this is in no way esthetic. When, however, he thanks God, he humble himself under his love, and it is truly far more beautiful to take the beloved as a gift from God's hand than to have subdued the whole world in order to make a conquest of her. Add to this that the person who truly loves will find no rest for his soul until he has humbled himself before God in this way, and the girl he loves means too much to him to dare take her, even in the most beautiful and noble sense, as booty.²⁵¹

Something similar can be said of art. Picasso appears to have thought of his art as a conquest. Kant would have thought little of such art. According to him the beauty of art must remain grounded in the beauty of nature, and this in two senses. The artist must represent nature understood as a gift and nature must give the rule to the artistic genius, i.e. nature must inspire him. In this sense the work of art is not so much an achievement for which he can take credit as a gift. For Kant, too, beautiful nature puts us in touch with the infinite. And if art is to do the same it cannot be experienced as just a mechanical reproduction of beautiful nature. Nature must so inspire the artist that his work too becomes an incarnation of the infinite. Kant thus calls every genuine work of art unexpoundable. Reason will never be able to give a fully adequate, i.e. an exhaustive account of what makes such a work a genuine work of art. When Kant thinks of nature,

²⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, p. 225.

he still thinks of it, as I pointed out, as divinely created. To say that the beauty of art should be grounded in the beauty of nature is to say that art must be grounded in and answer to an experience of the world as a gift that speaks to us of our place. But this presupposes that the medieval understanding of nature as a book in which we can find “the truthful sign of our life, death, condition, and destiny”²⁵² does not lie totally behind us, that we can still experience our world in some sense as a cosmos, that is to say as rather like a house, a house of which we are not the authors. Being with others, i.e, part of a community, is an indispensable aspect of this experience.

4

Let us consider once more what it is that makes the experiences of Kant’s two nightingales different. Important here is that the real nightingale is experienced as part of nature, where nature is something of which we are part as actors. Kant thus imagines a beautiful summer evening. Leaving their work behind, people have come together, enjoying food and drink. The beautiful is not thought here in the image of an Albertian painting. The individual is in a festive mood. All the senses are involved. And he or she is involved in the experience also as an actor. Part of that experience is something like a joyful appreciation of nature as a gift.

In “Building Dwelling Thinking” Heidegger gestures towards such an understanding of nature. But are we convinced by this gesture any more than by his appeal to the Black Forest farmhouse, or, for that matter, by my invocation of the pulpit in Oppolding or more generally of the culture of the Bavarian rococo?

I suggested that with his understanding of nature in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant occupies the threshold that separates the modern from a pre- or perhaps post-modern understanding of reality, where I understand modernity as ruled by that objectifying

²⁵² Alanus de Insulis, “Rhythmus alter, quo graphice natura hominis fluxa et caduca depingiutur, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris:Migne, 1855), 210: 579.

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

reason that has given us our science and technology and is ever more decisively transforming our life-world. But modernity so understood, I have argued, must lose sight of the whole human being. That is why we need to step beyond modernity. But where is this step to take us? Experiences of works of art and experiences of other persons can here point a way. But the objectifying reason that rules our science and increasingly also our common sense makes it difficult to put much weight on such invocations of the infinite. And yet Kundera's talk of the unbearable lightness of being does strike a chord: there is a sense in which our culture has lost its way.

When one has lost one's way it is natural to consider how one got to this place, to retrace the path taken, to consider alternatives that were rejected or neglected. In this connection historical thresholds are of special interest. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* marks such a threshold, the threshold that separates the Enlightenment from the Baroque. My book on the Bavarian Rococo Church is an examination of the same threshold, although it considers it, if you wish, in the opposite direction, from the Baroque to the Enlightenment rather than the reverse. Although few philosophers have recognized this, Otto Pöggeler is an exception, that book occupies a central position in my work. As the subtitle, *Between Faith and Aestheticism* suggests, at issue is the threshold that separates a modern aestheticism from an approach to art supported by faith. But does that faith, a characteristically Bavarian variant of the Catholic faith of the counter-reformation, not lie behind us in a way that forbids any attempt to recover it? What then do I hope to learn from the Bavarian rococo?

For a first answer I can turn to what Heidegger has to say in "Building Dwelling Thinking" about his 18th century Black Forest farmhouse:

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build. Our reference to the Black Forest farm in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses, rather, it illustrates by a dwelling that *has been* how *it* was able to build.²⁵³

What kind of dwelling did Heidegger have in mind?

²⁵³ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 2001), p. 158.

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain-slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead"—for that is what they call a coffin here: the *Totenbaum*—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse.²⁵⁴

There is no talk here of art. Instead Heidegger speaks of “the altar corner behind the community table,” of “the hallowed places of childbed,” and “the "tree of the dead," the *Totenbaum*. The house thus makes room for the sacred, which, while finding its focus in particular things and places, is however experienced not as an object, but as a kind of horizon that casts light on the significance of everyday life. We can assume these peasants to have said a prayer before they shared their meal on the community table, presided over by whatever marked the altar-corner behind. Altar-corner here translates, somewhat misleadingly, *Herrgottswinkel*,²⁵⁵ meaning the Lord’s corner. Such corners were common in old farmhouses of the region. Generally in the SE corner of the house, they included at least a cross, framed often by pictures of Jesus and Mary, perhaps a statue or other objects thought to hold a special significance. And flowers that had to be changed with the changing year. The altar corner thus had to be attended to. In many cases it developed into something more elaborate, a house-altar. In the house the *Herrgottswinkel* was thus a place that invited one to rest and reflect for a moment, to leave the everyday behind, return with renewed strength to the work that waited.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., pp, 157-158.

²⁵⁵ Heidegger, “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” Vorträge und Aufsätze, GA 7, p.162.

Whatever was put in that corner was not put there to be admired as an aesthetic object, although such crosses and altars are collected today as aesthetic objects. But it presided over daily life, more especially over the ritual of sharing food; it let those participating experience that food, and beyond that their life on earth as a divine gift. The cross would have invited them to think of death, but also to understand their sharing of the food in the image of the Last Supper, of Christ's sacrifice, which was thought to have robbed death of its sting, the grave of its victory. I am thinking with these words of 1 Corinthians 15:55: "So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" In the sacramental bread and wine "Christ's glorified body appears both as mutable reality 'that the earth has given and human hands have made,' [Ecclesiastes 3: 13-14] and as the immutable divine Word through which God has created the world for the mere purpose of Eucharistic praise."²⁵⁶ In the bread and the wine the abyss that separates time and eternity was believed to have been paradoxically closed. The altar corner casts something of this light into the everyday, invites those gathered before it to understand their own lives as both mutable and eternal.

We should keep in mind that something like such a transfiguration of the mutable has long been thought part of aesthetic experience. It is indeed entailed by Kant's understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. Here let me quote Schopenhauer's related account of the aesthetic experience of a tree.

Therefore if, for example, I contemplate a tree aesthetically, i.e., with artistic eyes, and thus recognize not it but its Idea, it is immediately of no importance whether it is this tree or its ancestor that flourished a thousand years ago, and whether the contemplator is this individual, or any other living anywhere and at any time. The particular thing and the knowing individual are abolished with the principle of sufficient reason, and nothing remains but the Idea

²⁵⁶ Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, England: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 204.

and the pure subject of knowing, which together constitute the adequate objectivity of the will at this grade.²⁵⁷

But here aesthetic contemplation demands a leave-taking from the everyday.

Heidegger's farmers, however, would have experienced the cross in the *Herrgottswinkel* very differently. It allowed them to experience their lives as not just mutable and fleeting, but *sub specie aeternitatis*. And their devotion was part of the everyday, not opposed to it.

In his description of the farmhouse Heidegger mentions not only the *Herrgottswinkel*, but the "hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead", the *Totenbaum*. Heidegger's reference to the archaic term *Totenbaum* invites further consideration. In the Alemannic dialect spoken in Switzerland and the Black Forest region *Totenbaum* is (today mostly was) just another word for *Sarg*, i.e. coffin. Such a coffin was not made of a single tree, as were the *Totenbäume* in the proper sense that have been found, some dating back some 3000 years, some to the early Middle Ages, not too far from the Black Forest. The archaic term no doubt attracted Heidegger because "tree" first of all suggests life. The cross on which Christ died has thus long been associated with the tree of life. It is the paradigmatic *Totenbaum*: Christ's death grants us life. Heidegger had lost his Catholic faith by the time he wrote "Building Dwelling Thinking," but he retained his conviction that only by opening ourselves to the inescapability of death, only by making place for it in our lives, do we truly live, i.e. can there be authentic dwelling. And along with such dwelling goes building that quite literally makes room also for death. The Black Forest farmhouse does so in its own distinctive way.

Let me add to this a footnote. As so often happens when one's attention is called to a somewhat unusual term such as *Totenbaum*, one soon runs across it again. Earlier this year I visited the pilgrimage church St. Maria Zöbingen near Ellwangen. In it there is a painting dating from 1661 of what was thought to be the miraculous event that led to the building of the church. It shows a procession in the background, in the foreground a horse with rider sunk into the earth on the left and on the right a *Totenbaum* being dug up. The text below explains: in 1161 (or 1261) an official of the local count sank, with

²⁵⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, p. 209.

his horse in this place into the ground and had to be levered out by the local peasants. The place became a sacred well. Nearby a pig had dug up a small bell and on further digging what was then thought to be a kneading trough was found, we now know it was a *Totenbaum*, in it a little box with some coins, three skulls, bones and three remarkably well preserved apples. As it turned out, the site was an Alemannic burial ground of the 6th or 7th century. Similar finds were later made elsewhere. The *Totenbaum* remains in the sacristy of the church. This was apparently the first find of such a *Totenbaum*. In the 19th century four more such *Totenbäume* were found at the site. The soil conditions helped to preserve the *Totenbaum* and the apples. What was thought miraculous has thus been given a scientific explanation. Those who built a pilgrimage church at the site of this remarkable find approached reality very differently.

I want to speak here of a liturgical understanding of reality. What do I mean by that term. “Liturgy” names a historically mediated communal response to the sacred that “discloses what deserves our attention and esteem, and helps us to distinguish between essential and ephemeral occurrences and phenomena.” Liturgy thus discloses “a horizon, which directs our sense of what is significant”.²⁵⁸ Such a liturgical understanding of reality presides over the dwelling that built Heidegger’s 18th century farmhouse, as it presides over the dwelling that built the pilgrimage church in Zöbingen.

Heidegger does not speak of a liturgical approach to reality. Instead he speaks of the thing as a gathering of the fourfold, the *Geviert*. Heidegger claims that the *Geviert* is constitutive of things.²⁵⁹ It should therefore, it seems, be easy to get hold of what Heidegger means by this term. That is of course not the case. What makes it difficult is the fact that our own time, so Heidegger claims, blocks adequate access to things, where we have to wonder about the measure of adequacy that is here being employed. Heidegger is aware of the untimeliness of his speaking of the “united four,” of, earth and sky or heaven (*Himmel* can mean either), of the divine ones, *die Göttlichen*, and mortals. Such talk may be understood as the nostalgic accompaniment of his understanding of the

²⁵⁸ Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Cambridge; Eerdmans, 2013), p. 20.

²⁵⁹ See Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 163-180. See also Karsten Harries, “Unterwegs zum Geviert,” *Heidegger-Handbuch. Leben-Werk-Wirkung*, ed. Dieter Thomae (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2003), pp. 290-302.

modern age as the age of the world picture or the *Gestell*. That our age will let us stumble over Heidegger's understanding of the *Geviert* and the associated understanding of the thing is only to be expected.

Three of the terms are easy to understand.

1. Earth names first of all the ground that supports us. But it also names what I have called "material transcendence," the thingliness of things that will always elude out conceptual nets.

2. Heidegger's *Himmel*" is also familiar. It means first of all the ever-changing sky above. But we should not forget that looking up to the sky we experience ourselves as not bound by the here and now. The word "spirit" points to the possibility of such self-transcendence. The word thus means not only the sky above, but the spiritual, ecstatic dimension of our being, the space presupposed by every logical or linguistic space. It thus also names what I have called "formal transcendence."

3. The least problematic term is the fourth. Our being is, in its very essence, that of mortals.

4. But what does Heidegger mean by die *Göttlichen*, the divine ones? How are we to think these? To exist authentically, Heidegger now seems to be saying, human beings must ground their lives in something divine. Heidegger's farmers had no problem doing so. They had their faith in the incarnation that allowed the divine logos to become perishable flesh, and this not just in Christ, but in every person, and in all of nature. But where are our *Herrgottswinkel*? Do we still experience the miracle of incarnation?

5

I suggested that with his Black Forest farmhouse Heidegger gestures towards the sort of understanding of reality that I tried to approach with my Bavarian Rococo Church. This is not the time to rehearse what I wrote in the English and German versions of this book. But to suggest at least briefly what I have in mind I want to take a brief look at a Bavarian counterpart to Heidegger's farmhouse, built at pretty much at the same time: the Jodlbauernhof in the Bavarian Hagnberg, built and presumably decorated in 1786 by one Michael Behamb, a local painter and hardly a great artist, but his decoration



Jodlbauernhof, Hagnberg 1786

nevertheless has a great deal to tell us.²⁶⁰ A description of it, very similar to the one Heidegger gives of his Black Forest farmhouse could be given. Here I want to concentrate on the outside. It may seem to answer to the comment by Luther that I cited in our second session:

Would to God that I could persuade those who can afford it to paint the whole Bible on their houses, inside and outside, so that all might see; this would indeed be a Christian work. For I am convinced that it is God's will that we should hear and learn what He has done, especially what Christ suffered. But when I hear these things and meditate upon them, I find it impossible not to picture them in my heart. Whether I want to or not, when I hear, of Christ, a human form hanging upon a cross rises

²⁶⁰ Alois J. Weichslgartner and Wilfried Bahnmüller, *Lüftmalerei* (Freilassing: Pannonia, 1977).

up in my heart: just as I see my natural face reflected when I look into water. Now if it is not sinful for me to have Christ's picture in my heart, why should it be sinful to have it before my eyes?²⁶¹

But on further consideration: does this farmhouse illustrate what Luther had in mind? According to Luther images inevitably accompany what we hear. When I think of Christ's suffering I inevitably also have an image of the suffering Christ. But the word has priority. The creator of this decoration, on the other hand, does not seem especially concerned with the Bible. What is represented here are not scenes from the Bible, but different saints associated with peasant life, so-called *Bauernheilige*. We see St. Leonhard, invoked by prisoners, by women in labour, and later as a protector of farm animals, especially horses; St. Sixtus, with the Papal tiara and double cross, patron of pregnant women, also invoked to assure a good harvest, especially of beans and grapes, also to help with throat and backpains; St. Katharina with her wheel, patron saint of women who sew and tailor, invoked also by those who had difficulty speaking; she is of course also the patron saint of philosophy, although I doubt whether that figured much in Behamb's visual thinking. We see St. Isidor, patron of peasants, with his pitchfork, Notburga, the saintly servant-girl with her sickle, very much a local saint (her relics are in the nearby Eben am Achensee). Notburga's attribute, the sickle, refers to one of the miracles told of her: On an afternoon when the weather threatened to change the farmer demanded that no one stop working before all the grain had been brought in. When the church bells started ringing Notburga stopped working to pray. When the farmer refused to allow this she threw her sickle up into the air where it kept hanging. Time stood still. She is thus patron of servant girls, but also of taking a break from work.

The main door of the house is framed by St. Sebastian, invoked to protect against infectious diseases such as the plague, and St. Florian, the latter invoked to protect against fire. Next to them we see on the left St. John the Baptist, on the right St. Andrew and on the NE corner St. Christopher, the giant who carried Christ. To look at a Christophorus image was supposed to protect against sudden death. He is thus the patron

²⁶¹ Jeremiah F Ohl, "Art in Worship". *Memoirs of the Lutheran Liturgical Association* (Pittsburgh: Lutheran Liturgical Association, 1906), trans. Willard R. Trask (A Harvest pp. 88–89).

also of everything related to travel. The north side of the house, the weather side, was similarly decorated, although the weather had taken its toll and the only figure now still visible is St. Benno, a very popular saint in Bavaria ever since his relics were brought from Meissen to Munich in 1576. He is supposed to help against bad weather, to bring rain when rain is needed, also to protect against the plague. The decoration thus speaks very much to peasant life, to the worries and hopes that shadowed that life. Saints like Isidor and Notburga offered ideal images of those who worked the land. To be sure, high in the gable, presiding over the whole, we see the cross, flanked as in many a *Herrgottswinkel* by frescoed images of Mary and St. John, rather smaller than those of the saints below. Above the cross a bell reminds us of the passage of time. We all have to die. But the emphasis of this decoration is not on the four last things, on death, judgment, heaven and hell, but very much on this life. Not to be missed, on the SE corner of the house, is a revealing representation of the fall, which here is shown as not at all an unhappy event. In this rather unorthodox representation Adam is being offered two apples, one by the snake, and one by Eve. The first he sort of fends off with his left hand, the one offered by Eve he happily accepts with his right. The scene brings to my mind a passage from Augustine's *The City of God*:

XIV, 11: For as Aaron was not induced to agree with the people when they blindly wished him to make an idol, and yet yielded to constraint; and as it not credible that Solomon was so blind as to suppose that idols should be worshipped, but was drawn over to such sacrilege by the blandishments of women; so we cannot believe that Adam was deceived, and supposed the devil's words to be truth, and therefore transgressed God's law, but that he by the drawings of kindred yielded to the woman, the husband to the wife, the one human being to the only other human being. For not without significance did the apostle say, "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression;" (1 Tim., 2, 14) but he speaks thus, because the woman accepted as true what the serpent told her, but the man could not bear to be severed from his only companion, even

tough this involved a partnership in sin. He was not on this account less culpable, but sinned with his eyes open.²⁶²

Here it is not so much pride that is said to be the source of Adam's fall, as human solidarity: Adam chose to exist in sin with Eve, as a mortal among mortals, instead of an existence free of sin, but without her. And I have no doubt that he made the right choice. Nor, it would seem, did the creator of this decoration.

And even Augustine forces us to wonder how Adam could have forsaken Eve, without betraying his human essence: For how does Augustine describe that essence:

XIV, 22: But we, from our part, have no manner of doubt that to increase and multiply and replenish the earth in virtue of the blessing of God, is a gift of marriage as God instituted it from the beginning before man sinned, when He created them male and female — in other words two sexes manifestly distinct.... It is quite clear that they were created male and female, with bodies of different sexes, for the very purpose of begetting offspring, and so increasing, multiplying, and replenishing the earth; and it is great folly to oppose so plain a fact.²⁶³

The decoration of the Jodlbauernhof very much affirms peasant life, very much an earthly life. It is not some afterlife, but this life that is the focus. It, we can say, discloses “a horizon, which directs our sense of what is significant.” Luther no doubt would have been appalled by this concern for all too human saints. He might have suspected too much Paganism in this form of Christianity. And he would have been right. This farmhouse brings to mind Nietzsche's words about the Greek Gods: “Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it—the only satisfactory theodicy!”²⁶⁴

Let me conclude the discussion of this farmhouse by mentioning one last aspect: Striking is how the rocaille ornament that frames the windows is interlaced with flowers. Nature is very present here, not just in the ornament, but also in the geraniums on the balconies, which have to be replanted every spring, in the barn for the animals, which is part the house, and most immediately in the Alpine setting that provided them with what

²⁶² St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans, Marcus Dodd (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 459.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 470.

they needed. Decoration here re-presents the house and the activities it serves, sanctifies it if you wish. But the emphasis here is not, as Luther might have wished, on Christ's suffering, but on everyday life, which is placed under the protection of the represented saints, who to be sure were distinguished by their greater proximity to God. But thoughts of heaven and hell are distant here. What matters is to experience this life as a divine gift.

"The work of art," Wittgenstein wrote, following Schopenhauer, "is the object seen *sub species aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub species aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics."²⁶⁵ The decoration of the Jodlbauernhof invites us to look at the world in this way.

6

I have been attracted to the 18th century because it places us on the threshold of our modern world. But more important to me than this particular historical threshold is what separates what Kant called the land of pure understanding, according to him an island, from the unknown regions that lie beyond. I therefore do not want to put too much weight on this particular period. In fits and starts the modern world took shape over a millennia old history. There are other such thresholds that invite similar reflections, Nietzsche and Heidegger thus looked back all the way to ancient Greece, to the death of tragedy and the emergence of a culture based on objectifying reason. With both that turn to Greece was tied to an attempt to restore to art its lost sacred dimension, where both were aware of the untimeliness of such an attempt. We are of course separated from that threshold by the Christian Middle Ages, another age of faith which lets us ask what led faith to return, where to point to Barbarian invasions is hardly an adequate answer. In the Middle Ages we meet with an analogous development. I have thus been especially interested in the period around 1400. There is a sense in which our modern world could be said to have its origin in the Florence of the time. My book *Infinity and Perspective* is an exploration of this threshold, straddled by Nicholas of

²⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* 3, p. 43.

²⁶⁵ Wittgenstein, L., *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 7.10.16, edited by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, p. 83.

Cusa, while the slightly younger Alberti, whose perspectival method, prefiguring Descartes' method in significant ways, has already passed it. I was very pleased to see, that work I began in that book has now been developed in an extraordinary way by Johannes Hoff in *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*. Hoff has given us not only the most challenging book on the 15th century cardinal to have appeared in English, but he has shown us what the step beyond modernity, to a modern recovery of the sacred demands and what makes it so difficult. Demanded, he argues, and in this seminar I have developed related considerations, is a turn away from our oculocentric culture that would also be a (re)turn to a liturgical approach to reality. I have tried to suggest what such a liturgical approach might mean. As Hoff understands it, Cusa's encounter with Alberti, at a time when our modern world was beginning to take shape, points the way towards a renewed understanding of creation as theophany, a manifestation of the divine. Such an understanding, he suggests, is supported by experiences of the invisible in the visible, so when we lovingly encounter another person, or by our joint experience of certain works of art. In this seminar I have tried to develop similar thoughts.

But if there is a sense in which the modern world can be said to have been born around 1400, it hardly developed in a single stream. Between Renaissance and Enlightenment lies the Baroque, lies a return of faith, where the Reformation lets one think first of all of music, and the Counter-Reformation of the visual arts. The Jodlbauernhof and the pulpit in Oppoldng offer late examples. And why should art not once again play such a role and serve the sacred? But the question remains: how is art to do that today? Much more easily supported is an interpretation of the modern work of art as offering something like Ersatz for the lost sacred. Schopenhauer has such an understanding of art. In its essence this is still the view of Michael Fried. But to provide an aesthetic analogue to redemption art has to settle here for beautiful illusion. has to offer no more than a temporary escape from a reality that is anything but divine.

7

But when appealing to the Bavarian Rococo in this fashion am I not guilty of doing what Nietzsche in his later preface accuses himself of having done in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

But, my dear sir, what in the world is romantic if your book isn't?
Can deep hatred against "the Now," against "reality" and "modern ideas"
be pushed further than you pushed it in your artists' metaphysics?
Believing sooner in the Nothing, sooner in the devil than in "the Now"? Is
it not a deep bass of wrath and the lust for destruction that we hear
humming underneath all your contrapuntal vocal art and seduction of the
ear, a furious resolve against everything that is "now," a will that is not far
removed from practical nihilism and seems to say: "sooner let nothing be
true than that *you* should be right, than that *your* truth should be proved
right."²⁶⁶

Later, in *Morgenröte* Nietzsche will have this to say about romanticism:

Too much energy is wasted on all sorts of resurrections of the dead.
Perhaps the whole romantic movement is best understood from this point of
view.²⁶⁷

Nietzsche is well aware of the part romantic nostalgia played in his overly simplistic reconstruction of the tragic age of the Greeks to which he opposed the Socratic faith in reason. What he has given us can hardly claim historical accuracy. What he created is, if you want, a myth, something in between historical reality and fiction, where that fiction again has its place between our everyday existence and an existence that haunts us, as Kant insists we cannot but be haunted by the idea of the highest good, while a Christian would think of heaven. I want to call this a *Zwischenwelt*.²⁶⁸ Myths create such *Zwischenwelten*: worlds that mediate between the everyday world and a reality that our very nature makes us long for but that finally eludes understanding. The decoration of

²⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" 7, p. 25.

²⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, 159.

²⁶⁸ I am thinking here of Gottfried Benn, quite aware of what separates my appropriation of the term from what he had in mind.

the Jodlbauernhof and legends of saints on which it relies illuminate everyday existence with such a myth.

Kant might have spoken here of symbolic representations of an idea of reason:

The moral law is reason's formal condition for the use of our freedom and hence obligates us all by itself, independently of any purpose whatever as material condition. But it also determines for us and a priori, a final purpose, and makes it obligatory for us to strive toward [achieving] it; and that purpose is the highest good in the world that we can achieve through freedom.²⁶⁹ (339)

The highest good is thus a goal we must strive for.

The subjective condition under which man (and, as far as we can conceive, any [other] rational [and] finite being as well) can set himself a final purpose under the above law, is happiness. Hence the highest physical good we can [achieve] in the world is happiness, and this is what we are to further as the final purpose as far as we can, [though] subject to the objective condition that man be in harmony with the law of morality, [since] our worthiness to be happy consists in that harmony.²⁷⁰ (339)

Key here is the idea of happiness. Happiness builds a bridge between our nature and morality. And that bridge must be built if we are not to despair over the point of acting morally. It can be built only if what we most profoundly desire is not contradicted by reality, as Schopenhauer thought. But to think the two in harmony is to believe in some sort of divinity. Such faith is thus an expression of a profound optimism, while the pessimist will find little here to convince him.

As stated by Kant, the idea of the highest good remains too abstract to provide the needed orientation. The abyss that separates it from our historical existence must be bridged. For a Christian the incarnation provides such a bridge. But even here the distance calls for further mediation. In the Jodlbauernhof it is provided by the representation of saints, which are rather like the Greek Gods, idealized versions of the life of these peasants.

²⁶⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 339.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

There is indeed a family resemblance between what I attempted in my *The Bavarian Rococo Church*, Heidegger in “The Origin of the Work of Art” and in “Building Dwelling, Thinking” and Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche attempted to contribute towards a recovery of the sacred, insisting that

without myth every culture loses the healthy natural powers of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. ... The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young should grow to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles.²⁷¹

A culture, Nietzsche claims, needs such a “fixed and primordial site.” But are all such sites not fictions that as soon as recognized as such cannot provide the needed orientation? To be convincing such a myth must be accompanied by a faith that it has its ground in experiences that elude the reach of our reason and yet provide our freedom with the needed measure.

²⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p, 135.