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**Art and Morality**

*Edited by José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner*

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Edited by  
José Luis Bermúdez and  
Sebastian Gardner

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# Art and morality

## An introduction

*José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner*

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The relations between art and morality are manifold and complex, and the contributions to this collection do full justice to the richness of the subject matter. The contributors are all agreed that the realm of the aesthetic cannot, and should not, be divorced from the realm of the moral, but this general idea is worked out in as many ways as there are papers. Our aim in this introduction is to introduce the main themes and problems broached by the individual contributors and to sketch out some features of the more general framework within which the individual papers can be located.

For the purposes of this introduction we will divide the papers into two groups. In the first group are those papers dealing with the more theoretical issues emerging at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. These will be discussed in the first part of the introduction. The second part of the introduction will deal with those papers exploring the relation between art and morality in more concrete terms, pursuing the theme with reference to particular forms of art, works of art, artistic categories, and historical figures and traditions. This grouping reflects a difference in emphasis, rather than a distinction of principle. The papers in the first part are all informed by reflection on the evaluation of art and the practice of criticism, while theoretical issues about the relation between art and morality are never far below the surface in papers in the second group.

### I

Philosophers concerned with aesthetics have frequently discussed the nature of the judgements that we make about art, the types of reason upon which they rest and the ways in which they might be justified. In considering the role of ethical considerations in thinking about art, a useful place to begin is with the relation between aesthetic judgements and moral judgements. This theme is very much to the fore in the opening essay in the collection, Michael Tanner's 'Ethics and aesthetics are — ?'. Tanner explores the suggestion, originally made by Arnold Isenberg and developed in different ways by Frank Sibley, Mary Mothersill and Richard Wollheim, that understanding aesthetic

judgements requires first-hand acquaintance with the work being judged. Tanner terms this the *acquaintance thesis*. The acquaintance thesis is closely connected with the thought that aesthetic judgements are not grounded in general principles (principles of taste) from which particular judgements can be derived. Many of the central concepts featuring in aesthetic judgements can only be ‘filled in’ by attention to specific features of the work of art, with this experience providing the ultimate justification of those judgements. This feature of aesthetic concepts (Sibley) and critical communication (Isenberg) rules out understanding the grounds of aesthetic judgements in terms of general principles. If this suggestion about aesthetic judgements is well-founded, then a *prima facie* difference between moral judgements and aesthetic judgements immediately emerges. Moral judgements, one might think, can be understood and communicated perfectly well without any first-hand acquaintance with the actions they concern. It is perfectly possible to describe an action in a way that makes manifest how it falls under a particular principle and hence how it should be judged.

Tanner does not dispute that this is often possible, but considers whether all moral judgements can be understood in these terms. There is, he thinks, a striking asymmetry in the types of examples that are considered in aesthetics and in ethics. Whereas in aesthetics our interest lies primarily with the exceptional (with works of art that have a claim to greatness), in ethics the concern is frequently with the mundane (with forms of behaviour whose regulation is essential for social existence). Perhaps, Tanner suggests, the acquaintance thesis ceases to apply when we move beyond the morally mundane to a form of ethical thinking in which what is being judged is not whether actions fall under general principles, and how those principles might be grounded, but rather the attractiveness of a particular way of living one’s life and the value of transforming one’s life in that direction. The ethical value of a lived life can only be captured, Tanner thinks, through a form of acquaintance (in the sense of acquaintance in which reading a well-written biography counts as acquaintance). He makes the point in the context of Robert Craft’s *Chronicle of a Friendship*, which recounts the conductor’s long friendship with Stravinsky.<sup>1</sup>

Craft’s skill is such that it is Stravinsky’s vitality which appears to be the agent of the book, and it even seems to be the point of the book that that should be so. One knows, independently of Craft’s wonderful book, that Stravinsky had prodigious vitality, from the sheer inventory of his doings: his travelling, range of friends and compositions. But the portrayal of them incontestably presents one with the ideal of a full though illness-stricken life which nothing lacking the book’s argumen-

1 Robert Craft, *Chronicle of a Friendship* (New York: Knopf; London: Gollancz, 1972).

tative energy would have conveyed. At this point the ethicist and the aesthete become one.

(this volume, p. 35)

As the final sentence makes clear, there are deeper issues here than the applicability to ethics of the acquaintance thesis. One way in which works of art can contribute to moral thinking is by portraying different ideals for the lived life in a way that offers the form of acquaintance with them required if they are to be judged, compared and perhaps even adopted.

Some complementary suggestions about the role that works of art might play in moral education are raised and explored in Christopher Hamilton's chapter 'Art and moral education'. Hamilton begins by considering what might be termed imagination-based conceptions of the way in which works of art can be morally significant. These are accounts of the relation between art and morality on which the moral significance of art lies in developing our imaginative capacity to be sensitive to the needs, emotions and moral qualities of other people.<sup>2</sup> Hamilton does not dispute that this type of insight into the inner life of others is a characteristic of many works of art, and indeed an important part of their value as art. He does, however, question whether such insight must always be morally beneficial. As he points out, 'the very possibility of a certain type of cruelty increases as we get to understand the inwardness of a given individual in all its richness and detail' (this volume, p. 40). And, for this reason among others, many works of art are deeply morally ambiguous.

Hamilton does not, however, think that the moral ambiguity of many works of art is in any sense an obstacle to finding an important role for art in moral education. Quite the contrary. This is, he suggests, precisely where we should look for the moral significance of art. Works of art that present a moral point of view that seems disturbing and/or reprehensible can be valuable precisely because they lead us to explore the meaning of our moral beliefs. In part this is because they can remind us that we are not 'morally finished beings', both by showing how apparent moral certainties can be deeply ambiguous and by presenting situations with which what we take to be our moral beliefs cannot cope. But it is also because works of art foreground the concept of style (in the sense of 'style' in which Alfred North Whitehead remarked that 'style is the ultimate morality of mind').

[A]mong all the things art can offer us, one of the most important things it can do is allow us to see a person's concrete, enacted attempt to achieve

2 See Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Noël Carroll, 'Art, narrative, and moral understanding', in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

his own style – I mean, most centrally, the attempt to achieve such a style on the part of the creator of a work of art. Which is not to say that it is only in art that we see this. And neither is it to say that we see this in all works of art: it is rather that the possibility of such a confrontation helps structure for us the very concept we have of art. But because this is so, and because one way in which we can be helped to achieve our own style is by being brought into contact with those who have their own style, the experience of art often holds out the promise that through it we, too, might come to find our own style – if, that is, we are the kind of person who looks to art for such things.

(this volume, p. 54)

For Hamilton, then, the moral significance of art is not tied to its ability to persuade us to choose a particular style of living, or ethical ideal. It lies rather in, first, reminding us that we might well need to make some such choice and, second, in illustrating one way in which such a choice might be made and pursued. Fixing a moral perspective upon the world is, at least in part, a matter of developing a personal style – and the artist’s own struggle to develop a personal style can, Hamilton suggests, be both an example and an inspiration.

Both Hamilton and Tanner develop ways of thinking about the moral significance of art that eschew what is sometimes called *ethicism*, namely, the view that works of art are to be judged by moral criteria in such a way that (what is taken to be) a moral defect will *ipso facto* count as an aesthetic defect. Ethicism is tackled directly in Matthew Kieran’s contribution ‘Forbidden knowledge: the challenge of immoralism’. Kieran rejects ethicism in favour of the more nuanced suggestion that ‘the moral character of a work is relevant to its value as art to the extent that it undermines or promotes the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work’ (this volume, pp. 56–7). On Kieran’s view the morally reprehensible character of a work of art can be an aesthetic virtue, while moral commendability can equally be an aesthetic vice.

As Kieran notes, one way of defending ethicism is through a broadly speaking cognitivist conception of artistic value, according to which an important consideration in evaluating works of art is the extent to which they deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world.<sup>3</sup> It is often thought that such a conception of artistic value directly entails ethicism, on the twin assumptions, first, that an immoral work *misrepresents* the nature of morality and, second, that nothing that misrepresents something can deepen our understanding of that thing. Kieran takes issue with the second of these

3 Such approaches are taken by Nussbaum in the works referred to above and by Wayne C. Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1988).

assumptions, suggesting instead that ‘in exploring a morally defective perspective a work may deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise’ (this volume, p. 63). In defending this claim he draws attention to the contrastive and comparative nature of our understanding of the morally good. The discriminatory abilities and capacities that make possible our understanding of the good need to be honed and refined in experience of the morally ambiguous and the morally reprehensible – particularly in the type of imaginative experience provided by works of art, a type of experience in which it is possible to suspend one’s moral judgements and moral attitudes.

There is, however, a long tradition in thinking about our response to works of art denying that such a suspension of one’s moral judgements and moral attitudes is at all possible. The most famous statement of this line of thought comes in a well-known passage from Hume’s essay ‘Of the standard of taste’ where Hume points out the difficulties of entering imaginatively into what is taken to be morally reprehensible. Here is the passage.

Whatever speculative errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions which then prevailed, and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgement of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind, from long custom, has been familiarized. And where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever.<sup>4</sup>

In more recent times Kendall Walton has defended a position explicitly indebted to one strand of Hume’s thinking in this passage – the strand that suggests an impossibility, rather than simply an impropriety or a lack of willingness, in trying to enter imaginatively into what one takes to be a radically deviant morality. Mary Mothersill’s contribution ‘Make-believe morality and fictional worlds’ is an examination of an exchange between Kendall Walton and Michael Tanner on what has come to be known as the ‘problem of imaginative resistance’.

As Mothersill notes, there is an important distinction to be made in thinking about whether we can enter in imagination into the morally reprehensible. The real difficulty (if there is one) comes, not with entering in imagination into a fictional world whose inhabitants hold moral beliefs that one finds

4 David Hume, ‘Of the standard of taste’ (1757), reprinted in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 226–49.

unacceptable, but rather with entering into a fictional world in which those moral beliefs are supposed to be justified – and hence that one can only enter by oneself taking them to be justified. In the exchange on which Mothersill is commenting, Tanner objects to Walton's putting the point in these terms. In line with the views expressed in the paper discussed earlier, Tanner suggests that it is wrong to think of works of art, particularly the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, as putting forward moral beliefs as part of the fabric of a fictional world. Instead, maintains Tanner, the great novelists are putting forward their own visions of how we should live our lives, and part of what it is to engage with those works is to work out for oneself the extent to which one shares that vision. Novels do not affirm particular moral propositions, which one might find objectionable and hence impossible to espouse even in imagination. Rather, they present total views of the world and how one should live in it, with which we need to engage – something we cannot do without entering into those views in precisely the way Walton claims not to be possible.

Mothersill agrees with Walton that we do, as a matter of psychological fact, have difficulty in entering into some of the evaluative perspectives presupposed by works of art. The example she considers is Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, an important part of the moral fabric of which is taken up by the supposed grave moral evil of amateur theatricals. This, she thinks, is a moral stance that it would be difficult to imagine being justified. Nonetheless, Mothersill agrees with Tanner that Walton's conception of what it is to imagine the truth of an evaluative perspective is impoverished. What is at stake, she thinks, is a type of dramatic imagination in which what one does is to rehearse a moral perspective to see whether it 'fits'.<sup>5</sup> What Walton describes as the problem of imaginative resistance would, Mothersill suggests, often be described more accurately as one's having tried on a particular perspective and discovered that it fails to fit. On other occasions it might better be described as a resistance, not to a particular moral perspective, but rather to the feeling of being manipulated. The phenomenon to which Walton draws attention is real enough, Mothersill thinks, but needs to be described more accurately.

One of the chief reasons for the sorts of overlap between ethics and aesthetics that we have been examining is the existence of a central core of concepts that can feature in both moral and aesthetic judgements and that seem, moreover, to have the same sense across these two types of use. Examples are the concepts of shallowness, obscurantism, sentimentality, vitality and decadence. These are concepts that, when applied in aesthetics, import an ethical overtone to aesthetic judgement – and conversely, that add an aesthetic dimension when deployed in moral judgements. Several of the

5 Mothersill draws explicitly on a paper by Richard Moran in which this conception of imagination is explored in some depth: 'The expression of feeling in imagination', *Philosophical Review* 103, 1994, 75–106.

contributors comment on the existence of such concepts and on their importance in thinking about art. Hamilton, for example, points out that the concept of style falls into this category. Two papers in this collection are devoted to exploring these concepts.

Michael Tanner's 'Sentimentality' (originally published in 1977 in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* – the only chapter in this collection previously published) develops an account of sentimentality in which it emerges very clearly why the charge of sentimentality is so serious, whether levelled at a person or at a work of art. The sentimentalist, according to Tanner, is guilty of an excess of feeling and a failure to control and deploy it constructively. He refers to 'the pointless inner proliferation of feeling which is sentimentality' (this volume, p. 109). The sentimental person, or sentimental work of art, luxuriates in feelings without either any serious engagement with the state of affairs that brought them about or any attempt to move through the feeling towards action. Tanner's exploration of the concept of the sentimental is bound up with his conception of what the ideal life should be – and should be understood in the context of his suggestion, considered earlier, that certain core works of art (the ones that we are inclined to think of as great works of art) need to be understood in terms of the vision of the ideal life that they put forward. Tanner, in common with Leavis, Lawrence and (in some of his moods) Nietzsche, thinks that the 'ideal of life' incorporates a certain 'fullness of emotional vitality'. The distinguishing mark of the sentimental is the absence of any such vitality. Genuine artistic expression, no less than a genuinely valuable moral life, requires feeling to be tempered by thought in a way that allows it to be channelled into action.

The concept of sentimentality is closely related to the concept of decadence, which is the subject of José Luis Bermúdez's contribution 'The concept of decadence'. Bermúdez explores the possibility of developing an account of the concept of decadence (what he calls a formal conception of decadence) that does not depend either upon assuming an ethico-aesthetic ideal from which the decadent can be seen as a falling away, or upon situating the decadent work of art within the type of narrative of world-historical growth and decline characteristic of the nineteenth century, and now somewhat out of fashion. The core of the concept of decadence, Bermúdez suggests, lies in the notion of an imbalance. This imbalance is not, as one might first think, the type of imbalance manifested in a preoccupation with form over content (assuming that sense can be made of this traditional opposition). Rather, Bermúdez suggests that the key to understanding decadence is the concept of *expressive form*.

A work of art's expressive form is the contribution its formal features make to its expressive capacity, understanding expression in a broad sense on which abstract ideas and ethical perspectives can be expressed no less than emotions and feelings. Correspondingly, a work displays imbalance with respect to expressive form when its formal features are not in harmony



with its expressive aims. This imbalance can occur in (at least) two ways. It might be that a work of art's expressive aims outstrip its formal resources – as we find in works of art that are bombastic or maudlin. But the charge of decadence is most applicable when the imbalance works in the opposite direction. It might be the case, for example, that a work displays formal features that are doing no work in realising its expressive aims, as with music written purely to display the virtuosity of the performer, or poetry written to illustrate an arcane metrical scheme. Or it might be the case that a surfeit of formal machinery is brought to bear on an expressive task that cannot bear the weight. The point with regard to the relation between art and morality is that an important class of breakdowns at the level of expressive form can be characterised using an essentially moral vocabulary, reflecting a lack of integrity and self-discipline.

The idea that integrity and self-discipline are virtues in an artist is, of course, a way of looking at the relation between art and morality that has a distinguished ancestry. Rather less familiar is the idea that integrity and self-discipline form part of the framework for understanding the activity of the critic – and, indeed, offer a way of understanding why and how criticism as an activity can carry a form of ethical success. This nexus of ideas is explored in Aaron Ridley's chapter 'Critical conversions'. Ridley sets out to explore the issues raised by Nietzsche's comment in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "My judgement is my judgement": no one else is easily entitled to it.<sup>6</sup> The question he addresses is: what makes it the case that someone is entitled to a critical judgement as their own? The issue here is really what counts as honesty and integrity in responding to a work of art. Ridley suggests that we need to understand such integrity and honesty in terms of three different requirements upon the critic. First, the critic must attempt to do justice to the work of art itself. Second, the critic must attempt to do justice to his own experience of the work. And, third, the critic must attempt, in articulating his own experience of the work, to order and negotiate between the various values informing that experience.

Of these three requirements, Ridley suggests that in an important sense the first collapses into the second. The evaluation of a work of art cannot be divorced from the evaluation of the experience it offers and hence, doing justice to the work is, in an important sense, a matter of doing justice to one's experience of it (although, of course, one needs to be sufficiently open to the work to allow one's experience to be shaped by it, as opposed to by what one expects to get out of it or what one hopes to get out of it). But the notion of doing justice to one's experience of a work of art can be understood in two different ways. In its simpler form it is a matter of articulating the experience of the work in the light of the values drawn upon in the experience. Even

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), section 43.

bearing in mind the complexities introduced by the fact that the experience of art tends to involve striking a balance (or, as Ridley puts it, negotiating) between different values, doing justice to this experience can be viewed as a matter of articulating it correctly and evaluating the work of art in a manner commensurate with such an articulation. Greater complexity appears when the critic's evaluation brings to bear values not directly involved in the experience of the work of art – when the process of evaluation involves a further process of negotiation between values over and above the negotiation involved in the experience itself. Here there may be no single way of doing justice either to the experience or to the work. In both cases, however, the critic is required to reflect upon, and arbitrate between, the potential conflicts between values that a work of art evokes. 'And', as Ridley puts it, 'the criticism that he produces [. . .] clearly betokens a kind of ethical success, a kind of systematic triumph of truthfulness over laziness, insincerity, pretentiousness and self-deception and indeed over any of the many ways in which the character or force of one's own values can remain obscure, especially to oneself' (this volume, p. 140). The extent of the achievement depends, of course, upon the range of values drawn upon in the experience of art and the critic's preparedness to negotiate in hitherto unexpected ways. Exposure to such criticism can, Ridley suggests, lead to what he terms a critical conversion.

## II

The chapters in the first group, although they are concerned with theoretical issues that abstract from the concrete differences between the various forms of art, and although they advance claims that have application to works of art in general, tend to focus for argumentative and illustrative purposes on literature more closely than on any other form of art. This emphasis is common and natural in philosophical discussion of the relation between art and morality: imaginative literature possesses clearly the potential for portraying different ideals for the lived life, moral ambiguity, conceptions of the good and so forth, in an intricate, conceptually nuanced manner. It raises the question, however, whether the intersection of art and morality which is affirmed by all of the writers in the present volume characterises equally and to the same degree works of art in all media. Even if all works of art are subject to moral evaluation, as part of their artistic evaluation, it may be doubted that, for example, music, as a supremely formal and abstract art, or painting, as an art that centres on visual perception, can carry the same weight of moral meaning as literature – except in so far as, and only to the extent that, they are made to incorporate literary, narrative or dramatic material. In this light, it seems to be no accident that music and painting should be comparatively neglected, in favour of literature, when the moral significance of art is being argued, and so frequently appealed to in contexts where views of art

that assert its autonomy and independence from moral concern are being defended.

Roger Scruton and John Armstrong indicate, however, the reasons why this view cannot be correct in any straightforward sense. As shown by their chapters, in both of which particular works of art are interpreted with care and in detail, it is possible for moral meaning to penetrate music and plastic art no less deeply than literature, and to be intrinsic to the value of musical works and paintings in ways that are specifically musical or pictorial. Thus, to the extent that there are fundamentally different, discrete modes of connection of art with morality, there is no reason for thinking that they correspond with any degree of exactness to the different forms of art.

Taking the case of a composer whose work continues, now in the second century of its reception, to arouse extreme reactions, both moral and aesthetic, and both *pro* and *con*, Scruton's paper examines Wagner's *Ring*. Contained at the centre of this work and penetrating its every aspect is, Scruton argues, a complex and multilayered vision that possesses the depth and significance of a philosophical system, and that indeed requires philosophical concepts for its proper elucidation. Wagner represents in the *Ring*, as Scruton interprets it, a comprehensive and integrated view of the relation of humanity to nature and of the moral framework of human life – of the conditions for human self-realisation and the origin of human evil, of the identity of the personal and the political and of the different fundamental forms of value – that has many elements in common with the German idealist inheritance that Wagner absorbed through his reading of Feuerbach, but which Wagner also enriches and transforms.

The essential point, which is emphasised by Scruton and demonstrated by his detailed analysis of many musical examples, is that this philosophical vision of Wagner's cannot be grasped without aesthetic, specifically musical experience and understanding. In order to grasp the thought of Wagner's that the *Ring* expresses, it is necessary not merely to understand the drama as presented in the libretto and in theatrical form, but to *hear* the appropriate musical developments: the music is 'the primary vehicle through which the action is accomplished' (this volume, p. 143); 'Wagner, by exploiting the musical potential of his motives, moves forward on the political and the spiritual levels simultaneously' (this volume, p. 159); 'Whenever the action seems incomplete, contradictory or mysterious the puzzle is resolved by the music, so that we feel, even if we do not understand, the rightness of what is happening on the stage' (this volume, p. 161). Because the musical features that are essential for a recognition of Wagner's moral and spiritual outlook are dynamic and incorporate historical developments within the drama and the music, they elude the method of *Leitmotiv*-analysis, which in fact leads inevitably to false construals of Wagner. Grasping the thought contained in the *Ring* becomes accordingly a case of knowledge by *acquaintance*, with instances of musical *movement* providing the objects

of acquaintance. Wagner's philosophical view is thus both embodied at a fundamental musical level and lies at the heart of the work's artistic and cultural value. Scruton's understanding of the *Ring* vindicates, therefore, claims for Wagner's artistic greatness, and it does so on grounds that include essentially moral understanding.

Turning from music to painting, Armstrong draws a sharp distinction between two moral functions that pictures may be and have been thought to have, and makes two initial concessions. The distinction is between painting which does no 'more than delineate the objects of moral regard' (this volume, p. 170), by representing morally deplorable and morally admirable subjects as respectively repulsive and attractive; and painting that enhances and contributes to moral understanding. Armstrong's first concession is that the latter ambition, in its chief historical forms – Plotinus' conception of visible beauty as intimation of the spiritual beauty that is an aspect of the morally Good, and Ruskin's conception of depictable nature as a divinely established vehicle for the communication of ethical truths – 'relies upon a framework of metaphysical assumptions which most people now find incredible' (this volume, p. 171). The second concession is that painting is indeed limited as an art form in its capacity to engage with moral understanding, in certain respects: it cannot, for example, articulate the differences in modality that are needed to represent certain morally relevant features of people and situations.

That painting can and does nevertheless fulfil the second function, of contributing to moral understanding, Armstrong proceeds to show by contrasting two paintings with overt moral content: a panel of Sassetta representing St Francis performing an act of charity, and Poussin's *The Ashes of Phocion Collected by his Widow*. The former does not for various reasons – none of which presuppose or imply artistic defectiveness – generate moral understanding: 'the picture simply asserts the commonplace conviction that St Francis performed a good deed [. . .] The moral content of the picture is thin and insubstantial in comparison with the complexity and subtlety of Christian ethics' (this volume, p. 174). Poussin, by contrast, 'stands at the opposite extreme from Sassetta's panel' (this volume, p. 182) in this respect. Through the composition of the painting, the nobility exhibited by Phocion's wife is located in relation to a broad, normative 'vision of social order and of human life' (this volume, p. 179), and the moral quality of her action is made visible to the spectator through its expressive aspect: the emotional and cognitive background constructed in the picture elicits in us the requisite state of mind for moral appreciation. This function is bound up in an especially intimate manner with the distinctive nature of painting as a form of art: we return again and again to paintings because they have the 'capacity to give a point of refuge and point of return to something which is, precisely, vulnerable and fleeting – yet highly valued' (this volume, p. 182). We thereby learn – in a richly experiential mode – of the rationale

or underlying framework of our moral evaluations. The conceptual limitation on painting's power of moral figuration that was initially conceded is thereby doubly compensated.

The concluding five chapters in the collection have a historical orientation, and exemplify different methods of pursuing critical issues in the context of historical writings. The philosophical authors discussed by Anthony Savile, Alex Neill, Sebastian Gardner, Christopher Janaway and Colin Lyas belong to a tradition of philosophical reflection on art that grows out of Kant's philosophy. This tradition, while of course displaying enormous diversity, is unified by certain broad assumptions concerning the nature and importance of art, included in which are (first) a belief that new philosophical materials, not provided by earlier (classical, rationalist, empiricist) philosophical systems, are needed in order to elucidate art correctly, and (second) an enlarged conception of the rights and duties of art. In parallel with the increasing cultural importance assigned to art in the course of the nineteenth century, the philosophy of art post-Kant shows a heightened sense of the role that art can (and, according to some theorists, must) play in philosophical enquiry. This development brings in its wake a new uncertainty regarding the relation of art to morality, and opens up new possibilities for understanding it. The whole set of debates that is reflected and pursued in the present volume – regarding the extent and importance of the relation of art and morality, and its correct philosophical understanding – belongs to this historical development. This makes it natural and appropriate for philosophers who are concerned with the interaction of ethics and aesthetics to examine the historical figures who have helped to create the context of present-day thought about art: in particular, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

Kant's own theory of art is still regarded widely as considerably less important and convincing than the general theory of the aesthetic that is contained in his account of pure judgements of taste in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful'. This account, through its characterisation of taste as distinct from empirical cognition and moral consciousness and as in a special sense disinterested, has been responsible historically for sponsoring a number of formalist aesthetic programmes, in which it is denied that there is any essential connection of art with morality. And yet, one of the greatest attempts in the history of philosophy to unify the aesthetic and the ethical – to demonstrate by philosophical means the oneness that neo-Platonism claims to intuit and that is, as Tanner observes, asserted so gnomically by Wittgenstein – is Kant's claim that beauty is 'the symbol of the morally good'.

Savile approaches this claim of Kant's, too often pushed aside on account of the difficulties that (Savile acknowledges) it involves, by way of a concept that figures prominently in Kant's 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement' but has remained without sufficient illumination: Kant's notion of the 'ideal of beauty'. Savile shows first that the account of taste extracted from Kant's Analytic by 'autonomists' in the philosophy of art – those who deny that the

ethical and aesthetical are ‘intimately and inextricably intertwined’ (this volume, p. 185) – confronts difficulties, concerning among other things the justification of the key assumption that different individuals share a common aesthetic sensibility, and then that Kant’s ideal of beauty is designed to address these difficulties. The notion of an ideal or ‘maximum’ of beauty is bound up with Kant’s technical concepts of ‘dependent’ (conceptually informed) beauty and of ‘reflective’ judgement (where the particular is given and the task for the judging subject is to find the principle under which it is to be brought), but Savile shows that Kant’s reasoning concerning the need for an ideal of beauty is intelligible independently of anything peculiar to the Kantian system. The ideal of beauty, Kant says, must be identified with an ideal human figure, and Savile shows how, by virtue of this identification, morality enters Kant’s equation. Morality is, therefore, essential to Kant’s justification of taste, *pace* autonomism: it transpires that the ‘stoutest’ (this volume, p. 185) autonomist is in fact a ‘heteronomist’, and that Kant’s philosophy of art is much more than a mere addendum to his theory of taste.

A further innovative result suggested by Savile concerns the conception of moral goodness that is supported by reflection on aesthetic experience: ‘the initially undifferentiated idea of moral goodness’ – which appears to be Kant’s – ‘has progressively given way’, over the course of Savile’s enquiry, ‘to a finer grained notion, that of an array of ethical goods to which we are variously responsive’ (this volume, p. 202). Savile concludes with an indication of the major adjustment that is required by this result, and which in Savile’s consideration constitutes a move in the direction of greater plausibility, namely that claims for what Kant takes to be the a priori character of the ethical and the aesthetical give way to an acknowledgement that both rest on ‘a straightforwardly contingent thought’ (this volume, p. 202). Kant’s conception of the linkage of art and morality would in this way become available from the Humean perspective to which Kant’s aesthetics are standardly regarded as opposed.

Throughout its history, the philosophy of art has ascribed special importance to the category of tragedy. In the pre-modern and early modern periods, this can be understood largely in terms of the primacy which was accorded generally to classical culture and thought, more specifically, in terms of the artistic pre-eminence of Attic tragedy in the neoclassical canon, and the fact that tragedy occupies such a dominant place in what arguably lacked until recently a serious rival in the theory of art, Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the later modern period, tragedy remains central to reflection on art, but for very different reasons, which have instead to do with the attempt, originating in German romanticism and German idealism, to locate in art a privileged source of truth. Thus tragedy comes to be regarded as articulating a higher or deeper philosophical truth than is available from within the confines of ordinary – extra-artistic and thus non-tragic – experience. A result of this development is that the relation between tragedy and morality, which is regarded in the

neo-Aristotelian tradition as stable and secure, becomes unsettled and is rendered open to reconstruction. Accordingly we find – most famously in Hegel and Nietzsche, but also in Schopenhauer, Schelling and others of the period – interpretations of tragedy that construe its meaning as either non-moral (Schopenhauer, Schelling), anti-moral (Nietzsche) or moral only in an un-commonsensual, philosophically complex fashion (Hegel).

Working in this historical context, Neill and Gardner are both concerned to direct the philosophical consideration of tragedy beyond the familiar and well-trodden territory of the alleged problem of pleasure in tragedy, and to defend a view according to which the value of tragedy is constituted centrally by the truth that it contains.

Neill's chapter provides a detailed study of Schopenhauer's theory of tragedy, which emphasises its close relation to Schopenhauer's metaphysics and shows it to be defensible on grounds that are plausible. Schopenhauer's thesis that artistic contemplation (music excepted) takes as its true object the quasi-Platonic Ideas that correspond to the different grades of objectification of Will, is applied by him to the case of tragedy to yield the theory that tragic representations reveal to us (the Idea of) the morally indifferent and unspeakably painful character of life in general, which is the necessary result of the self-antagonism of the will in the sphere of individuation. Consequently – as a vehicle for the same all-important philosophical truth as is established discursively in Schopenhauer's philosophy – tragedy occupies, for Schopenhauer, a pre-eminent position in the hierarchy of the arts.

This has been thought to set, Neill notes, a *prima facie* problem for Schopenhauer. Given his cognitive account of the value of tragedy, and the content of the cognition that according to Schopenhauer tragedy embodies, it appears very hard to explain why we should take any more pleasure in the experience of tragic works of art than we do in the first-hand, artistically unmediated experience of the unbearable reality that tragedy presents in synopsis. Neill considers first various responses to this problem that might be made on Schopenhauer's behalf by drawing on his conception of artistic experience as a state of subjective tranquillity or by referring to the 'objective' side of the experience of art (its presentation of the Ideas), but he concludes that these will not do the trick. Ultimately, Neill argues, the right response for Schopenhauer to take is to note that the original objection, and indeed much discussion of the putative hedonic paradox of tragedy, is premised on the hedonic theory of value – the view that it is necessary, in order for such and such to be deemed valuable, that it should be a source of pleasure. If we 'abandon the hedonic theory of value', then 'the fact that becoming acquainted with the Ideas presented by tragedy is not pleasurable' is 'no bar to seeing the experience in question as valuable' (this volume, p. 210). That Schopenhauer does not hold the hedonic theory of value is in any case shown, Neill argues, by his conception of the forms of art as ranked in order of value and by his ethical theory. And for a full answer to the question of why for

Schopenhauer tragic cognition has value we must turn, Neill concludes, to his theory of salvation.

Gardner offers a Nietzschean view of the relation between tragedy and morality, supported by a suggestion as to how the metaphysical meaning of tragedy may be understood. The compatibility of tragedy and morality that is asserted in much historical writing about tragedy, and that remains a tacit assumption in much contemporary writing on the subject, is contradicted, Gardner claims, by the considerations (first) that tragedy and morality each assign a different and conflicting value to suffering, and (second) that tragic affirmation is morally indifferent. In support of the first point, Gardner examines critically the moral interpretation of tragedy proposed by Schiller, and argues that Schiller's Kantian view – by virtue of its theodicean implication, that suffering can be morally compensated or redeemed – negates an essential condition of tragic response. The second point – that the value that we find in tragic representation and which provides the ground of the affirmative moment in our response to tragedy, is indifferent to the claims of morality – is shown, Gardner claims, by central examples of tragic works, in which it is clear that the value expressed in tragic affirmation is not morally conditional, that we accord tragic value irrespective of moral failure or achievement, and that this value is – in the perspective afforded by the experience of tragedy – more fundamental than moral value. (It also points to the speculative hypothesis, which a number of theorists have entertained in different formulations, and which Gardner suggests as a ground for tragic value and thereby as an explanation for tragedy's independence from morality, that at the core of the experience of tragedy lies a realisation of the bare form of human life.) If this is correct, then in each of these two respects, the perspective of tragedy conflicts with that of morality.

This insight of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Gardner claims, can be detected, in nascent form, in earlier discussions of tragedy in German philosophy. Gardner goes on to suggest however – here departing from Nietzsche, who continues in later writings to pit the tragic perspective against the moral perspective – that the conflict of tragedy and morality need not be regarded as final: it remains conceivable that both perspectives can be reconciled. The important point, according to Gardner, is to appreciate that, if the compatibility of morality and tragedy is to be maintained – let alone, if positive moral meaning is to be ascribed to tragic art – then this requires speculative philosophical labour: it cannot be regarded as part of the manifest meaning of tragic experience, lying at its surface; nor can it consist in the straightforward identity of world-view that is claimed standardly in neoclassical theory and in much humanist critical practice.

Just as philosophy can ask about the relation of art and morality in general, so can it raise the question of its own artistic elements and of their moral force. This question is raised in an urgent fashion by Nietzsche's philosophical enterprise. It is a very familiar observation that the salience in Nietzsche's



writings of extraordinary literary qualities has fuelled the suspicion that his philosophy is fundamentally irrationalistic and that his radical philosophical claims are presented in emotionally charged, philosophically ‘unprofessional’ prose precisely because they lack a sober argumentative grounding. Yet, Nietzsche’s literary excellence is at the same time one aspect of the deep appeal that his philosophy holds for many of his readers, and for such readers the stylistic qualities of his writing are felt to be not alien, but integral, to the justification of his philosophical outlook. The general question of how and whether artistic means may be employed legitimately in pursuit of philosophical ends, and of whether there could be an indispensable role for artistic methods in philosophical writing, is therefore put in sharp focus by the more specific question of the problematic character of Nietzsche’s texts.

As Janaway notes, recent approaches have tended to go in one of two directions with respect to Nietzsche’s literary style and methods. Postmodern readings have laid a great emphasis on Nietzsche’s style or rhetoric, which they have conceived as the essential instrument of his critique of traditional philosophical notions (of determinate textual meaning and so forth) – at the cost of cutting this critique loose from the diagnostic claims to psychological truth which are necessary in order to rationalise the use of style or rhetoric as a philosophical instrument. Analytic reconstructions have tended to exhibit ‘relative silence on questions concerning his literary methods’ (this volume, p. 266–7), opening themselves to the reasonable complaint that they violate a basic explanatory condition which work in the history of philosophy should aim to meet.

Janaway’s account of the function of Nietzsche’s literary methods cuts straight between these two approaches. Focusing on Nietzsche’s method of provoking affective responses in his reader – of shame, temptation, embarrassment, revulsion, disquiet, admiration – Janaway shows how *On the Genealogy of Morals* is designed to provoke such reactions as part of its procedure of revaluing moral values. After its ‘false beginning’ of scientific objectivity, the First Essay of the *Genealogy* changes gear, ‘probing’ and ‘calling into consciousness’ ‘*the affects of the reader*’ (this volume, pp. 262, 265). Nietzsche’s ‘rhetoric of imaginative provocation of the affects’ flows ‘naturally from his descriptive moral psychology’ (this volume, p. 268). In the light of Nietzsche’s view of human psychology, and in view of the changes in inclinations and aversions that he regards as desirable and seeks to bring about,

here is a programme that would at least make sense: detach people from their practice of making moral judgements, thereby enabling them to feel non-moral inclinations and aversions. How to detach people from making moral judgements? Show them the inherited affects of which these judgements are the *post facto* rationalisations. How to show people the affects they have inherited? Provoke affective responses in them, and invite them to reflect on the explanation for their having them.

(this volume, p. 270)

Several of the Nietzschean themes explored by Janaway – concerning the proximity of art to philosophy, and the pursuit of ethical ends through the medium of each – are also treated in the chapter by Lyas. Lyas observes that, while there are compelling reasons for thinking that there is ‘something up’ with morality in the modern age, our understanding of why this should be so – of what it is exactly that is rotten in the state of morality – remains poor. Accompanying this disquiet regarding morality – not necessarily, but in some important cases, such as that of Nietzsche – is a strong attraction to art, which may be regarded as providing access to sources of motivation and orientation that are closed off to, if not by, morality. The theme of discontent concerning morality thus joins with that of the transformative power of art, and the question is, how we may suppose that art is capable of effecting the kind of deep inner transformation that some, like Nietzsche, have sought to find in it.

Lyas pursues the suggestion that the answer lies with a concept central to modern aesthetics, the concept of expression. In the first place, Lyas argues, the conception of expression developed by Croce offers a general way of understanding how philosophical and artistic interests may converge: philosophical conception qualifies as a form of the sense-making activity that Croce calls expression. This explains the way in which both philosophy and art can arouse a sense of recognition – ‘the sense that what is expressed was in some sense already known to us’ (this volume, p. 282) – but it leaves unexplained, Lyas notes, the ‘difference in kind between the illumination that is produced by philosophical articulations and that produced by artistic articulations’ (this volume, p. 283). Taking again the example of Wagner, Lyas suggests that we find in Wagner’s works a diagnosis of our discomfort regarding morality, and that the transformative potential of art can be understood in terms of what art, understood as Crocean expression, can show us regarding what it is like to live with different sets of values from those which we actually find ourselves with. Both the critical understanding of our condition and the potential for transforming it are contained in the depths of the work of art, and they are made available to us in a mode that is equipped to stimulate and facilitate self-transformation, that is, artistically rather than through self-consciously philosophical reflection. Which is of course not to deny, as Lyas emphasises, in agreement with Tanner (whose writings on Nietzsche and Wagner Lyas refers to throughout as a basis for his discussion), that serious, perhaps insuperable obstacles may stand in the way of actualising the possibilities opened up by art.

The origin of this collection lay with José Luis Bermúdez’s suggestion that we should assemble a collection of papers in honour of Michael Tanner. Over a lifetime of teaching at Cambridge, Michael Tanner has kept alive and fostered a spirit of passionate, critical engagement with philosophy, music and literature, expounding an outlook in which philosophical rigour seeks to join with the understanding of art, and in which both are directed to the end of achieving fullness of life. For the good fortune of his inspiration and

influence, many of us remain deeply grateful. Michael's interests and orientation are visible in the contributions of those whose papers formed the basis of what grew into the present collection. His agreement with or approval of what his former students argue for here is, of course, another matter.

The editors wish to thank Denis Bevington, Emma Gardner and Irene Ibison for their help, much appreciated, in preparing the manuscript; and the Aristotelian Society for permission to reprint Michael Tanner's paper, 'Sentimentality', from the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 77, 1977, 127–47.

## Ethics and aesthetics are — ?

Michael Tanner

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My title is taken from the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein famously claims that ethics and aesthetics are one. I shall not be discussing *his* reasons for making this striking claim, the result as it seems to me, of a disastrous extrapolation, in ethics, from Kant's already catastrophic transcendental moral psychology, where the source of moral value is placed in the noumenal will; and in aesthetics, an equally disastrous adoption, or adaptation, of Kant's and Schopenhauer's view of aesthetic experience as 'disinterested contemplation', and therefore removed from the causal nexus and any consequent *practical* concerns. In the *Notebooks 1914–16*, the entry for 7 October 1916 runs in part: 'The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics.'<sup>1</sup> The connection had not, at that time, become an identity, but it is clear in what direction Wittgenstein was moving, and how he would arrive – and not only from motives of maximum gnomonicness – at his later formulation. Crudely speaking, the further you abstract yourself from particular phenomena, the easier it is to proclaim their identity. The merging, for one bad reason or another, of two of mankind's most remarkable enterprises was common at the end of the last century and the beginning of this; and even so extravagant a genius as Wittgenstein was in many ways, some of them surprising, a child of his time, and in part a fascinatingly gamey mixture of fin-de-siècle Vienna and debut-de-siècle Cambridge.

Wittgenstein's views on ethics and aesthetics have made very little impact, largely no doubt because it is so hard to determine what they are, itself a result of his reluctance to spell them out at any length. In discussions since the Second World War, the tendency among philosophers who have interested themselves in both fields has been much more to draw extreme contrasts between them, thereby harking back to Kant and one line of thought that issued from him; and it is largely the nature and validity of these contrasts that I shall be discussing, especially in relation to the concepts of autonomy,

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1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–16*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, English trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), p. 83e.

authority and principles as they occur in the two fields. This is, I realise, much-trodden ground, but not often well-trodden, so a fairly speedy synoptic traversal of it may still serve a useful purpose.

The most striking contrast between morality and art, as they are studied from a contemporary philosophical viewpoint, is the place that evaluation is often thought to occupy in relation to them. No one wishes to claim that it is out of place in morality: on the contrary, insofar as there is a widespread tendency to think of moral judgements as overriding, it is *there, par excellence*, that evaluation occurs; whereas aesthetic evaluation is regarded by many philosophers as at least suspect, at worst (or best, depending on your general outlook) impossible and this claim is sufficiently widespread to need to be taken seriously by an aesthetician.

One route to this contrast can be succinctly sketched as follows: moral judgements of particular actions, whether prospective or already performed, must always be based on principles, whatever status these principles are accorded. That is common ground among subjectivists, philosophers such as those who, while in fact espousing subjectivism, claim to be unable to understand it, objectivists and fashionably designated realists. But judgements of particular works of art are not based, or at any rate not in a similar way, on principles, and the relationship of what have often been called phenomenal properties to their aesthetic properties, and the further relationship between aesthetic properties and judgement of the works in which they are present, is powerfully disanalogous to the relationship between a description of an action and the moral judgement passed on it. And, this line of argument concludes, when the lack of analogy is adequately explored, it reveals that the whole notion of aesthetic evaluation is thoroughly questionable. In a paper which still commands a great deal of attention – thereby bearing witness to the primacy, in philosophy, of assertion over argumentation – Stuart Hampshire writes ‘The spectator-critic in any of the arts needs gifts precisely the opposite of the moralist’s: he needs to suspend his natural sense of purpose and significance.’<sup>2</sup> Though this and related claims in Hampshire’s paper have often been dealt with, it is clear that they retain an attractiveness, and the attractiveness is not wholly specious.

Perhaps the easiest way to elicit what truth there is in Hampshire’s paper, and to locate the cynosure of its confusions, is to list some platitudes about morality and art respectively. First, about morality: (1) The first point of moral principles and injunctions is to get people not to behave badly in certain ways of an obvious kind, and to behave tolerably in some elementary ways. Since it is necessary for the continuance of any society that people, e.g. refrain from killing one another, at least under most circumstances, and that they usually tell the truth and exhibit fidelity to contracts, there are some extremely

2 Stuart Hampshire, ‘Logic and appreciation’, in W. Elton ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), p. 166.

familiar moral rules which are imposed on every member of society. (2) The worse an action is, morally speaking, the more it matters that it should not be performed: this is little more than a variation on (1). (3) The violation of these basic moral principles is only permissible if there is a strong conflicting principle which overrides the others. There is a certain amount of controversy about this – in other words, about which principles are the most basic; it is widely held that the judicial execution of an innocent man is not justifiable even if an enormous amount of good results from it, since that act will have poisoned the wells, as it were; and Anscombe thinks that sodomy is not permissible under any circumstances whatsoever; but that is something that distinguishes her from most contemporary moralists. (4) All moral actions are universalisable, that is, if action A is right for person P then *ceteris paribus*, any other person in relevantly similar circumstances to P should perform an action of type A. (Hampshire, it is worth pointing out here, is confused about this: he says that ‘anyone [. . .] who moralises necessarily generalises’,<sup>3</sup> which is true if one recognises that generalisation, unlike universalisation, admits of degrees; if one doesn’t recognise this, as I think that, at least in this passage, Hampshire fails to, then one is likely to commit the Kantian error of thinking that moral principles are not only universalisable, but that they also generalise over all men, or all rational beings; a confusion that results in some of Kant’s most notoriously outlandish moral views.)

Now some platitudes about art and aesthetic judgement: (1) There are no *obvious* aesthetic principles or rules which can be said, in any serious sense, to be basic and useful. While it is no doubt wise not to write a piece of music entirely outside the pitch-perception of human beings, or to collaborate in producing a novel so long that even a speed reader would need more than the average life-span to get through it, these don’t occur to one as principles with which to equip the aspiring artist. (Nor do injunctions like ‘Be interesting!’) (2) *Prima facie*, while the worse an action is the more important it is that it should not be performed, and the harsher the judgement on its performance, the worse a work of art is the *less* it matters (and here it is clear that I do believe in the possibility of aesthetic evaluation). This point needs expansion: but the most common meaning I attach to ‘appalling work of art’ is that it is so incompetent as to be beneath notice. When Nietzsche rashly sent to Hans von Bülow his early orchestral composition, the ‘Manfred Meditation’, von Bülow wrote: ‘If you really feel a passionate urge to express yourself in music, you should master the rudiments of musical language: a frenzied imagination, revelling in reminiscences of Wagnerian harmonies, is no sort of foundation to build upon’,<sup>4</sup> something that many late nineteenth-century

3 Loc. cit., p. 164.

4 Letter of 24 July 1872, in Marie von Bülow, *Hans von Bülow's Leben, dargestellt aus seinen Briefen*, Zweite Auflage (Leipzig, 1921), pp. 220–2.

composers might well have put up over their desks or pianos. That is the right note to strike with incompetent amateurs: but when von Bülow can't resist adding 'your *Meditation*, looked at from a musical viewpoint, is the precise equivalent of a crime in the moral sphere', he is making a mistake, since, as he says at the end of the letter, 'your music is not detrimental to the common weal, of course, but something worse than that, detrimental to yourself, seeing that you can find no worse way of killing time than raping Euterpe in this fashion'. But it is precisely what is detrimental to the common weal that is, par excellence, 'a crime in the moral sphere'. There are, I think, at least two other forms of artistic badness (and here I disagree with Professor Beardsley who in *The Possibility of Criticism*<sup>5</sup> thinks that there are only diminishing degrees of artistic goodness): the trivial and the corrupt, the latter naturally calling for critical exposure and denunciation. So the first two platitudes here concern lack of basic principles, and the unimportance of aesthetic badness in its commonest form. (3) While moral principles are employed both to prescribe and to judge actions, aesthetic judgements are chiefly made *after the event*; that is, there is at least one way in which the moralist has more urgent tasks to perform than the critic. (4) The way or ways in which aesthetic judgements are universalisable are much more complicated and obscure than those in which moral judgements are.

Moving on from these pretty obvious, though not sempiternal truths (some which seem very plainly correct to us would have been dismissed scornfully by many of our predecessors, especially, I think number (1) of the list of aesthetic platitudes), there is a further and crucial contrast to be drawn. While I can give you, as nearly as possible, a 'purely descriptive' account of an action from which you will be able to conclude that it was good or bad (*ceteris paribus* clauses being always remembered), I cannot provide you with a more or less purely descriptive account of a work of art from which you can conclude that it is good, though it seems more plausible to say that from such an account you can conclude that it is bad – a single note unvarying in any respect and lasting twenty minutes, for example. It is this feature of aesthetic discourse that Richard Wollheim, in the second edition of *Art and its Objects*, refers to as 'a well-entrenched principle in aesthetics, which may be called the Acquaintance principle, and which insists that judgements of aesthetic value, unlike judgements of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another'.<sup>6</sup>

It is at this point that my promised topics of autonomy and authority make their entry: for the autonomy of aesthetic judgement, if not that of ethical judgement, seems indisputable, granted the well-entrenchedness of the

5 Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).

6 Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 233.

Acquaintance principle; it might, indeed be thought that the Acquaintance principle gave a more precise force to the term 'autonomy' than it would otherwise have, if one felt, as I do, that the concept of autonomy is less clear than its frequent unexplained use by philosophers suggests. One might try to make a point which, cursorily stated, seems perspicuous but becomes harder to grasp when one ponders it, in this way. Take the following three cases: the legal man; the moral man; and the aesthetic man. It is required of the legal man only that he does not infringe the law; his motives are irrelevant – he may well, like almost everyone, including to the scandal of his Cambridge friends, the saintly G.E. Moore, proclaim truly that he only pays income tax because he could be penalised if he didn't; and similarly with many of the other laws he keeps on the right side of. If he *does* infringe certain laws, his motives may well be of interest in a court of law, but if he doesn't, that's all there is to it – he is a 'law abiding citizen', which is the most we can require of him in that dimension. The moral man is equally required, in the first place, to obey moral laws – and the first duty of the moralist is to ensure that people do. It goes without saying that motives enter in a much more intimate way in assessing someone as a good, moral man; but without venturing further onto the treacherous territory where this issue beckons, it can safely be said that many, if not most of the correct or good acts which people perform are not done from a sense of duty or conformity to, or reverence for, the moral law, nor does it seem desirable, in many cases, that they should be, but from habit, or the desire for the quiet life, or fear of disapprobation, or what Kant calls 'pathological affection'. It is only in the framework of a fairly highly developed and sophisticated society that the motives for acting morally command much, let alone sovereign attention. Kant was a very unworldly philosopher.

The primacy of getting people to do the right things, or pass the right moral judgements, is connected, though not straightforwardly, with the transmissibility of moral knowledge, to use Wollheim's expression. But the fact that I may lead a certain kind of life which at least enables me to get by morally, and that I can pass, with point, moral judgements on others for reasons other than the 'correct' ones, means that, at a surface level at least, sincerity and first-handedness of moral judgement are not universally required. The sheer fact that morality is necessary because of a conflict between what we would like to do and what we ought to do is enough to demonstrate that sincerity, though a crucial concept in ethics isn't one that can be invoked in a straightforward sense. If one takes 'sincerity' in the most naive way, as a congruence between the inner and the outer life, it is precisely what we do not require much of the time. Of course, as we shall see, there is enormously more to sincerity than that glib little account allows, and it enters the moral life and our estimates of it at many points, but in its crudest forms it clearly can't be called a virtue.

When we think of sincerity in morals, it is in the first place in relation to actions: in fact, in the case of many moral actions it may not be the obvious,



or the most appropriate, word to use, and that may partly account for the use of the more fashionable term (at least in some circles) ‘authenticity’. Even then, however much ‘To thine own self be true’ is good advice, it is far from being as trite as many of the items on Polonius’ list are usually alleged to be. For a great deal of moral action *does* go against the grain, especially if one thinks of what people are morally obliged to *say*. There is a constant incipient conflict between the obligation to be truthful and the obligation to be a tolerable member of a social group, as Molière’s *Le Misanthrope* makes immortally clear – though perhaps that is more a matter of not being unnecessarily open than of actually lying. If it is felt that sincerity is not the important concept here, and that my introduction of it is a side-tracking manoeuvre in setting up contrasts between morality and aesthetics, I am half-inclined to agree; on the other hand, discussion of the prerequisites of being a moral agent can’t get very far without it; but as we shall see later, it is more of a moral ideal to be striven toward than a starting point of the moral life.

Finally, the aesthetic man; most of us are not, or not to any significant extent, aesthetic agents. And the question of sincerity in relation to the creation of art is hugely complex. In some cases it simply makes no sense to talk of works of art as sincere or not; in other cases it is possible to raise the question, but minimally relevant. And in a further group of cases it is a term that I, at least, feel compelled to use, while not regarding it as one of the ‘passwords’ of the intentional school, with which designation in the paper ‘The intentional fallacy’,<sup>7</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley contrive to give it an oddly conspiratorial air. While saying nothing detailed on *that* score, I will merely constate that categorically to dismiss the relevance of sincerity to the creation of art seems to me to postulate a clarity and clear-boundedness in our concept of art which I don’t believe that it possesses: and in particular a confidence in our placing of art in the spectrum ranging from utterances where sincerity is the prime requirement, such as private avowals of affection, and those where it manifestly plays no part, such as the recital of public notices in parks; a confidence which is quite misplaced.

As to sincerity in aesthetic judgement, however: while there may be all sorts of reasons for being insincere in one’s aesthetic judgements – moral reasons included, such as the conceivable obligation not to hurt the feelings of someone who has given one a bad painting as a present – there is simply no point, from an aesthetic standpoint, in being insincere in one’s judgements of works of art. This is a separate point from the Acquaintance principle: it is, in general, a necessary condition of making a sincere aesthetic judgement that one should have first-hand experience of a work, but it clearly isn’t a sufficient condition. For one may experience a work and recognise that it possesses properties that are approved by one’s friends or teachers or

7 W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘The intentional fallacy’, in David Newton-de Molina ed., *On Literary Intention* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976).

culture-circle and therefore pass on it what one takes to be the appropriate judgement, while actually feeling quite differently about it. And just as there is a great deal of cant about morality (about the congruence of motives and actions), so the extent of the genuineness of many people's aesthetic reactions tends to be widely overestimated. There is a large body of works of art to which almost universal lip-service is paid, simply because people are afraid of departing from the authorised view of Shakespeare, Titian or Beethoven, unless they are determined to immortalise themselves as *enfants terribles*, like Shaw (on Shakespeare) and Stravinsky (on Beethoven, until very late in life). So sincerity in response to works of art demands first-hand experience of it, together with an honest report of what that first-hand experience evoked. But sincerity in moral *judgement* (as opposed to action) does not demand first-hand experience of what is being judged, but merely an honest reaction to it, even if the action or person being judged is only described, and not witnessed or encountered. And, in general, though a good deal of 'insincerity' in the naive sense that I have so far invoked is to be expected, indeed desiderated, in the moral life, sincerity of moral *judgement* is customarily required.

It seems that at this stage, the contrasts between the moral and aesthetic realms are not so thoroughgoing as they first appeared. And there is this further consideration: if one regards morality, at least at its basic level, as an enterprise to which a good deal of hypocrisy, bad faith and so on, are necessary, even if in principle undesirable, so one might regard the community of aesthetic judges (by which I mean nothing sterner than that group of people for whom artistic judgements are a serious concern) as one in which a fair amount of disingenuousness is also to be expected and even essential. Here I am taking it that, though a moral agent or judge is necessarily part of a community, while an aesthetic judge may be far more independent, individualistic, and possibly isolated, it is most profitable for the purposes of my discussion, and also most often the case, that he is a collaborator in a community of aesthetic judges. In such a community, which will involve many shared assessments and values as well as, initially and desirably, many disagreements, there will be a good deal of merely token assent and therefore insincerity. Nonetheless, I think there is a significant contrast between the moral community and the aesthetic community. While, in the moral sphere, we tolerate, because we have to, a great deal of insincerity, habit, and the commitment, in T. S. Eliot's view, of the 'highest treason', which is 'to do the right act for the wrong reason', the artistic community can tolerate far less. A dislocation of more than a minor extent between aesthetic judgement and genuine aesthetic response rapidly renders the whole enterprise pointless; hence sincerity enters at an earlier stage in the aesthetic than in the moral life.

To make this clearer, it may be instructive to compare the early stages of moral and aesthetic education, as they are typically passed through. The first stages of morality are a matter of imperatives issued to do, or refrain from

doing, various things: reasons may be given, often of the rudimentary though far-reaching form of ‘How would you like someone to do that to you?’ Quite often reasons for the imperatives won’t be given, because they wouldn’t be understood. Actions or types of actions are simply prescribed or proscribed, and performed or desisted from, with varying degrees of resentment by the recipient of the prescription, etc. By contrast, aesthetic education begins in the production of delights of varying kinds, whether it be the hearing of stories, the making and seeing of pictures and playing with coloured blocks of wood or plastic, and the listening to tunes or the bashing of small xylophones. Unless the parent or teacher is rigorously didactic, like James Mill (and it is interesting to note from John Stuart Mill’s mature writings on art how his view of it was permanently warped by his notoriously stringent early training), pleasure functions as almost the sole criterion, and there is parental toleration of indignant refusal to endure dull stories or inadequately noisy quasi-musical instruments. As the child’s tastes and interests become more sophisticated and exigent, sets of preferences form and the shaky foundations of taste are laid. At some point strain begins to arise between what the child enjoys and what he is told is worthwhile working at if he is to gain greater enjoyment. (I realise that by prevalent contemporary standards, I sound a bit like James Mill.) The discrepancy between what is found immediately and genuinely attractive, and what one is told one ought to enjoy, notoriously widens for many people during adolescence, and if the rift becomes wide enough artistic interests are abandoned, or a defiant low-brow stance is struck. But for those for whom the gap narrows and who consequently develop serious tastes, the judgements they make will be founded on sustained first-hand contact with works of art, and an order of preferences – not, of course, a straightforward linear order or anything like that – will be established. The kinds of demand made on art may be very different, ranging from thorough-going, incorrigible hedonistic connoisseurship to strenuous moralism. The process is sufficiently familiar not to need any further filling-in. The crucial point is that though tastes change, develop, regress, ossify or stabilise, interest will only be maintained in art at all, and thus in specific works of art, so long as first-hand responses, frequently of a positive kind, are maintained – unless one takes the necessarily idiosyncratic, passionately negative late-Tolstoyan view of virtually all the available specimens.

Ideally the *moral* growth of the individual will have a fair amount in common with the process I’ve just delineated. After the strikingly different, painful and largely incomprehensible initial stages, the normal child will come to understand something of the rationale of the injunctions and prohibitions under which he has been labouring. And as he grows into adolescence, and the range of his interests and emotions widens, he will find morality extending into areas which he hadn’t previously considered subject to it, probably because he was scarcely aware of their existence. His principles, unless he is a very exceptional person, will become numerous, complicated and

probably unstatable. A major element in his development as a moral being will be the ‘internalisation’ of his moral principles and beliefs, so that what was seen as no more than a quasi-legal code to which he was subservient will become his own code – but here the discrepancy between the aesthetic and the moral begins to manifest itself again. What psychologists call ‘internalisation’ is an analogue of the state that moral philosophers call ‘autonomy’, and though it occurs to some degree in everyone except psychopaths, I’ve already expressed doubts as to whether it is ever completed to anything like the extent that moral philosophers demand. Most of us remain morally fairly heteronomous, listlessly acknowledging the need to obey rules which we would break if we could with impunity. On the whole we tend to acknowledge quite genuinely the need for a moral law, as we do for the laws of the state (they overlap to a considerable degree, of course), while continuing to resent the restraint imposed on us by many particular moral laws, and acting in accordance with them, if we can’t get away with their violation, only because we don’t want to be disapproved of or ostracised.

It is important to emphasise that when aestheticians are discussing evaluation and related topics, as opposed to working in those epistemological and ontological areas of the subject concerned with such matters as the identity and mode of existence of works of art, although they often tend to talk in terms of ‘works of art’ in general (something that is perfectly harmless when ontologists do it), they usually have in mind arresting works – ones that are at least pretty good. While when philosophers, at least in the Anglo-American world, talk of moral action, principle, and judgement, they most often, and notoriously, have in mind fairly commonplace acts: they are thinking, though unwittingly, of moral mediocrity, which is the most that the majority of people aspire to. This means that contrasts can be made more readily than they should be: it enables aestheticians to talk without *arrière-pensée* of the impossibility of providing recipes for the production of works of art, in contrast to moralists whose job is precisely to produce general codes of conduct. But in fact many works of art are constructed according to recipes, though one may on that account refuse to designate them as ‘art proper’, Collingwood being the most celebrated advocate of *that* line of thought. So it would seem, supposing one doesn’t follow Collingwood, fairer to compare the keeping of promises, and the usual range of soporific moral examples, with the making of B-movies, or the production of *Gebrauchsmusik*, or pulp fiction, rather than with the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or *Così fan tutte*. A better comparison, in the moral sphere, with those fabulous works would be an act of moral heroism, or of supererogation, though they present problems of their own and may still not provide the contrasts one wants to locate as precisely as possible. Better would be an example of moral creativity, the promulgation and/or enactment of a radical departure in morality. There aren’t many of these to be found, by comparison with the enormous wealth of great works of art; and they stand in a different relationship to one another

from the way that great artworks stand with respect to one another. For while it isn't, on the whole, correct to say that great works of art contradict one another, great moral systems do. Or at least I take it that they do, though that claim has been interestingly, and for my purposes, illuminatingly, contested by Strawson in his paper 'Social morality and the individual ideal'.<sup>8</sup> In that paper he sketches a view which makes competing moral ideals into something very similar to great works of art, at least in respect of the relation that they are normally thought to bear to one another. For Strawson, social morality, that area which receives most intensive scrutiny from contemporary moral philosophers, demands conformity for the maintenance of the social group, and is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition of life's being worth living. But since men have widely different temperaments and interests, they consequently construct for themselves different individual ideals – those of them, at least, who are concerned enough with the quality of their lives to have ideals at all. Some arrive at the notion of extraordinarily refined social existences, of the kind cherished by the chief characters in the late novels of James; others of a constantly renewed affinity with nature and the rhythms of the seasons; others of a universal brotherhood; others of lives purged of everything except the will to truth; and so on. As Strawson portrays the scene, it becomes explicit that for him the larger the number of alternative and indeed exclusive ideals there are, the better. Strawson revels in the variety of men's visions of the ideal life, seeming himself to subscribe to an ideal which is precisely the contemplation of how divergent ideals can be; he writes of the realm where there are 'conflicting truths but no truth'.<sup>9</sup> This view might be called in the most derogatory sense, the aestheticisation of morality, according to which the *homme moyen sensuel* gets his kicks from observing the strivings, usually doomed, of fanatics. The sheer fact that many of these ideals do portray *the way* for man to live, and elicit total allegiance, adds to the excitement but can be discounted. In the light of this it is hardly surprising that in his article on 'Aesthetic appraisal and works of art'<sup>10</sup> he arrives – via a more logically rigorous route – at a view of works of art as similarly non-competitive, seen from the standpoint of sane moderation. His way of regarding morality as a dichotomised affair makes those people who recommend and succeed in pursuing highly individual ideals into something very similar to significant works of art. In both morality and art there are basic rules of competence or mere adequacy, though I've shown that these rules are of very different importance in the two spheres, failure to fulfil them in art guaranteeing ignorability, failure to observe them in morality (though 'competence' is being strained here) leading to a very great deal of hostile attention.

8 P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974).

9 Loc. cit., p. 29.

10 In *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*.

Beyond that, in Strawson's view (and it is interesting, even touching, to note how he and like-minded philosophers, mainly in Oxford, who make brief excursions into aesthetics are, though not aware of it, producing as 'timeless' accounts of aesthetic concepts what are best seen as logico-analytical analogues of the aestheticism of Pater and Wilde) – beyond that, works of art have their own, incomparable lives and so do moral agents. Hence the closeness, on this account of morals, of at least some people's lives to works of art. A maximum degree of individuality is postulated and the morality of self-realisation (which was, it's worth noting, worked out theoretically in Oxford contemporaneously with the doctrine of 'art for art's sake') is to be recommended the more strenuously the more it is taken that selves are unique – or can be created. There is much that is attractive in such a view though in the end I find it unacceptable, even repellent.

But whatever its faults, it succeeds, though inadvertently, and without recognition of those who have espoused it, in creating a notable comparison between aesthetic and moral properties. Actually Strawson and Hampshire, among others, have been at pains to emphasise the *difference* in logical behaviour of moral and aesthetic predicates. To expand upon, and in part repeat, a point made earlier, the difference is alleged to be this (I may say before I begin this part of the discussion, that I shall continue to be fairly slack in my use of 'predicate', 'property', 'concept', 'term' and 'judgement' where nothing much seems to depend on the distinctions among them): it is characteristic of moral, as of aesthetic, properties that they are supervenient upon natural or phenomenal properties. But it is further characteristic of aesthetic properties, as it is not of moral properties, that their ascription does not follow from the description of the phenomenal properties on which they supervene in such a way that from the phenomenal description the aesthetic properties can be inferred: hence, at least in part, the Acquaintance principle. Waiving for the moment some difficult questions as to what is to count, in some cases, as a description of a work of art, it is true that from a description of the phenomenal properties one won't be able to conclude that it is vivid as opposed to garish, serene as opposed to languid, graceful as opposed to insipid, solemn as opposed to pompous. Aesthetic properties, that is, are perceived. (This view has been argued at greatest length, of course, by Frank Sibley.) Moral qualities, on the other hand, are normally thought to be inferred; if I describe some action then, *ceteris paribus*, you can infer that it was good or wicked, generous or petty. However, this contrast becomes less clear-cut with the aestheticisation, in a more favourable sense than I employed a short while back, of the moral life. For it is characteristic of certain moral qualities that they too can only be ascribed to someone on the basis of first-hand experience of him and his behaviour. This fact is concealed because the predicates designating the qualities often are used, and correctly, in a way that *can* be inferred from a description; I am claiming only that they are not always used in this

sense, and that it is especially characteristic of their use in what might be called ‘morally creative’ contexts that they are not.

Let me begin the explanation of this by quoting a celebrated passage from Isenberg’s ‘Critical communication’.<sup>11</sup> He quotes a conversation:

‘The expression on her face was delightful’  
‘What was delightful about it?’  
‘Didn’t you see that smile?’

And he comments:

The speaker does not mean that there is something delightful about smiles as such; but he cannot be accused of not stating his meaning clearly, because the clarity of his language must be judged in relation to his purpose, which in this case is the *evaluation* of the immediate experience; and for that purpose the reference to the smile will be sufficient if it gets people to feel that they are ‘talking about the same thing’. There is understanding and misunderstanding at this level; there are marks by which the existence of one or the other can be known; and there are means by which misunderstanding can be eliminated. But these phenomena are not identical with those that take the same names in the study of ordinary communication.

And, immediately afterwards he adds, relevantly to my argument: ‘Reading criticism, otherwise than in the presence, with direct recollection, of the objects discussed is a blank and senseless employment – a fact which is concealed from us by the cooperation in our reading, of many non-critical purposes for which the information offered by the critic is material and useful.’ Now the widely accepted view of aesthetic properties is no more than an expansion of this seminal passage; what goes for ‘delightful’ also goes for the majority of aesthetic terms. And the task – or a major task – of the critic is to get people to notice the presence of aesthetic properties by using a characterisation of some features in a work which directs attention to them. It seems to me that this is also true of at least some moral properties, such as sincerity, nobility, purity and corruption – at least in some contexts. Or to put it another way: some aesthetic properties are also ethical properties; and if the Acquaintance principle operates for aesthetic properties in general, then it also works, sometimes, for ethical properties. I am not at all sure that I can provide a general characterisation of them, but, with Isenberg in mind, let me develop an antinomy which John Casey has pointed to in his excellent paper

11 Arnold Isenberg, ‘Critical communication’, in *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism: Selected Essays of Arnold Isenberg*, ed. William Callaghan et al. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973), p. 164.

‘The autonomy of art’,<sup>12</sup> where he delineates a conflict that might arise between a philosopher of mind of, roughly speaking, a Wittgensteinian (Mark II) outlook, and a literary critic. Suppose that a man’s wife dies, and that by all the usual criteria we have adequate grounds for saying that he is experiencing grief. But, feeling the need to commemorate her by publishing news of her death in a newspaper, he chooses a trite and sentimental poem by which to express his sense of loss. A literary critic will be liable to charge him with shallowness or insincerity. Aldous Huxley, in an article ‘Sincerity in art’ published in 1927, made the same point: ‘I have read,’ he says, ‘genuine letters by suicides just before their death, which I should, as a reviewer, have pilloried for their manifest “insincerity”. And yet, after all, it would be difficult to demand of a man a higher proof of the sincerity of his emotions than that which he furnishes by killing himself because of them. Only suicides of talent write letters that are artistically “sincere”. The rest, incapable of expressing what they feel, are compelled to fall back on the trite, “insincere” rhetoric of the second-rate novel.’<sup>13</sup> Our inclination in these cases is to say that such people (though I disagree with Huxley that suicide is proof of sincerity) have feelings that they cannot find adequate expression for – that their non-verbal behaviour shows that they feel deeply, or at least intensely, but that they can’t put their feelings into words and find someone else’s, a bad poet’s, say, adequate. What I think we *ought* to say is something which doesn’t rest so strongly on a dualistic view of feeling and expression: in finding adequate verbal expression for one’s feelings one is clarifying them, even, in Spinozistic terms, moving from being a passive victim of them to experiencing them actively, and this is, *pace* Casey, simultaneously an imaginative and a moral achievement. A problem about the individuation of emotions may arise here – is the man who was sobbing, gibbering incoherently, and finding adequate expression of his feelings in a piece of kitsch feeling the same emotion when he contrives to express it either by writing, or finding satisfaction in reading, a profound poem? In no longer fashionable terms, I’m inclined to reply: Say what you like, but be careful. Clearly he has undergone some change: but since we don’t have anything like clear-cut criteria for the individuation of emotions, I prefer to say that what was previously inchoate and uncomprehended has become, in its expression, something grasped and organised, though I think we should be careful not to over-intellectualise the process, as Spinoza certainly does. Collingwood’s distinction between the generalised betrayal of emotion, and its particularised artistic expression, is more satisfactory, and equally overcomes the dualism of the empiricist tradition, while pressing much too far in the direction of

12 John Casey, ‘The autonomy of art’, in Godfrey Vesey ed., *Philosophy and the Arts* (London: Macmillan, 1973).

13 Aldous Huxley, *On Art and Artists*, ed. Morris Philipson (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 53.



uniqueness. Whatever we decide is the best formulation, it is clear that we do have, and therefore any philosophical account must be able to provide for, a distinction between the achievement of an adequate expression of a given emotion, and the process of development and growth which emotions sometimes undergo.

It is characteristic of one moral ideal, or cluster of related ideals, that it has as some of its key terms ‘sincerity’, ‘depth’, ‘integrity’, ‘purity’ and some term opposed to ‘sentimentality’ (it is interesting to note that ‘sentimental’ doesn’t appear to have any one term as its opposite). It is these terms, most of which I listed earlier, which have both moral and aesthetic employment; and when their ethical and aesthetic applications are most difficult to disentangle – when disentangling them would be most harmful to the purpose they are serving – is, I suspect, when they are being used to characterise expressive states. It is then that we need first-hand experience of people and their behaviour if we are to be able responsibly to ascribe these properties to them. And equally it is at this point that the moralist will no longer find it adequate to speak in terms of principles of action, for it is no longer action alone, or even action accompanied by the appropriate motive, that he is concerned with; but rather with a mode of living which involves feeling, perception and thought, and to know the morality involved is to know the person who embodies it.

At this point we may begin to make sense of the initially dark saying that ‘A work of art is to be judged by its own standards’ if we concentrate equally on what might be meant by saying ‘A person is to be judged (morally) by his own standards’. Clearly neither of these claims will apply to every, or even most, works of art or people. But if we restrict them so that they mean only that some art and some people are to be judged by their own standards, they can be useful, though the aesthetic claim (quite commonly made) is more likely to be mischievous than illuminating as it stands. For, taken literally, it appears to suggest an absurd procedure whereby, on encountering such a work, we abstract from it the standards that it creates and then proceed to apply them in order to judge it. And it seems equally foolish to suggest, in the case of a major moral innovator, that he should be judged by the standards he embodies, though some of his actions may be judged by the standards created by the rest – as, for example, in the case of Christ’s childish and petulant causing of the fig tree to wither when he was feeling thirsty and it had no fruit on it, as was only to be expected given the season, according to Luke’s careful description of the incident.

Why then, in the face of these obvious objections to the formulation, should it be so often produced? My suspicion is that it results from anxiety on the subjects of autonomy and authority. For an autonomous judgement must be made on the basis of standards which, in some sense, originate from within the person making the judgement, even though he acquired them in the first place from elsewhere. And unless he has extracted principles from works or

persons and incorporated them into his value-system, he is no longer an autonomous judge or agent, but is simply overcome by extraneous considerations, such as fear or a desire to conform, and is therefore not genuinely making judgements of the required kind. This kind of view is most familiar in the context of theological ethics. Certainly many theologians and Christian philosophers have argued that God wills what is good because it is good rather than that it is good because God wills it, on assorted grounds such as that if one identifies the good with God's will, one can't praise God without lapsing into tautology. I agree with Anscombe that such arguments are unconvincing, and that the claim that God is to be obeyed in his capacity as a *moral* being, which she attributes to Sidgwick (though I can't discover where he makes this claim), is vulgar. Were I a Christian, I would grasp the horn of the Euthyphro dilemma which claims that things are good because God approves of them. If one were God, and the good is defined in terms of one's will, I imagine that one could bring oneself to forgo the praise which would be due to one if one merely incessantly willed the good. In both morals and art it is possible to encounter phenomena which provide one with one's concept of greatness or goodness, and which serve, in Matthew Arnold's term, as touchstones for judging works of art, or people, or ways of life (among other things). Once the touchstone has been encountered, a principle can no doubt be elicited from it. But the principle is not only *validated* by the touchstone, but may well be given its *sense* by it. Hence the, or an, Acquaintance principle appears in another form: judgements of aesthetic, and in some cases of moral, value must be based on first-hand experience of their objects not simply because one is in no position to assert the presence of the requisite properties without the experience, but also because one is not capable of understanding the meaning of the terms which designate the properties without the experience.

Though the claims I am making in aesthetics have universal validity, I don't think that applies to my claims vis-à-vis morality; though my own view of morality is that someone who doesn't assent to them will have an impoverished moral life. But the very idea of taking an embodied ideal, or selecting from several – an inspirational view of morality – may be deeply repugnant to many people. For it seems to smack of, or could unkindly be called, 'born-again ethics'. But because the examples most immediately likely to spring to mind of the born-again are not attractive, that shouldn't put us off the whole notion. There are better reasons, in any case, for resisting it if one wants to, one of which is that while the case for the Acquaintance principle in respect of works of art seems unimpugnable, the case for it in morality does not. For it seems plausible to argue that while, from a psychological point of view, the disciples of Christ were inspired by being acquainted with an incarnation of the Sermon on the Mount, from a logical point of view the sermon itself is adequate to get people to understand what it means to love your enemies, turn the other cheek, and so forth. Again, while Christ often spoke

in parables which depict someone acting well (as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan) or several people acting with varying moral interests and outcomes (as in the Parable of the Talents), they merely make more vivid what could be expressed in general terms; and undeniably it could. For in morality, as elsewhere, conceptual revision (one of Christ's enterprises) tends to be undertaken as a result of remarkable and surprising occurrences or thought experiments, but it could be undertaken without them.

However, while it is very often true – though in many areas one would only rationally undertake conceptual revision in the face of *actual* occurrences, such as the Michelson-Morley experiment – it is not true, or at any rate not adequate, in morality, if one is being adjured to follow a way of life extensively different from one's present way, provided that that doesn't strike one as being more unsatisfactory than average. For one needs, for such an undertaking, a depiction of the new way that is persuasive enough to make it seem worth the effort of self-transformation. What needs to be conveyed is the difference in quality of the new way of life; and that is what is bound to escape general formulations of principle. Notoriously so since those who produce formulae are inevitably going to seem trite or merely paradoxical (the latter would apply to 'Love your enemies' taken out of the context of Christ's life). The dangers of producing recipes for happiness or (if you despise that, as it is fashionable to do) for the meaning of life, are too well-known to be rehearsed. The meaning that a man finds in his life, whether it is an actual or a fictional personage, will only emerge with any force from a depiction of that life which can be characterised by at least some aesthetic terms. This comes out clearly not only from the futility of extracting the message of a novel or play, but also from the dire results which ensue when a collection of distinguished people are asked to contribute essays to a volume called 'What I Believe' or 'What Life Has Taught Me'. For one is invariably left feeling, after perusal of such books, that life has taught distinguished people very little, or else lessons of surprising banality. It is *in* the living, as retailed by a gifted autobiographer or biographer, that the point and value of someone's life can be seen.

The giftedness I mean is, largely, an aesthetic matter. I say 'largely' because at this point the category of the aesthetic becomes blurred; or rather it becomes decreasingly useful to try to decide which are and which are not aesthetic qualities. Indeed, it may be positively harmful, since if we decide that, e.g. 'ironic' is being used aesthetically, the point of that decision is presumably in part to block off certain types of response which under certain circumstances, we should *not* block off. For, in the depiction of a life, or a way of life, the manner of depicting and the life depicted are not to be separated; I don't mean, of course, that a life may not be routinely told, even if it was a very unusual life – it happens frequently in biographies, and makes them very dispiriting. But in a biography which we feel does justice to its extraordinary subject – and there are very few that do – there is a congruence

of the telling and what is told that transcends the ‘aesthetic’, as that is nowadays narrowly used. In Robert Craft’s *Chronicle of a Friendship*,<sup>14</sup> for example, the depiction of Stravinsky and of the author himself is such that the remarkable qualities of both men and of the many extraordinary people they encounter, come across in ways that need a wide vocabulary, aesthetic, moral, and other: ‘vitality’ for instance, is a word that one needs to use often in characterising both Stravinsky and the portrayal of him, and I’m not at all clear that one would be convinced of his vitality if one wasn’t equally impressed by that of the depiction: Craft’s skill is such that it is Stravinsky’s vitality which appears to be the agent of the book’s, and it even seems to be part of the point of the book that this should be so. One knew, independently of Craft’s wonderful book, that Stravinsky *had* prodigious vitality, from the sheer inventory of his doings, his travelling, range of friends, and compositions. But the portrayal of them incontestably presents one with an ideal of a full though illness-stricken life which nothing lacking the book’s congruent energy would have conveyed. At this point the ethicist and the aesthete become one. Or perhaps, given my concentration on ‘vitality’, it will be felt that neither category is involved.

Which brings me to my final two points, though I realise that I have raised many other issues in the chapter which I have not cleared up: first, in talking of Craft’s depiction of Stravinsky and in general in talking of the depiction of moral ideals as embodied in such figures as Christ, I have not attempted to distinguish between depiction and description. Such a distinction might well be thought necessary, especially in light of the claim that it almost never follows from the description of a work of art that it has a given aesthetic property. For in claiming that some moral properties are aesthetic properties, it would seem to follow that they too would need to be experienced rather than simply described. My answer to this is that, in the first place, the notion of description becomes less clear as one moves through the arts from painting to literature. Certainly nearly all descriptions of nearly all paintings will be approximate, since our vocabulary for coping with lines, colours and forms is so limited and imprecise; hence, mildly paradoxically, the clearness of the notion of description in relation to paintings. In music, we can describe works in comparably approximate ways, though with the importing of emotional but not necessarily thereby aesthetic terms, as in Mann’s description of fictional musical compositions in *Dr Faustus*, we may almost feel we have experienced the work; and we may also describe musical works in great technical detail, the *terminus ad quem* of which would be an account of the score from which someone could copy the work down, as happened in Delius’ dictations of his last works to Eric Fenby. Here we may feel uneasy about using ‘description’ any longer. Equally, if someone described *Paradise Lost* as a poem the first word of which was ‘Of’, the second ‘man’s’, and so on to the

14 Robert Craft, *Chronicle of a Friendship* (New York/London: Knopf/Gollancz, 1972).

end, we would have so full a description that we might well be inclined not to call it that at all. Without pressing the point, I think we could say that in describing in a fairly detailed way a man's life, including quoting things he said and rendering his manner of behaviour as vividly as possible, we may well have produced a work to which aesthetic qualities may be ascribed – for that is precisely what most novels do, and we ascribe aesthetic properties both to them and to the incidents and characters within them. Much more needs to be said on this, but I hope my line of argument is clear.

Second, and last: I have so far left my hostility to Strawson's account of moral ideals under-explained. His view of the desirability of a maximum variety of ideals depends on the non-implementation of most of them, and that makes them imaginative in a damaging way. It is part and parcel of his, and Hampshire's (perhaps it is fairest to say our culture's) prevalent view that inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness of aesthetic appreciation is a good thing, and obviously so; works of art are unique, incomparable, and those 'principles of exclusion' to which Hampshire contemptuously refers, are undesirable. Here I will merely state flatly that it seems to me that the more art one appreciates in this way, the less deeply one appreciates it. Cutting it off from the general systems of belief and value in which most of it had its origins, one cultivates an aesthetic cosmopolitanism in which one is equally at home everywhere, and regards one's aesthetic rootlessness as being admirably reflected by the 'autonomy' of art. And what goes for art goes for moral ideals which therefore cease, in any serious sense, to be moral or ideal at all. What is widely thought of as catholicity of taste and tolerance of moral ideals seems to me to be promiscuity and indifference, the almost inevitable end-products of a culture which presents us with so many temptations that we elevate submitting to as many of them as possible into a principle. But at this point, when a paper on ethics and aesthetics is rapidly becoming a sermon on morality, I had better stop.

# Art and moral education

*Christopher Hamilton*

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### I

In what way, if any, is a human life impoverished by the absence of serious contact with art? To ask the question is not to claim that one can answer it. But it is a question which presses itself on anyone who cares about art and wants to try to grasp what it is about art that leads him willingly to give up a great deal of his energy and time in engagement with it.

Perhaps the most tempting way in which one might try to make out the importance of art in life is to think that the experience of art can be recruited to a moral education. To those who are temperamentally inclined to understand the experiences of their life, at least in part, in the terms offered by great works of art there is something deeply attractive about this view. And it is also a deeply consoling view, so much so that it remains one of those ideas that constitute permanent places of repair of the human spirit in its attempts to grasp the meaning of things and fit together into some kind of clear pattern the disparate aspects of human life. It is this view that I wish to explore in this essay.<sup>1</sup>

### II

Many philosophers have tried to vindicate the view that there is some kind of connection between virtue and human happiness, the idea usually being that the exercise of virtue itself involves, or otherwise leads to, happiness. That there is a connection between virtue and happiness is surely right, but, I think, more plausible than the claim that if you are virtuous you will be happy is the idea that if you are happy you will be likely to be virtuous. At any rate, the latter idea is far from absurd. Suppose, anyway, that we grant it. Then, for someone who cares for art, he will, other things being equal, be likely to find happiness if he has access to, and can enjoy art, as he wishes.

1 I am grateful to Sebastian Gardner and José Luis Bermúdez for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

But then we can say that, for such a person, the experience of art is likely to contribute to his virtue.

This kind of connection between art and morality is clearly, however, not the thing, indeed, not the *kind* of thing, that those who claim that art can contribute to the moral life are usually after. For it is obvious that exactly the same kind of connection proposed between art and morality can be found in many other areas of life: we could view, say, the playing of bridge or cooking or swimming as contributing to the moral life in just the kind of way that art is said to on the present account.

So much the better for bridge, cooking and swimming, one might suppose. Yet those thinkers who have explored the relation between art and morality have, in general, set their sights higher. For example, Martha Nussbaum has claimed that art – in particular the novel – directs our attention to particular individuals in particular situations and thus gets us to enter imaginatively into the subjectivity of the individuals whose condition we have presented to us in the work;<sup>2</sup> Frank Palmer has argued that through literature we learn through imaginative identification what it is like to be a given person (say, Macbeth) and how to feel in the right kinds of ways;<sup>3</sup> Noël Carroll has suggested that through art we can deepen our understanding of the moral knowledge we already possess;<sup>4</sup> and R. W. Beardsmore has claimed that through art we can expand and deepen our understanding of how actions can manifest different emotions and moral qualities, thus enabling us to become more sensitive in our perceptions;<sup>5</sup> all of which is said to help in a moral education. The common thread running through all these accounts is that of an exercise of the imagination which enables us to become more sensitive to others and their needs in a way which nourishes the morally good life.

I am sure that one or other of these views, or some combination of them, or, at any rate, something like them, correctly identifies the way or ways in which engagement with *some* works of art or genres of art can contribute in the case of *given* individuals to their moral education. But I think that the theorists in question have a strong tendency to exaggerate the morally beneficial effects of art. For example, Noël Carroll, discussing Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*, says that the play can *clarify* for us the nature of the virtue of prudence, for 'we are offered a striking contrast between worldly prudence and imprudence in the persons of Lopukhin and Madame Ranevskaya – a contrast staged over the cherry orchard whose loss, due to Madame Ranevskaya's obliviousness to real life, deals a shattering blow

2 Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) and *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

3 Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

4 Noël Carroll, 'Art, narrative, and moral understanding', in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5 R. W. Beardsmore, *Art and Morality* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

to her family'.<sup>6</sup> But it seems to me that the play actually does something else: what it shows is the way in which both prudence and imprudence can involve us in deep forms of compromise, neither being able to respond adequately to the kinds of need and hope that really motivate complex persons while allowing them to retain their integrity and a sense of the pointfulness of things. Any clarification to be achieved through the play is, I think, quite different from the type Carroll conceives of: it is an insight into the poverty of both prudence and imprudence, together, nonetheless, with a deepened understanding of the importance and significance of both in human affairs. Carroll's easy assumption that the play helps us see the value of one type of prudence and the worthlessness of another seems to me quite implausible. Furthermore, even where a work of art does effect a clarification in our moral thinking, I can see no good reason why this must be one which is friendly to morality. It could make one more hostile to morality. For example, a work of art might help one to see that one does not really value something or other which one thought one valued or thought one ought to value. Thus, a play like Georg Büchner's *Dantons Tod*, with its image of human beings driven by circumstance, unable to understand one another even when they want to, and finding release from this only in the hope of cultivating and satisfying a boundless longing for a pleasure so deep that they can forget both themselves and everyone else, might help one see that one had hitherto been paying only lip-service to the idea of the dignity of each human being and help one to the recognition that one does not really believe in this dignity at all.

But beyond such examples, it remains unclear whether the imaginative insight which art affords into others' subjectivity really is always conducive to moral probity. For example, a certain kind of person might find that, since his moral and spiritual energies are limited, attention to literature or other forms of art would absorb what little he has for others in life. Or, otherwise put, he may know that, if he were to pay attention to art, he would become so involved in the kinds of goods it offers that this would leave little over for life itself. His sensitivity to fictional characters might be nourished at the expense of sensitivity to the real characters around him. After all, sensitivity to fictional characters is in some ways a great deal easier than sensitivity to real people. In fact, the kind of person I have imagined is in many ways typical: it is a great mistake to think that we – most of us, at any rate – have anything more than limited resources when it comes to what we can offer by way of compassion, sensitivity and concern for others. Our sensitivity to others can easily go dead on us, and it is far from obvious that a concern with art does, as such, do much to prevent this.<sup>7</sup>

6 Carroll, op. cit., p. 147.

7 Cf. George Steiner, 'To civilize our gentlemen', in *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 81–2. In Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* there is a character, Lowell Lee Andrews, a fat, bespectacled, respectable college boy who, as Capote puts it, harbours



Moreover, even if, say, a novel gives insight into the inner life of those characters whose lives it explores, such insight could be recruited to serve evil. As Nietzsche emphasised, a cruel person needs, in order that his cruelty be effective, to have a subtle and refined insight into the subjectivity of the person on whom he exercises his cruelty: we all know the way in which the very possibility of a certain kind of cruelty increases as we get to understand the inwardness of a given individual in all its richness and detail. And a cruel person might well be able to find in novels or other forms of art precisely the insights into the nature of human and individual subjectivity that enable him to be all the more subtly and piercingly cruel to those among whom he lives. And in general, acquaintance with art can help one refine one's ability to make others suffer all the more painfully and deeply. Of course, it is true that some ways of making others suffer are not likely to benefit from reading novels or other engagement with art: the thug who bashes others on the head will not learn much from Henry James about how to bash more effectively or in such a way as to inflict greater or more complex pain, even if he had the interest and ability to read one of James's novels (it is unlikely, of course, that he does). But a refined and spiteful intelligence might learn a lot about making others suffer from James's work.

### III

Martha Nussbaum would disagree with this last point in particular, and it is worth pausing a little to look at some of her thoughts about the role of the novel in the moral life, for reflection on what she claims will help us to deepen the foregoing comments.

Nussbaum has claimed, contrary to what I have argued, not simply that the novel *can* contribute to the life of virtue, but that the novel, by its very nature, rules out the possibility that it could cultivate a person's cruel or wicked dispositions, claiming that 'the novel [. . .] promotes mercy through its invitation to empathetic understanding [. . . T]he novel cultivates a moral ability that is opposed to hatred in its very structure'.<sup>8</sup> Of course, Nussbaum does not deny, as she hardly could, that a novel can invite us to take up a critical attitude to the characters in it, but she thinks that this criticism is always tempered by mercy as a result of the empathetic identification into which the novel invites its readers. Further, she grants that a novel may present a mistaken or falsified view of the facts – she claims that in *Hard Times*

fantasies of being 'an ice-hearted master criminal'. He decides that the best way to achieve this aim is to murder his mother, father and sister, which he accordingly does. Capote's way of putting things – in terms of Andrews' harbouring fantasies – is slightly misleading, since Andrews already was ice-hearted: it was just that he had not got round to displaying his absence of respect for human life, including his own. Andrews was an avid and intelligent reader of Dostoyevsky, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and others. I am grateful to Michael Newton for drawing my attention to Capote's book.

‘Dickens [. . .] fails to take note of harms caused to women by inequalities of autonomy that are endemic to marriage as it was lived at his time’<sup>9</sup> – and can be legitimately criticised on this account. However, she claims that the novel itself offers indispensable resources for such a criticism: following Adam Smith, she argues that the novel encourages rational-emotional participation in the lives of its characters, a participation which is central to a moral education because it is precisely one in which the reader is himself not personally involved and thus in which he has no ‘confused intensity of emotion’ which would render him ‘prejudicially located’<sup>10</sup> from the point of view of achieving a just view on things. She even claims that such participation will ‘naturally’ lead the reader to care about the plight of those characters worst off in a novel and thus towards a concern for social equality.<sup>11</sup>

Against this it is important to insist that it is just not true that the novel always contributes to virtue and to a compassionate view of the individual. Thus, Robert Musil’s novel *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* does little, if anything, to encourage virtue; in fact, it does a lot to undermine moral commitments, as J. P. Stern has forcefully argued.<sup>12</sup> Or again, in a discussion of the character of Rosamond in *Middlemarch* F. R. Leavis notes that, although there is little animus in George Eliot’s presentment of this character, ‘the reader certainly catches himself, from time to time, wanting to break [her] graceful neck’.<sup>13</sup> Further, it is hard to feel any compassion for Madame Bovary, and extremely doubtful that Flaubert wants us to; the chess player Mirko Czentovic in Stefan Zweig’s *Schachnovelle* is contemptible, and is meant to be; Zeenie, the wife of the eponymous Ethan Frome in Edith Wharton’s novel, is despicable in her life-denying hold over Ethan; and various characters in Lawrence’s novels are meant to earn a scorn from the reader unmixed by mercy or compassion. One can find many more such examples – as D. Z. Phillips has remarked, Nussbaum can only seem to make her claim plausible by a highly selective choice of literature.<sup>14</sup>

But there is a second point to be made against Nussbaum’s position. For even supposing that we *were* to grant that the novel, as such, encourages a compassionate view of the individual and thus contributes to a moral education in a corresponding sense, we should still have to ask whether that was a view of the individual we wanted promoted. And this is so in at least two senses. First, such a view of the individual expresses, and helps to support,

9 Ibid., p. 76.

10 Ibid., p. 75.

11 Ibid., pp. 90ff.

12 J. P. Stern, ‘History in Robert Musil’s *Törless*’, in S. Kappeler and N. Bryson eds, *Teaching the Text* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

13 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 84.

14 D. Z. Phillips, ‘Introduction’ to Rush Rhees, *Moral Questions* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. xvi. Cf. also Iris Murdoch’s comments on such issues in the last chapter of her *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Fontana, 1968).

the kind of social world in which we in the West live, namely, a world in which the bourgeois citizen is supreme.<sup>15</sup> And one may well simply not find this to one's moral taste. Thus someone of a sufficiently Nietzschean taste could well find the modern moral world objectionable in that it has insufficient room for the noble and the heroic, without which life is flat and stagnant. And such a person may well then object to the novel as helping to render unavailable to us, even if only in imagination, the kind of view on life which *he* favours. Second, even if a person were to find modern morality to his taste as something good for society, it might still be possible for him as an individual to need to become less compassionate: there is a kind of person who would flourish better were he able to inflict more pain on others with a good conscience, and the novel would not aid him in this necessary part of *his* moral development.

Hence it is clear that when Nussbaum says apropos of the novel that 'literature and the literary imagination are subversive',<sup>16</sup> she exaggerates the way in which the novel is subversive, for it closes off or otherwise obscures certain kinds of moral possibilities. Moreover, she insists that history, for example, can only have a morally educative effect if it resembles the narrative form of literature. But why should we not simply accept that some people need some kinds of material for their moral education and others do not? Whence the desire to insist that some kinds of writing cannot properly be part of a moral education? Surely it is just true that some people can get little or nothing out of literature as far as morality goes, while others can get a lot. And the same might be said of aphoristic writing, history, plays, films and so on.

There is a general point in all this. What one makes of art and whether it is relevant to one's moral experience and, if so, in what way, depends a great deal upon the kind of person one is. It might also depend upon the period of one's life that one is thinking about. Thus, it is perfectly possible that, at a given stage of an individual's moral development, and perhaps for reasons to do with the particular experiences he has had, he has no need of art insofar as his virtue is to be cultivated. Perhaps he has lived too much of his life in a spirit of rigorous self-enquiry and what he really needs now is to release himself from this, in which case the best thing he could do would be to forget about the educative effects of art and simply treat it as nothing more than an enjoyable pastime. Or perhaps he has need at a particular time of his life not of the struggle to get anything out of novels – 'The progress which the understanding makes through a book, has more pain than pleasure in it', remarked Samuel Johnson – but of the freedom of colour and of experience that can come through certain paintings. And so on.

In any case, it is, or should be, clear that not everyone needs art in order to become morally better. Furthermore, I think there is often a mistake in

15 Cf. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963).

16 Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p. 2.

what we make of people who find art to be important in their (moral) life. We might well say that cultivated, sensitive people, people who are also sensitive to others, are those who read literature and engage with other forms of art, but we are probably getting things the wrong way round if we suppose they are like that because they are deeply engaged with art. It is more likely, I think, that they value art because they are sensitive people anyway and they seek out those things in life which answer to the kinds of corresponding needs they have.

The truth, so it seems to me, as I have already suggested, is that *some* works of art (or *some* novels) can, for *some* people *some* of the time, contribute to their moral education; for if one is a certain kind of person one can recruit art to the project of one's moral improvement, and perhaps one might come in this way to treat one's fellow human beings a little better. But even so, I think we should be wary of the claim in the case of any given person, for it is easy to think that the experience of art contributes to one's moral improvement when, in fact, it is contributing to something else. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is this. Art can make one's life more interesting; can make one a more interesting person to talk to; can deepen one's sense of life in various ways, for example, by helping one to understand one's own and others' motives; can provide so much pleasure that one feels light of spirit; can give one a sense of being in touch with people more interesting than those one happens to find around one; can help one become wittier, or more outrageous or self-assertive, or quirkiest or more uninhibited; can deepen and expand one's sense of order and thus feeling of freedom;<sup>17</sup> and much else besides. But it is very easy to confuse these with becoming more virtuous. And this confusion is all the easier to fall into because there is, after all, something deeply mysterious about the way in which art can nourish one. This is because we *forget* a great deal of what goes on in our trafficking with art and yet those who care about art know that it sustains them as little else can. Lichtenberg articulates this in one of his aphorisms: 'I forget most of what I have read, just as I do most of what I have eaten, but I know that both contribute no less to the conservation of my mind and my body on that account.'<sup>18</sup> There is among theorists, I believe, a strong tendency to exaggerate – perhaps *malgré eux* – the explicitness and clarity of whatever it is that we learn from art,<sup>19</sup> and it is understandable that this exaggeration often gets articulated in moral terms: for not only is there a certain gratification in thinking that what nourishes us helps us be better to others, it is also the case that if someone finds both art and morality to be among the most important

17 Cf. Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ch. 5.

18 G. C. Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 122.

19 Cf. Jenefer Robinson, 'L'éducation sentimentale', in Stephen Davies ed., *Art and Its Messages* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

things in his life he will be tempted to link them in some conceptually and emotionally satisfying way. To suppose one's personal delight in art has little, no, or even a detrimental effect on one's treatment of others, is, for many thinkers, a deeply unpleasant thought.

The second reason why we should be wary of the idea that the experience of art has contributed to an individual's virtue is suggested by one of La Rochefoucauld's maxims: 'La philosophie triomphe aisément des maux passés et des maux à venir. Mais les maux présents triomphent d'elle.' For one might adapt this to our present discussion: Knowledge of art triumphs over the evil we have done to others and the evil we shall do to others. But the evil we now do to others triumphs over our knowledge of art. That is, one can, through art, gain insight into the suffering one has inflicted on others and into the suffering one will inflict, but this will not stop one inflicting suffering at the moment. This is a point Plato made: our knowledge of art can easily flatter us into thinking it makes us morally better people. Yet insight into the suffering we cause can even make us readier to cause it: having a finer sense of what we are doing can easily trick us into thinking we are doing something different. Moreover, as the great moralists have always known, the old habits of the soul easily reassert themselves when we find life tough: a conviction that now we know what we have done to hurt others in the past means we will not do this again evaporates easily when we feel backed into a corner.

#### IV

Those philosophers who wish to insist that art is crucial to a moral education tend to make a related claim concerning the work of art itself, one also made by other philosophers. I wish to discuss this claim a little, for it will help us explore further the way in which morality and art are linked with one another.

The claim in question is, as Berys Gaut puts it, 'that the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious'.<sup>20</sup> This claim is, as it stands, surely far too strong:<sup>21</sup> as Marcia

20 Berys Gaut, 'The ethical criticism of art', in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 182.

21 Ron Bontekoe and Jamie Crooks, 'The inter-relationship of moral and aesthetic excellence', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32, 1992, 209–20, p. 210, disagree: '[T]he expression of a bad moral vision does indeed constitute an *aesthetic* defect in a work of art, and [...] it is always necessary to judge a film, a novel, a painting or a poem to be flawed *as an art work* because of its mishandling of moral themes'. Apart from the vagueness of the notion of what it is to mishandle a moral theme, this view could only be thought plausible on the assumption that we know perfectly well what is morally good and what bad. But this is, to say the least, highly contentious (Nietzsche calls it one of the great prejudices of the

Muelder Eaton – who is very sympathetic to Gaut’s position – has said, there are cases where aesthetic and ethical evaluation of a work of art go their separate ways.<sup>22</sup> And Frank Palmer, who also argues for a view close to Gaut’s, grants that some ‘wholly negative art’, meaning nihilistic or anti-human art, is not therefore bad art. He mentions Hieronymus Bosch and Salvador Dalí as two possible examples.<sup>23</sup> I myself would think in this context of David Lynch’s film *Eraserhead*. But the theorists in question certainly claim that Gaut’s claim is true for most works of art.

I do not deny that it is legitimate to think that the moral attitudes expressed, encouraged or whatever by a work of art are relevant to its aesthetic value, though I think that there are often difficulties in making out just what this comes to in any given case. This is because the terms in which we might wish to judge a work of art are such that they themselves show we often have no clear understanding whether we are rejecting or accepting the work on moral or aesthetic grounds and therefore, a fortiori, whether we are judging the work aesthetically (partly) on the basis of its moral qualities. Thus, for example, if one judges a work of art to be vulgar (for example, Jean Genet’s *Un Chant d’amour*), joyful (John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*), despairing (Kafka’s *Der Prozeß*), bleak (Kleist’s *Die Marquise von O-*) or angry (Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*) – in all these cases I am simplifying, of course – then it is far from clear that one is judging them on moral or aesthetic grounds: the terms in question seem to resist categorisation as one or the other. One might say, one is doing both, at once, in such a way that it is impossible to separate out the two categories; or one might say that it is neither here nor there what categories one is using, that, indeed, such judgements show the useless rigidity of these categories: both of which points of view are arguable. And it is not surprising that in our response to art there is such an unclarity, for outside art it is also true that the ethical and aesthetic often interpenetrate in a way which disables us from distinguishing them. Thus people can also be vulgar, joyful, despairing, bleak, or angry (dispositionally so) and it is just as unclear whether these are ethical or aesthetic qualities in this context as it is in the context of works of art.

Still, there is, after all, some kind of difference between aesthetic and moral judgement and evaluation, however unclear it is in some cases where we would say the one stops and the other begins: this is shown, as Aurel Kolnai says, by the fact that there is nothing like the Decalogue in matters of aesthetic evaluation or artistic creation.<sup>24</sup> And, as I have already said, I agree with the

modern world). Nonetheless, Bontekoe and Crooks are by no means alone in supposing that it is indeed obvious what is morally good and bad. I return to this issue below.

22 Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 138.

23 Palmer, op. cit., p. 179.

24 Aurel Kolnai, ‘Aesthetic and moral experience’, in *Ethics, Value and Reality* (London: Athlone Press, 1977), p. 202.

idea that the moral features of a work of art are relevant to its aesthetic quality. The issue is in what way this is so. And the question for those who conceive of this link in such a way that a work is judged to be aesthetically flawed if it is morally repugnant is: on what grounds could this be so?

There is not much mileage to be got out of the thought that a work of art is morally flawed if it leads people to behave in morally reprehensible ways, and that this in turn makes it aesthetically flawed. For one thing, one might think a work morally reprehensible even if it had no effect on people's behaviour. For another, a work might lead people to behave badly while being wholly morally innocent. And, in general, as Noël Carroll has said, 'we still understand virtually *nothing* about the behavioral consequences of consuming art'.<sup>25</sup>

But what about a case where a work of art does, in fact, have a deleterious effect on people's behaviour and it is clear that the work offers a morally reprehensible vision? Such is the case with D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a film which portrays black people as driven by lust, as drinkers, and as brutal and cruel, and which contributed to racial tensions and racially motivated attacks and killings in the 1910s and 1920s in the US. Should we say that the work is aesthetically flawed because morally objectionable? I cannot see what the advantage is of saying this over saying that the film is a great work even where and when it is morally flawed. Or is the thought supposed to be that one *could not but* see a work as being aesthetically flawed if one sees it as being morally reprehensible? Kendall Walton seems to suggest as much when he says that if a 'work's obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count as an aesthetic as well as a moral defect'.<sup>26</sup> But that is merely a description of a particular psychological incapacity.<sup>27</sup> Any given person might well find that the work is aesthetically fully accessible and valuable despite his finding it morally unacceptable. Gaut has offered a different argument to get to the conclusion Walton is after:

A work's manifestation of an attitude is a matter of the work's prescribing certain responses toward the events described. If these responses are unmerited, because unethical, we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed. Our having reason not to respond in the way prescribed is a failure of the work. What responses the work prescribes is of aesthetic relevance. So the fact that we have reason not to respond in the way prescribed is an *aesthetic* failure of the work [. . . ]<sup>28</sup>

25 Carroll, op. cit., p. 133.

26 Kendall Walton, 'Morals in fiction and fictional morality I', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68, 1994, 27–50, p. 30.

27 Cf. Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 100–1.

28 Gaut, 'The ethical criticism of art', p. 195.

But I think we should reject this view. For example, many of Strindberg's plays want to get us to see relations between men and women as the fundamental metaphor for understanding life and as being, at root, deeply combative and hostile, a kind of remorseless struggle to the death. Many will feel that they have good reason to resist such a moral vision, but they can quite consistently feel that, far from impairing Strindberg's plays, it actually makes them aesthetically all the better: for it makes them sparkle and crackle with life and energy. Or again, consider Arthur Schnitzler's play *Reigen* – probably better known as *La Ronde*, Max Ophuls' film version in French – which invites us into a view of human beings as fickle, deceiving, self-serving and sexually voracious and insatiable, a view which many have thought of as being wicked. Yet it is aesthetically a glorious play, carefully crafted, full of wit and light, humorous and inventive. And its very subject matter, morally offensive to some, lends it some of these qualities. For example, the fickleness of the characters is one of the things that enables Schnitzler to write in the sparkling language which characterises the play. One more example: consider the following comments by Lionel Trilling on *Mansfield Park*:

It scandalizes modern assumptions about social relations, about virtue, about religion, sex, and art. Most troubling of all is its preference for rest over motion. To deal with the world by condemning it, by withdrawing from it and shutting it out, by making oneself and one's mode and principles of life the very centre of existence and to live the round of one's days in the stasis and peace thus contrived – this, in an earlier age, was one of the recognized strategies of life, but to us it seems not merely impracticable but almost wicked.

Yet *Mansfield Park* is a great novel, its greatness being commensurate with its power to offend.<sup>29</sup>

Evidently Trilling does not think *Mansfield Park* aesthetically impaired by being morally questionable. If anything, as these comments and the whole of his discussion make clear, he thinks its moral unacceptability part of what makes it aesthetically great.

But there is a further complication here. For it is not always clear just what the moral character of certain works of art is, just what the moral view or vision is into which they invite one, or which they express or evince. And given that this is so, the idea that a work of art is aesthetically impaired to the extent that it is morally questionable, is, for such works, one that muddies, rather than clears, the waters. For example, it is possible to interpret Herman Melville's masterpiece of a novella *Benito Cereno* as expressing a point of

29 Lionel Trilling, 'Jane Austen and *Mansfield Park*', in Boris Ford ed., *The Pelican Guide to English Literature V: From Blake to Byron* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 115–16.



view on the narrative's black slaves which is fundamentally racist – or, at any rate, as being unable to undermine a fundamentally racist view – in its incapacity to come to moral terms with the evil done to them in forcing them into slavery. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the novella as expressing precisely the moral ambiguity of the situation in which both the white Spaniards, original captors of the slaves, and the blacks themselves are embroiled, and thus as deepening our understanding of the evil of slavery. Both of these interpretations have something to be said for them. And such moral ambiguities can be present in a work of art even if the artist did not intend this. Gaut, like many other theorists,<sup>30</sup> misses this because he often talks as if it is perfectly clear just what the moral import of a work of art is. And if one wants a reason why this is so, the answer, it seems to me, is that he has a strong tendency to operate with a simplified and narrow conception of morality, according to which it is clear what is morally good and what morally bad: hurting others, refusing equal treatment to all human beings and so on are morally bad; treating all people with consideration, respecting their rights and the like are morally good. To which one wants to say, with D. H. Lawrence: this is all very well, but it only makes up one tenth of morality. And because Gaut operates with a particular conception of morality he tends only to see – I mean, in the examples of works of art he gives he tends only to see – the moral features of the work which are highlighted by that conception of morality. This results in an insensitivity to the fact that works of art can offer radically different moral visions – I have mentioned some of these in the examples I have given – and makes it seem more plausible than it really is to suppose that a work of art is aesthetically impaired if it is morally questionable.<sup>31</sup>

## V

It seems to me that a more fruitful line to pursue than those considered hitherto concerning the relation between the moral and aesthetic value of a work of art is the case of someone who is imaginatively attracted to a work but morally disturbed by it.<sup>32</sup>

Consider in this context Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes*, which concerns the exploits of a band of morally unpretentious conquistadors, led by Aguirre, who hope to reach El Dorado and win for themselves limitless riches. There is irony and even a sense of the absurd in the presentation of Aguirre, but the film also celebrates violent self-assertion, greed,

30 See note 20, above; Walton, op. cit., and Carroll, op. cit.

31 Cf. Michael Tanner's criticisms of Kendall Walton in his 'Morals in fiction and fictional morality II', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68, 1994, 51–66.

32 Cf. Kendall Walton, op. cit., pp. 30ff.

brutality, destruction and, in general, the longing for power. It is a lush, powerful, immensely attractive film. Someone might see it and find his imagination captured by it, but, recognising that it invites him into a moral perspective of which he disapproves, insist that it is impaired as a film. This is, indeed, the reaction of Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken, who claim that the fact that Aguirre possesses a real grandeur lends him an ‘irresistible attraction that invites identification with his character at the expense of enlightened detachment’, and that this weakens the film.<sup>33</sup> There is evidently some kind of fear or anxiety at work here, a fear of imaginative participation in, or realisation of, the film on the spectator’s part. Fundamentally, what seems to be going on is that the spectator’s imagination is captured and he thinks, in the name of morality, that it ought not to be. The film is thus considered to be impaired.

However, such a reaction is only one of many possible reactions to the film. Another possibility is that, instead of giving priority to one’s moral sense over the imagination in the judgement of the film, one could seek to accept the tension that exists here between the moral understanding and the imagination. If one looks at things this way, one will do so because one will see no good reason to expect that all of the capacities and powers of the mind must be subordinate to one of its powers – the moral understanding – and also because one will not expect to find one’s moral understanding satisfied by all the kinds of things that can interest one in different ways. After all, if *Aguirre* is a great work of art but invites one into a morally questionable point of view, why should we see this as a problem with the *work* rather than with *us*? We can ourselves be enriched as individuals if we learn to live with the tension between our imagination being captured by a work of art and our moral sense being repelled by it.

However, such a position depends upon our being able properly to distinguish imagination from the moral sense or understanding. And we know that in general this is not so: if our imagination – with all that this involves by way of fantasy, longing and so on – is captured by a work of art whose moral vision we consider to be repugnant, then this can in some cases lead to an unwillingness simply to go on asserting that the moral vision of the work is, indeed, repugnant. For our moral understanding is itself shot thorough with the imagination. And the most interesting way in which such an unwillingness might manifest itself here, I think, is where a work of art helps one to explore what the *meaning* of one’s moral beliefs is. For example, reflection on the power of *Aguirre* might set us to wondering about the nature of the

33 Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 33. Kolker and Beicken’s attitude is underpinned by the idea that Aguirre is a ‘protofascist in historical disguise’, a claim which seems to me absurd and to depend on nothing more than the prejudice that a post-World War II German filmmaker *must* be concerned with Nazism in his work, as if it were some kind of moral failing not to be. I do not believe the film has anything to do with fascism at all.

kinds of compromises or costs in terms of our spiritual and psychological health which our peaceful, bureaucratised life involves; or whether a long life of diligent work is a worthier way to live than one of meteoric, short-term self-assertion; or about the nature of greed in a human being's life – whether there can be any nobility in greed, for example; or whether there are productive uses to which we can put our violent drives or if the attempt at their complete suppression is better; and so on. Thus, the film might help us explore what our moral beliefs *mean* to us: how important they are to us, to what extent they are revisable, and so on.

In general, we can say that what *Aguirre* might help us see is something strangely under-explored by philosophers, namely, that our moral opinions are not, usually, as firm or clearly demarcated as we would like, but have a vague and shifting quality. It is not as simple, by the lights of the kind of person whose reaction to Herzog's film I am discussing, as that *either* we believe that the kind of thing Aguirre does is evil *or* we think it morally acceptable. The film's real value, as a complete work of art, that is, as an organic whole subject to simultaneous moral and aesthetic assessment which captures our imagination, lies in its ability to make us feel unsure of things in precisely the kind of way indicated.<sup>34</sup> The same might be said of a multitude of other artworks.

Of course, often we refuse to look at works of art in this way. As Arnold Isenberg has pointed out, we are often ready, when we read a novel, watch a film, read poetry, and so on, to suppose ourselves, not simply moral beings, but finished moral beings.<sup>35</sup> But it seems to me that many people recognise that their moral beliefs and opinions are not such as a finished moral being would have. For they recognise that, at least for many such beliefs and opinions, these are not things one either has or does not have, as if we were dealing here with an all-or-nothing affair, or as if one simply had the right moral beliefs or did not. Rather such beliefs are things to which we can feel attached, by which we can feel trapped, which we can loathe but not see how to rid ourselves of, which can burden us, set us free, inspire us, depress us, perplex us, console us and so on. In fact, as Nietzsche pointed out, belief, in moral matters at least, is a foreground phenomenon: to say one believes something is not to settle anything, but to open up space in which one might try to understand why one has this belief, what it does for one, what it inhibits one from doing, thinking or feeling, how it contributes to one's sense of well-being, whether it exists as a form of self-inflicted punishment or reward – in short, what its *meaning* is for one. And a belief can have this nature because the human mind is blessed with a number of different and conflicting capacities

34 Cf. Lawrence Hyman, 'Morality and literature – the necessary conflict', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, 1984, 149–55, and 'Moral attitudes and the literary experience', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38, 1979, 159–65.

35 Arnold Isenberg, 'Ethical and aesthetic criticism', in *Aesthetics and the Theory of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 276.

and faculties – fantasy, imagination, memory, desire and so on – which form a unity only in a hazy, unstructured and fleeting sense.

Philip Larkin once remarked: ‘What I should like to do is to write *different* poems, that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people, but to be different from yourself.’<sup>36</sup> If art can help one explore one’s moral thinking in the kind of way I have sketched then we could think of it as helping us to be different from ourselves. But, of course, being different from oneself in the relevant sense is a way of being oneself: this is why exploring the meaning of one’s moral beliefs through art can be understood as an attempt to find out the kind of person one is.

Of course, one will only be able to explore the meaning of one’s moral beliefs through artworks if one is a certain type of person to begin with. And we all of us will have limits concerning how far we can take this in any given case: a work which sets me wondering about my moral beliefs might seem to you so disgusting as to be beyond the pale; or vice versa. No one could be limitlessly flexible in this regard, and I suppose that if, per impossibile, anyone were, that would be some form of nihilism. (In reading Nietzsche, I sometimes have the impression he wanted to be the kind of person who could be limitlessly flexible in this way, and that he occasionally saw the experience of art as one way of achieving this. This may be why it is tempting to find some kind of nihilism in Nietzsche, despite his fierce, and sometimes absurdly fierce, attachment to certain values.)

Because a work of art can, in presenting a moral point of view which disturbs us as being reprehensible in some way, lead us to explore the meaning for us of our moral beliefs, there is a lot to be said for the idea that a work of art can be valuable *because* it expresses or articulates such a moral point of view.

## VI

If we are properly to understand what it is to explore, through art, the meaning of one’s moral beliefs, then, as I have already suggested, a central issue here will be that of coming to know who one is, what kind of person one is. And such a way of looking at things invites one into an understanding of the difference between what is *real* and what is *fake* in a person. F. R. Leavis distinguished between two forms of sincerity: there is a sincerity a person possesses when he reports correctly his state of mind; then there is a sincerity which involves a person in an attempt to resist the temptations of sentimentality, cliché, cheapness, self-indulgence, vanity and the like in his inner life.<sup>37</sup>

36 Quoted in Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 74.

37 F. R. Leavis, ‘Reality and sincerity’, in *A Selection from Scrutiny I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

A person might be sincere in the first sense and completely fake within, whereas the second form of sincerity *is* the struggle not to be fake. And someone who thinks of art as deepening his understanding of the meaning of his moral ideas is, I think, someone who regards art – or, at any rate, some art – as being able to help him towards a better discernment of the real and the counterfeit in his own soul. Art will be able to help him do this because works of art themselves can deal in fake or real emotions and views on the world. Leavis's work is replete with detailed examples of how we might understand this in specific cases.

Of course, it is no doubt true, as David Pole has said, that not all works of art, or even all kinds of works of art, are relevant to the moral life in this way.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, there can also be reasoned and serious disagreement about whether a work of art is fake in what it offers or not. Nevertheless, as I said, aside from such issues, those who speak of art's being able to help one explore the meaning of one's morality will probably be sympathetic to Leavis's view. But even if it is true that art can help one diagnose sentimentality and the like in oneself, there is a wholly separate question concerning whether one can free oneself of it. And in fact there is a yet further question about whether it would always be good to rid oneself of sentimentality, even if one could. For there is an issue in this area to which Leavis gave scant attention, and this is that, shallow as this sounds, there can be times, for a given person, when he needs to give himself over, if only temporarily, to sentimentality, nostalgia, cheapness and the like. Life is extremely tough: for one thing, most people spend most of their life doing something which for the most part they do not want to do – I mean, work for someone else (for the Greeks, working for someone else was a deeply ignoble way of life); for another, it is full of frustrations and disappointments, some self-generated, for sure, but many there because the world is, as George Eliot said, not an udder from which we can feed. Under such conditions, it is sometimes *too much to ask* to think that we should always shun cheap and sentimental art (that the modern age has made a fetish of such art is, of course, a quite separate issue). Sometimes we need to *let go*.

But even beyond this, sentimental art can itself sometimes nourish us. This point was well seen by Lawrence, than whom there were few more opposed to sentimentality and cliché. In his essay 'Hymns in a Man's Life' he discusses the way in which some of the hymns he learnt in his childhood 'mean to me almost more than the finest poetry, and they have for me a more permanent value, somehow or other'. He quotes from a 'banal Nonconformist hymn', full of references to Galilee and he comments:

To me the word Galilee has a wonderful sound. The Lake of Galilee! I don't want to know where it is. I never want to go to Palestine. Galilee

38 David Pole, 'Leavis and literary criticism', in *Aesthetics, Form and Emotion* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

is one of those lovely, glamorous worlds, not places, that exist in the golden haze of a child's half-formed imagination. And in my man's imagination it is just the same. It has been left untouched.<sup>39</sup>

And he goes on to say that the sense of wonder he had as a child, engendered in part through banal hymns, has stayed with him and helped him live fully.

The point of Lawrence's discussion is precisely that sentimental art, or art that is otherwise cheap, can sustain us in unexpected ways. It is true that this is so in the case Lawrence describes on account of the connection with his childhood of the works in question, but I can see no good reason in principle why the same should not apply to works one comes across later in life. Think of Wittgenstein's love of detective magazines and Westerns. The *rigour* of Leavis's position that the sentimental is always corrupting could only be maintained if we subscribed to a philosophy of mind which viewed the mind as more integrated in its powers, needs and capacities than is in fact the case.

## VII

One of the deeply interesting things about what Lawrence says concerning the hymns in his life and the reason he loves them is that, while at one level he seems to be saying something deeply personal, something that can reveal only some merely idiosyncratic feature of his own life, what he says possesses, in fact, a strange power which demands our attention. Part of the reason for this is that Lawrence's essay invites us to think about whether there is anything in our life which plays the kind of role for us that the hymns he mentions did for him. But this is not a complete explanation. The real reason why what Lawrence says has the power it does is that it is so honest, unafraid and direct: he is completely unhampered by anything which would stand in the way of saying unreservedly how it is that things strike him, and yet what he says is quite free from any desire to shock or appear iconoclastic for the sake of it. Lawrence, we might say, had his own view on things, 'a rich, turbulent, unmistakable world, a world that he [had] smelled for himself, seen for himself, heard for himself, felt for himself, devised for himself'.<sup>40</sup> This was not a matter of his believing this or that, or feeling this or that – such terms do not capture the depth of what is at issue here – but of a modification of his whole being. He had what A. N. Whitehead called 'the most austere of all mental qualities; I mean the sense for style'. And he went on

39 D. H. Lawrence, 'Hymns in a Man's Life', in Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore eds, *Phoenix II* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 597.

40 I borrow these words from a discussion of Karl Kraus by Elias Canetti in his 'Karl Kraus: the school of resistance', in Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: André Deutsch, 1986), p. 38.

to explain: 'Style, in the finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind [. . .] It pervades the whole being [. . .] Style is the ultimate morality of mind.'<sup>41</sup> And style, in this sense, is both an aesthetic and a moral concept. It is aesthetic because it is concerned with how a person speaks, thinks and acts; it is moral because it directs our attention to whether, when someone speaks and thinks, what he says and thinks really are his own words and thoughts, whether he is speaking and thinking out of his own centre of life. But perhaps these are two ways of saying the same thing, in which case we should not so much say that such style marks a close, or the closest, point of intersection of the aesthetic and the moral, but that such style shows the way in which, or the place at which, ethics and aesthetics are one. But if that is so then it is important to see that the notion of morality at work here is not primarily one which concerns itself with how one treats others, but rather one whose central concern is that of the state of a person's soul.

It must, of course, be acknowledged that there can be reasoned disagreement about whether someone has style in the sense under discussion. Moreover, one might dislike or otherwise reject the style a person possesses even if it is genuinely a style of his own. Further, as has been implicit in what I have been saying, we should be unlikely to think of someone as having style in the relevant sense unless we thought that it evinced a deepened understanding of life. But beyond this – and this brings us back more directly to the relation between art and morality – I do not think that engagement with art is itself always necessary for someone to achieve his own style, any more than I think that such engagement is necessary in order to treat one's fellow human beings with respect. Nonetheless, among all the things art can offer us, one of the most important things it can do is allow us to see a person's concrete, enacted attempt to achieve his own style – I mean, most centrally, the attempt to achieve such a style on the part of the creator of a work of art. Which is not to say that it is only in art that we see this. And neither is it to say that we see this in all works of art: it is rather that the possibility of such a confrontation helps structure for us the very concept we have of art. But because this is so, and because one way in which we can be helped to achieve our own style is by being brought into contact with those who have their own style, the experience of art often holds out the promise that through it we, too, might come to find our own style – if, that is, we are the kind of person who looks to art for such things.

And here is the mystery. It is through the imitation of those who have style that we might come, eventually, to have our own style: by abandoning the self to that of another, we come, in the end, to find our own self. The point is made wonderfully by Elias Canetti in a discussion of the influence that Karl Kraus had over him as a young man. Canetti is referring to himself as a writer,

41 A. N. Whitehead, 'The aims of education' in Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (London: Ernest Benn, 1959), p. 19.

and to other writers, but I think that many of those who are not writers but who find art to be important in their life will also recognise here one of the reasons why they do so.

The authenticity of the model's [in Canetti's case, Kraus's] world is what the model gives one, is what most deeply impresses one. One lets oneself be overridden and overpowered by this world, and I cannot imagine a writer who was not controlled and paralyzed by someone else's authenticity at an early time. In the humiliation of his rape, when he feels that he has nothing of his own, that he is not himself, does not know what he himself is, his concealed powers begin to stir. His personality articulates itself, arising from resistance [ . . . ]

But the richer the world of the man who kept him subjugated, the richer his own world when it shakes off the other. Thus, it is good to wish for strong models. It is good to be at their mercy, insofar as one secretly, in a kind of slavish darkness, goes after one's own world, which one is rightfully ashamed of still because one does not yet see it.<sup>42</sup>

42 Canetti, *op. cit.*



# Forbidden knowledge

## The challenge of immoralism

*Matthew Kieran*

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### I The renewal of ethical criticism

Since the ancient Greeks there has been a strand of philosophical thought which holds that the moral character of a work is internally related to its value as art. In its most extreme forms moralism imperialistically swamps the recognition of virtually every other artistic value – giving rise to the puritanical evaluation of works wholly on the basis of moral criteria.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately the poisonous idea that artistic value is ultimately reducible to moral value has flowered only rarely and briefly. But more sophisticated versions, according to which a work's moral character is only one of the features that contributes to an overall judgement of artistic value, have been hugely influential. Much critical and artistic thought from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the Victorian era embodied this kind of thought. With the rise of aestheticism, formalism and the new criticism this kind of view fell largely out of favour. For aestheticism denies any internal connection on the grounds that aesthetic and thus artistic value properly construed should not be conflated with the cognitive content and value of a work.<sup>2</sup> I am unsympathetic to aestheticism and so shall not be concerned with it here.<sup>3</sup> Yet towards the end of the last century, both in contemporary philosophical literature and critical practice, there was a reassertion and renewal of the importance of ethical criticism.

A very moderate formulation of the thought, which I now think is the right one, holds that the moral character of a work is relevant to its value as art to

- 1 See Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art? and Essays on Art*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Duckworth, 1930) [originally published 1898] for the claim that the moral and spiritual value of a work determines its value as art.
- 2 See Peter Lamarque, 'Tragedy and moral value', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, 1995, 239–49, and Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) for a defence of sophisticated aestheticism.
- 3 See Matthew Kieran, 'Art, imagination and the cultivation of morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, 1996, 337–51, and 'The value of art' in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes eds, *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 215–26, for reasons why I hold this to be the case.

the extent it undermines or promotes the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work.<sup>4</sup> Thus the morally commendable character of a work *may* be an aesthetic virtue where it enhances our imaginative engagement with a work and the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* be an aesthetic vice where it undermines our imaginative responses. To use an example cited by Noël Carroll, the hero of a tragedy must have a certain moral character if we are to pity him.<sup>5</sup> If we judge him to be unworthy of pity then a work cannot achieve its aims qua tragedy. But note that, contrary to the way this claim is often taken (including by Carroll himself), it is consistent with holding that in certain cases the morally reprehensible character of a work *may* constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a vice.<sup>6</sup> Just because the moral character of a work can be related to its aesthetic value in one way does not preclude there being other possible relations in different cases. For example, in satire it seems that a work's morally reprehensible character may sometimes enhance our engagement with it and the achievement of its purpose qua satire, i.e. ridicule.

However, there is a much stronger version of the ethical assumption which, following Berys Gaut, I shall refer to as ethicism. Ethicism holds that where the moral character of a work is aesthetically relevant, a moral defect necessarily constitutes an aesthetic defect and a moral virtue necessarily constitutes an aesthetic virtue.<sup>7</sup> This is perfectly consistent with holding that morally defective works can be good and perhaps even great artworks. It is just that, nonetheless, they remain flawed qua art to the extent that the defective aspect of the moral character of the work is aesthetically relevant. Ethicism is most clearly articulated by Gaut as follows; 'if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent ethically meritorious.'<sup>8</sup> But he is far from being alone. David Hume suggested, in his 'Of the standard of taste', that 'where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such

4 See Matthew Kieran, 'In defence of the ethical evaluation of narrative art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, 2001, 26–38, esp. pp. 33–8, for an argument to this effect.

5 See Noël Carroll, 'Moderate moralism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, 1996, 223–37, and his 'Art and ethical criticism: an overview of recent directions of research', *Ethics* 110, 2000, 350–87.

6 Thus it is really a misnomer to call the position moderate moralism at all. For in recognising the complexity of the relations between the (im-)moral character of a work and its artistic value in this way the position characterises a view that any moralist, no matter how weak, would surely be unhappy with. See Matthew Kieran, 'Art and morality' in Jerrold Levinson ed., *The Oxford Handbook to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

7 Berys Gaut, 'The ethical criticism of art', in Jerrold Levinson ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–203.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

sentiments.<sup>9</sup> Wayne C. Booth, in arguing for an explicit return to literary ethical criticism, has claimed that our appraisal of the moral character of a work in this way should necessarily factor into our judgements concerning our evaluation of it as a literary work.<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum has argued that serious or great works of literature necessarily deepen our moral understanding in virtue of the ways, as art, they experientially shape our attention and attitudes appropriately to the moral particularities of the narrative as represented.<sup>11</sup> And Iris Murdoch, in dialogue with Bryan Magee, articulated her conception of the relation between art and moral evaluation thus:

The author's moral judgement is the air which the reader breathes. One can see very clearly the contrast between blind fantasy and visionary imagination. The bad writer gives way to personal obsession and exalts some characters and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is without any suitable aesthetic 'explanation'. The good writer is the just intelligent judge. He justifies his placing of his characters by some sort of *work* which he does in the book. A literary fault such as sentimentality results from idealization without work . . . [in response to Magee's follow up question] the good artist has, I think, a sense of reality and might be said to understand 'how things are' and why they are.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to what I once thought, in what follows I shall argue that ethic-ism cannot but be false. An upshot of the resulting argument is a position I shall term cognitive immoralism. It is immoralist because it holds that a work *may* be valuable as art in virtue of, rather than despite, its immoral character.<sup>13</sup> It is cognitivist because the account of how and why this is so relies on the assumption that the value of art, at least in part, is a function of the ways in which a work may deepen our understanding and appreciation.

## II Counter-examples, affective responses and cognitivism

In light of the ethicist's claim consider Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas*. The film concerns the rise and fall of a group of tightly knit minor Mafioso gangsters. The gangster demotic is richly captured and the tension between

9 David Hume, 'Of the standard of taste', p. 152, in his *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) [originally published 1757].

10 Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1988), esp. Ch. 9 and Part III.

11 Martha Nussbaum, "'Finely aware and richly responsible": literature and the moral imagination' in her *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 142–4.

12 Bryan Magee, *Men of Ideas*, 'Philosophy and literature: dialogue with Iris Murdoch', p. 249.

13 Note that this is compatible with the moderate formulation given above of the way in which sometimes the moral character of a work may enhance its artistic value. Hence use of the

mundanity, danger and fear is used to great effect. And the characters are represented as being attractive, witty and admirable in crucial respects. In particular the forged bonds between them and more generally the underlying Mafioso code is characterised as being attractive. In part this is explicitly linked to the nature of the American Dream and in part to a much more primitive and ‘authentic’ tribal ethic of fidelity and loyalty to ‘the family’. Those outside ‘the family’ do not count morally while those within it are due respect, loyalty and hierarchical homage no matter what their individual failings or foibles are. Ultimately everything falls apart because the three main characters fail to respect the group ethic – they come to define themselves too closely as the group to which such loyalty is due and others in the Mafia as thus being outside it. Hence they start to scam others within the Mafia and, in the extreme case, Tommy DeVito’s violence explodes upon other Mafioso to whom such bonds should apply; hence their ‘tragic’ downfall. Our responses of admiration and pity, at least for Henry Hill and Jimmy Conway, depend upon our admiring not just their personal characters but their commitment to the Mafioso code. Pity arises because we are shown how their individual flaws lead them to violate that very same code. The film itself is a kind of eulogy for the very values that bring about the demise of the ‘wise guys’.

In very rich ways the film draws upon and mobilises our judgements, attitudes and responses in ways found to be rewarding. We come to admire their chutzpah, humour and creative scamming and see how these traits are closely related to the American Dream. We come to admire their fundamental tribal loyalty and see how it enables them to take advantage of the American Dream in ways which individuals acting alone could not. Hence we realise how such bonds of loyalty enable the success of individuals as members of the group. We also come to see how such tribal loyalty can have great personal costs (such as having to go down for a stretch) despite enabling the success of the group as well as great personal benefits (the intimate bonds of deep friendship being just one). All of which contributes to the intelligibility of the characters, the theme of the film and the subsequent rewards. Moreover our responses, at least for Henry Hill and Jimmy Conway, depend upon our holding in what we imagine that their personal characters and their commitment to the Mafioso code are worthy of our admiration. Hence at the end of the film we’re supposed to think that Harry gets what he deserves for breaking the Mafioso code by being condemned to a humdrum life of subterfuge in nowheresville, mid-west America.<sup>14</sup>

term immoralism is itself perhaps overly strong. Nonetheless I do so in keeping with the relevant literature. See Berys Gaut, ‘Art and ethics’, in Gaut and McIver Lopes eds, *op. cit.*, pp. 341–52, and Daniel Jacobson, ‘In praise of immoral art’, *Philosophical Topics* 25, 1997, 155–99.

14 No doubt some will balk at my characterisation of the film and the way it works. If you think I have misrepresented it then imagine a close cousin of the actual film that fits the characterisation.

It is crucial to note that *GoodFellas* is not just a case which involves sympathising or even empathising with Henry Hill who one imagines believes the Mafioso code to be admirable, attractive and noble. If that were so all that would be required is that one imagine Henry believes what he is represented as so doing and that one comes to care enough about him such that we can appreciate the pleasure he derives from acting on the basis of his beliefs. Appreciating a narrative with central immoral characters is not necessarily tantamount to appreciating a work which gets us to endorse, in imagination, that which we actually take to be immoral. The point is, rather, that for *GoodFellas* to work we are required to imagine certain propositions and commitments as holding, though one in fact believes they do not hold and are immoral in some respect. In other words, *GoodFellas* requires us to imagine that the object of our sympathy or empathy, Henry Hill, is worthy of our responses. So I take it that *GoodFellas* is as good a film as it is partly because our moral judgements, attitudes and responses are mobilised in ways that render the imaginative experience both more intelligible and rewarding than it might otherwise be. But I also take it that the moral perspective here is deeply defective. Any internalised moral code which deems group outsiders to be morally insignificant and group loyalty to be the supreme value, and any response which commends or endorses such a code, is deeply flawed. So here we have a case of a work that is aesthetically intelligible and rewarding in part due to, rather than despite, the defectiveness of its moral perspective. Nor is *GoodFellas* a rare exception in this respect. From Homer through the Icelandic sagas to novels by Henry Miller, Philip Roth and Martin Amis there are many works which are rendered intelligible and rewarding because they draw upon moral assessments, attitudes and responses we properly consider to be problematic or defective. Drawing on our moral judgements, reactions and assessments should not be conflated with arriving at and making the appropriate ones. Thus, it would seem, there are many such counter-examples to the ethicist's thesis.

However, counter-examples as such cannot do the work of philosophical argument. One of the problems with the current debate is that too often the appeal to examples is relied on in place of argument. Yet competing characterisations and explanations can be offered. The trouble with over-reliance on examples is that they can be cut different ways to suit distinct positions.

The ethicist can claim that although we sometimes can and do respond with sympathy and admiration for characters who do not deserve it, nonetheless we should not. How we should respond to characters and a work as a whole depends upon the responses we judge to be merited. Where the merited response comes apart from the response sought from us by a work it is, in that respect, a failure – and where a response is morally defective it is unmerited. Indeed we should recognise that it is a fault in the film that it attempts to seduce us into responding in ways we take to be morally bad or problematic. Thus moral flaws in a work, where they bear on the responses sought

from us, will always be aesthetic flaws and moral adequacy, wherever it bears on our responses, an aesthetic virtue.<sup>15</sup> So, according to the ethicist, either: (1) All that is required in the *GoodFellas* case is my capacity to sympathise (in a sense that is morally grounded) with Henry Hill which does not require me to endorse, in what I imagine, his moral beliefs. In which case the relevant responses do not require me to endorse a morally defective perspective. Or (2) if my conceiving of Henry Hill as getting what he deserves at the end requires me to have endorsed in what I imagine cognitive-affective attitudes that I actually take to be morally defective then it is indeed flawed as art in that respect.

Yet there is a competing characterisation on offer. As Daniel Jacobson has argued, it is one thing for an emotional response to be ‘fitting’ with respect to its object and another for it to be morally proper. What it is for an emotion to be fitting is for it to accurately present its object in terms of certain evaluative features. So, for example, indignation may be fitting when you have been insulted, joy may be fitting when your achievements are recognised or hilarity may be fitting when someone presents a surreal incongruity. It is a further distinct question as to whether feeling the fitting emotion is morally (or prudentially) appropriate. For example, although the surreal incongruity between two fat ladies at the bus stop and the billboard model may be hilarious there is good moral reason not to respond with mirth. That a response is not morally proper does not show that it is not a fitting one. Thus, Jacobsen argues, a work can solicit responses which are immoral but nonetheless fitting.<sup>16</sup> A work may seek admiration for an intellectual, cultured and astute serial killer (Hannibal Lecter), vicious hilarity at the pathetic delusions of someone who is depressed (David Foster Wallace’s *Interviews with Hideous Men*) or delight in the wreaking of vengeance (Clint Eastwood’s *High Plains Drifter*). My responses to such cases, and indeed to Henry Hill in *GoodFellas*, may be fitting (which is all that is required) while nonetheless I recognise them to be, in actuality, morally defective. But all that is required, on this view, is that a work should aim for and successfully solicit a fitting response. What is missing in the argument for ethicism is a suppressed premise to the effect that we should respond to works not merely in ways which are fitting to the nature of what is represented but, furthermore, in ways which are *morally* speaking right or proper.

How might we adjudicate between these two claims? One way the ethicist can support her claim is by adverting to the underlying cognitivist conception of artistic value. How we evaluate a work depends upon both the quality of the imaginative experience afforded and what we take the understanding implicit in the imaginative experience to be. To the extent that a work deepens our understanding of the world, ourselves and the interrelations of states of

15 See Gaut, ‘Art and ethics’.

16 Jacobson, *op. cit.*

affairs, attitudes and values it is a good work. To the extent that a work misrepresents, mischaracterises and distorts them it is a bad work. Hence we often praise works as being profound, subtle, nuanced, insightful and true to life or condemn them as being shallow, superficial, banal, sentimental, unintelligible or false. Now it looks as if ethicism falls out of cognitivism. If a work, through the prescribed imaginative experience, mischaracterises moral attitudes, values and morally relevant states of affairs then it is defective as art to that extent. For the imaginative experience thus afforded cultivates (moral) misunderstanding rather than deepening it. So, given cognitivism, where the moral character of a work is aesthetically relevant a moral defect necessarily constitutes an aesthetic defect and a moral virtue necessarily constitutes an aesthetic virtue.<sup>17</sup>

Except at the most basic level, that of denying cognitivism as an adequate account of how any art as such should be evaluated, this line of argument has remained relatively unchallenged. There is, however, one notable exception. Jacobson, following up his criticism of ethicism, has argued that immoral works could be valuable as art in virtue of, rather than despite, their moral character in a way that is consistent with cognitivism.<sup>18</sup> The argument is as follows: there are many different conceptions of the human condition, the nature of morality and the rightness, goodness or otherwise of many kinds of actions, attitudes and character traits. One of the things art is particularly good at is enabling us to engage with and understand different ways of conceiving of such matters. Thus immoral works can afford us knowledge. We can come to understand better how and why people think or feel differently by engaging with works we deem to be immoral. Now, according to Carroll, this argument looks like a purely instrumentalist justification of immoral art.<sup>19</sup> For though we may come to understand much more about how a racist may see black people from watching *Birth Of A Nation* nonetheless it misrepresents the nature of moral character and commends to us moral attitudes that should be condemned. Consider, by analogy, our judgements of philosophical works. No matter how useful it is to read Kant or Nietzsche in terms of our cognitive stock and philosophical understanding, if we think their philosophy fundamentally mistaken then we hold it to be flawed in that respect. For the flaw consists in the failure to realise one of the cognitive goals of philosophy – namely truth. The instrumentalist line may be significant in showing why immoral artworks (or false philosophical works) should not be censored, along Millian lines, but it doesn't give any reason to think that a work's value as art may be enhanced in virtue of its morally defective character.

17 I once argued for such a line of thought in 'Art, imagination and the cultivation of morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, 1996, 337–51, and Gaut, Nussbaum, Booth and Murdoch in the aforementioned references all argue for or assert a cognitivist conception of the value of art.

18 Jacobson, op. cit., pp. 193–4.

19 Carroll, 'Art and ethical criticism', p. 381.

We should grant that one way of interpreting the immoralist claim is wholly instrumental and that as such it poses no threat to the inference of ethicism from cognitivism. But in what follows I shall attempt to give a more robust argument to underwrite the immoralist's claim. The core thought is this: what matters in evaluating a work's value as art is the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work. Works which commend or fail to condemn characters and states of affairs that we would judge to be morally bad can, through getting us to take up a perspective we would not otherwise entertain, enhance the value of the imaginative experience afforded. In effect we are sometimes prepared to suspend our moral judgement or entertain moral judgements other than those we would actually assent to because of the (potential) cognitive rewards this may bring. For in exploring a morally defective perspective a work may deepen our appreciation and understanding in ways that would not happen otherwise. Thus the immoral character of the imaginative experience afforded by a work may directly deepen our understanding. Therefore a work may be valuable as art in part due to its morally defective aspect.

To substantiate the argument however we will have to take several steps back. The most crucial move is the claim that morally defective imaginative experiences, including taking up attitudes and responding in ways that are morally problematic, are required to enable one more fully to understand things than one could otherwise have done. This is related to the general thought that a full appreciation of how and why something is good generally depends upon having experienced that which is bad. But the general thought is insufficient for the immoralist claim. What is needed is a justification of the claim that experiencing bad things in ways that are problematic, in particular morally speaking, affords a certain understanding that could not otherwise be had. I shall focus on this part of the argument in the following section. However we also need reason to hold that imagination can afford the relevant kind of experience and that it is possible to suspend our actual moral judgements. Consideration of these matters is deferred to Section IV.

### **III Experiencing what's bad to understand the good**

A primary means of learning, for example that something is the case, and understanding, grasping how and why something is the case, is experience. Of course it is by no means the case either that everything can be so learnt and understood (think of logic or quantum mechanics) nor that everything that can be so learnt and understood needs to be or is experienced (think of authoritative testimony regarding how bad the university cafeteria's coffee is). However, in order to fully appreciate and understand the nature of an experience we require comparative cases. This suggests we must have experienced, in some sense, the bad in order to understand the good. The first part of the argument I take to be fairly uncontroversial so I shall merely sketch it:



- 1 Experiential grounding – having a certain kind of experience is a primary way of coming to know what that kind of experience is like.
- 2 Appreciation constraint – the appreciation and understanding of the nature of an experience (‘what it is like’) admits of degrees and depends upon the capacities to attend, take different perspectives on, and discriminate between, elements of the experience and how they interrelate.
- 3 Comparative experience requirement – coming to a fuller understanding and deeper appreciation of a kind of experience, to the extent that kind admits of attending to different aspects, taking up different perspectives and exercising different and finer discriminative capacities, requires comparative experience both within the relevant kind and of relevantly contrasting kinds.
- 4 Psychological claim – the grounds adduced for (1)–(3) entail that comparative experience is required not just to more fully appreciate certain appearances to the different senses and our lower level mental life but also with respect to (a) certain higher order occurrent cognitive-affective mental states *and* (b) certain higher order cognitive-affective attitudes and character traits (many of which are partly evaluative).

It follows from (1)–(4) that suffering bad experiences, responses and attitudes can happen to deepen our understanding and appreciation of good ones. But as articulated this seems like a fairly trivial claim. We all know that bad experiences sometimes do so, but it is not yet obvious that bad experiences are either primary or required to have a full understanding and appreciation of good ones. What is additionally required is the substantiation of the following:

- 5 Primacy claim – experiencing bad responses and attitudes in ways which are problematic, with respect to moral and non-moral values, affords a kind of comparative experience or perspective that could not otherwise be had.

The argument for this comes in two parts;

- 5.1 Certain bad experiences can primarily or distinctively afford discriminatory capacities or perspectives which are required for a full grasp and appreciation of certain good experiences.

This is a formally articulated version of the thought many of us often have that one may not be able to fully appreciate the nature of good things or their achievement unless one has in some sense experienced the bad. A person in Arcadia may find their existence deeply pleasurable but unless she has experienced hardship or suffered in some way she may lack a proper appreciation of how and why her existence may be deeply happy. As she experiences many

different kinds of pleasures in Arcadia, the delights of friendship that never goes awry, the fruits of love that is never betrayed and indulgence in art that is never merely vulgar or crass, she may come to have a highly refined sense of what distinguishes certain kinds of pleasurable experiences from others, grasp much about how they interrelate, what they mean and appreciate their different qualities. Nonetheless there is something important to the thought that such a charmed life might only be deeply shallow. For if one has never experienced betrayal by a friend or lover, never seen a bad play or heard a great novel badly dramatised then there will be certain features of friendship, love and great art that one probably will not fully understand and appreciate. For example, such a person may well lack the discriminatory capacities which would enable her to pick out how certain features and traits constitutive of friendship can actually undermine it. Thus they would be unable to see how the desire to please in friendship can be self-defeating (where it habitually trumps the desire to tell the truth say) or lack the discrimination required to see how introducing elements of farcical comedy into a tragedy may render it absurd. Thus given the lack of certain capacities, because without the relevant kinds of bad experiences she has not exercised them, she may fail to appreciate in a deep sense the nature or quality of the achievements of true friendship or great art. A proper estimation and appreciation of the worth of a friend or a work of art depends not merely on recognising that they keep to their word or afford us pleasure but upon the realisation of the multifarious ways in which they can easily go wrong or fail. A lack of experience, both of the kind in question and relevantly contrasting kinds, is thus likely to preclude full understanding and proper appreciation.

- 5.2 The claim holds not merely for bad experiences as such but for experiences which are morally problematic (including those which are truly immoral).

If we grant (5.1)–(5.2) then bad experiences, including morally bad experiences, are a primary means of coming to have a full understanding and appreciation of good ones. But note that ‘bad experiences’ is ambiguous between (a) being subject to experiences which are themselves bad in some respect and (b) experiencing things in a way which is bad in some respect. Consider an instance of voyeurism which is morally bad because it consists in some persons delighting at the humiliation of another through personal revelations. I can be the subject of this kind of bad experience because I am the object of voyeuristic delight. It is bad for me in many respects, since I am the object of humiliation, but it is not the case that I am implicated in it in any way which is morally bad. Alternatively I might experience such a state of affairs as one of the voyeurs. Although it is not bad for me in many ways, I experience amusement and delight, I am implicated in the experience in a way which is morally bad. Note that one can be implicated in an

experience of a state of affairs which is not in and of itself morally problematic in a morally bad way. For example, I may voyeuristically spy on someone undressing in the privacy of their own home. Given the disambiguation it might be thought that all (1)–(5.2) establishes is that being subjected to bad experiences, responses and attitudes is a primary means of deepening our understanding and appreciation of good ones.

However, the argument applies to both disambiguations since experiencing something morally bad does not exhaust the ways in which experiencing something in ways that are morally problematic enables us to come to know certain things. For example, if I am subjected to bullying as a child or see it occur I will obviously know that the infliction of pain and humiliation can give rise to pleasure in others. To that extent I will find bullying intelligible since it follows from something's giving pleasure that there is a motivation for doing it. Thus, in virtue of being subjected to, or witnessing, a certain morally bad experience, I may learn something I might not have otherwise done. I come to be able to discriminate between merely physical and psychological bullying or between bullying which works by social humiliation, by the assertion of individual dominance and by the destruction of self-worth in ways I would not otherwise have done. But I may well fail to understand how and why it may be found pleasurable. It is no coincidence that often what makes bullying such a psychologically painful experience for a child is their failure to fully understand why someone bullies them. For a parent to explain that the bully derives pleasure from their actions does not give rise to an understanding of the phenomenon that is found so puzzling but is merely to reiterate that which is found so puzzling by the child. Rather, understanding depends upon having had, and being able to relate bullying to, relevantly similar kinds of experiences. For example, I may have a competitive relationship with my younger brother and be drawn into play fighting with him on occasion. During a particular play fight I may suddenly find myself drawn to use just that extra bit of force required to hurt him slightly or hold him down just that extra bit too long to humiliate him. In doing so I come to find that I derive pleasure from so doing precisely because it is a slightly painful, and thus particularly vivid, way of highlighting to him that I remain superior to him vis-à-vis physical strength. Such an experience is relevantly close enough to, if not actually constitutive of, a minor episode of bullying such that I can come to understand why it is that people may derive pleasure in bullying others.

It does not follow that only by bullying someone myself will I come to understand how and why the activity may be found pleasurable. But it does follow that I am more likely to do so if I have had some kind of experience where I derived pleasure from something which is bad in ways relevantly close enough to bullying in order to do so. For example, a more indirect way I may come to understand bullying is by watching someone else being bullied and coming to recognise how the subjugation of another may afford

me pleasure precisely because their humiliation reinforces my sense of superiority. Where I have experiences that are morally problematic in this way I will more likely be able to recognise and understand how and why people may derive pleasure in different ways from so acting. As articulated the kinds of cases discussed are not ones which merely appear to be immoral or are only *prima facie* immoral but not all things considered immoral or are merely immoral from the viewpoint of a particular agent but, rather, they are immoral *simpliciter*. Thus a primary means of coming to a full understanding and appreciation of the nature of morally problematic experiences does not just encompass being subject to or witnessing morally problematic states of affairs but also includes actually experiencing certain states of affairs in ways that are morally problematic *i.e.* immoral.

Interestingly, this claim gives us some reason to be suspect of moral saints (at least as they are naively understood to be).<sup>20</sup> If someone has never been tempted they will lack certain experiences that are a primary means to a proper understanding and appreciation of the human condition. Hence their moral proclamations and proscriptions are more likely to be naively utopian. Where there is a failure to grasp the difficulties involved for mere mortals in striving to be good, the pressures we are subject to, and an inability to appreciate how resisting temptation constitutes an achievement then any resulting ethic cannot but be inhumane and unforgiving. It is surely cruel to demand what most of us cannot meaningfully hope to achieve.

#### **IV Artworks and imaginative experience**

(5.1)–(5.2) entail that the experience of bad things and the experience of things in ways which are bad are a primary means of reaching a full understanding and appreciation of good things. It follows that one has a *prima facie* epistemic duty to seek out bad experiences and experience things in bad ways where one believes one may lack a full and proper understanding of good experiences of the relevant kind. This is because I take it we have a general *prima facie* epistemic duty to seek out evidence (whether it be that afforded by experience or critical reflection) which can confirm, undermine or deepen our understanding. It does not follow, however, that one has a *prima facie* epistemic duty to do so with respect to actual states of affairs. For imaginative experience, construed here in terms of the entertaining of represented states of affairs, can indirectly and informatively enable us to have bad experiences or experience things in bad ways independently of the existence of the states of affairs as represented. But it can only do so given our capacity

<sup>20</sup> I take the naive understanding of a moral saint to be one who is never tempted because their natural desires already converge with what is right and good. I happen to think there can be no such people, given the human condition, and moral saints should properly be understood as those who achieve such convergence. The greater the achievement, in overcoming temptation, the greater the understanding of the human condition is likely to be.

to suspend our moral judgements in engaging with artworks. Thus there are two distinct elements to the following claim:

## 6 Imagination claim

- 6.1 imaginative experience can be an indirect and informative means of learning by experience; and
- 6.2 it is possible to suspend our actual moral judgements or allow ourselves to take up moral judgements and attitudes in imagination that we would not actually endorse.

(6.1) Good artworks can deepen our understanding and appreciation of certain kinds of experiences, states of affairs, cognitive-affective attitudes and characters in many ways. They can refine our grasp of concepts and how they are to be applied, crystallise incipient assumptions we already hold, show how certain traits and connections may be interlinked, proffer an imaginative simulation or quasi-experience of what certain kinds of experiences are or could be like, show us different ways of looking at, perceiving, or conceiving of, certain states of affairs. I will concentrate on one kind of case where a work may deepen our understanding and appreciation of (a) how certain responses and attitudes of approval can be taken up to a state of affairs we would normally be repulsed by and disapproving of and (b) how the desire for social approval and strength of character can be interlinked in ways which may result in someone being motivated to deeply harm another. I needn't bully anyone, be subject to it or witness actual bullying in order to understand much about it if I can read a work like Graham Greene's *The Destructors*.

Greene's short story concerns a gang of boys in post-World War II London and the competitive rivalries between two central characters. The resolution of their individual rivalries and the gang's collective identity is achieved in the final act by the wanton overnight destruction of the house of a widower who has been unusually kind to them. It is a vicious and nasty piece of work precisely because through our identification with the central characters, their struggles to attain group acceptance and our admiration at their achievements, we come to respond with delight at their devastating achievement. The ruthless imaginative vision of such an epic act of destruction, the callous thoughtfulness underlying it, the sheer gall and qualities of leadership shown in bringing the annihilation of the house about are breathtaking.

Crucially we do not merely admire the breathtaking nature of the gang's achievement while disapproving of the moral character shown. Rather, at least to the extent the story succeeds, our cognitive-affective responses are shaped in such a way that the reader, like the minor characters in the gang, wishes the act to succeed, desires the central characters to show the leadership required to bring it about and is left in awe at its completion. Hence, at

the end, when the gang recognises their rightful leader we think this only fitting and appropriate. If our moral beliefs and judgements were operating as they ought to be with respect to such a state of affairs then we would be repulsed and horrified. Indeed, we would judge the very nature of the callousness and gall shown to disqualify anyone from being an appropriate leader. But having read the story, and assuming we respond as solicited, we can come to recognise how and why the destruction of things deeply precious to another can be joyful, an exercise of power and an assertion of strength. Furthermore we learn not just how and why this can be the case with respect to other people but, importantly, how and why this can be the case with respect to ourselves; precisely because we have come to respond in ways we actually deem to be immoral. Thus *The Destructors* shows us not merely how and why children can come to enjoy bullying but, on a much larger scale, how ordinary good people may be seduced into perpetrating and delighting in evil acts. We have come to endorse in imagination cognitive-affective attitudes we do not actually believe or hold and which we actually take to be, in part, immoral.

(6.2) It is implicit in the argumentation thus far that we can and do suspend our actual moral judgements or allow ourselves to take up moral judgements and attitudes we would not actually endorse. But, it might be claimed, this cannot be. In a much discussed paper Walton considers the problem of imaginative resistance to works which seem morally repugnant to us, in virtue of getting us to respond in ways we judge to be immoral, by considering the following question:

can an author simply stipulate in the text of a story what moral principles apply in the fictional world, just as she specifies what actions characters perform? If the text includes the sentence, ‘In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl’ or ‘The village elders did their duty before God by forcing the widow onto her husband’s funeral pyre’, are readers obliged to accept it as fictional that, in doing what they did, Giselda or the elders behaved in morally proper ways? Why shouldn’t storytellers be allowed to experiment explicitly with worlds of morally different kinds, including ones even they regard as morally obnoxious? There is science fiction; why not morality fiction?<sup>21</sup>

Walton’s claim is that there cannot be morality fiction, or rather we cannot engage with fiction which is at radical moral odds with us, because given that moral properties supervene on ‘natural’ ones we cannot grasp what it would

21 Kendall Walton, ‘Morals in fiction and fictional morality I’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68, 1994, 27–50, p. 37.

be for something we believe to be morally bad to be morally good. Hence we cannot meaningfully entertain in any full sense that slavery is not evil. But I do not see why the representation of supervenience relations being other than we believe them to be, assuming this is the right way to talk, precludes understanding in this way. Consider a non-moral case. Although I take mental facts to supervene on physical ones I can certainly imagine in a large amount of detail a Cartesian conception of the interrelationship between the mind and the body and, in so doing, come to understand much about what such a picture of ourselves implies. So why think supervenience as such makes a difference? One explanation is to hold that moral claims are categorical (they hold in all possible worlds) whereas this is not the case for relations between the mental and the physical (there is a very distant possible world where Cartesianism holds). But many works which solicit responses, cognitive-affective attitudes and claims we deem to be morally problematic do not conflict with what we take to be categorical morality. Thus even granting the claim it does not show we cannot meaningfully engage with works we take to be morally defective. Second, it's quite clear that we can and do engage with works which do conflict with what we take the categorical demands of morality to be depending upon how close the state of affairs as represented either is, or is made to seem, psychologically possible. Consider someone who once was a Roman Catholic but is now a confirmed atheist reading Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Given her secular conversion she firmly believes that morality categorically cannot depend upon the commands issued by God. Nonetheless, in reading *Brideshead Revisited* she responds with sympathy, admiration, awe and ultimately affirmation to the culmination of the novel. And yet her responses depend on a pro attitude towards Charles Ryder's sacrifice of everything that is most humanly valuable in favour of the decrees of God. Here we have someone responding in a way which is at odds with what they take to be conceptually possible. What matters is not what is taken to be conceptual possibility but what, psychologically speaking, someone is able to entertain. No doubt in some cases this will be because the world as represented is already psychologically very close to who someone is or was. Yet sometimes this is possible because of the artistry of the work and the ways in which what is rendered can be made to seem psychologically vivid and close to the reader. And the latter is the mark of a work being good as art.

The right explanation is surely that we take up a kind of conditional assent to the states of affairs as represented. If Roman Catholicism were true then Ryder's self-abnegation would be deeply sad and good. And *Brideshead* enables us to take up such a stance to the extent that it renders intelligible and psychologically close to us certain things we already incipiently value while developing them, interrelating them and characterising the resultant attitudes in ways we would not actually assent to. The suspension of moral judgement in this way is no different from Coleridge's suspension

of intellectual belief. We can, and do, enjoy both intellectually and morally surreal works. And such works can show us something not merely about what such surreal views are like but, furthermore, something about what is the case. Consider Swift's intellectually and morally surreal *Gulliver's Travels*. Of course parts of the work have localised targets in mind but the underlying thrust of the book is to make humanity in general seem ridiculous, craven, petty, idolatrous of reason, lacking in curiosity and corporeally disgusting. It is certainly true that suffering, repugnance towards the corporeal world and the ridiculousness of our rational ambitions is part of the human condition but such a conception and the responses they give rise to leave most of what is humanly valuable out. The overarching attitude toward human existence solicited from us is one of vitriolic resentment and a conception of death as the only blessed relief. It is an attitude I take to be deeply wrong and I take many of the moral attitudes and responses we are solicited to take up to be pernicious. It is an intense concentration on a partial aspect of our existence which is over-generalised, magnified to preclude all else and deeply distortive. And yet many of us respond to it because we are presented with a highly imaginative exploration of an attitude that is at times psychologically close to us, and thus can be invoked by the artistry of the work. The value of engaging with many works derives from the particularly powerful ways in which they can get us to imaginatively explore different possible attitudes. In some of these cases the works involve characterisations, responses and attitudes we judge to be morally defective and yet nonetheless they are rendered close to us in ways we find to be intelligible.

Why then, it might be asked, does the phenomenon of imaginative resistance seem stronger in the moral case than the scientific case? In both cases works can, and do, get us to respond in ways we take to be cognitively and morally surreal or defective. Yet we sometimes resist or resent being asked to do so more in the moral case. The asymmetry between the two kinds of cases is not as stark as is commonly supposed. Many people commonly do resent being asked to entertain states of affairs they take to be cognitively defective if there is no pay-off. If a novel attempts to get me to imagine a state of affairs I take to be incoherent, confused or surreal then unless there is some kind of pay-off in terms of understanding or appreciation I'm inclined to think it a waste of time and resent having being bothered to read it. What was the point? But in the moral case the resistance and resentment does go deeper. For I have not merely been asked to imagine and respond in ways I take to be cognitively problematic but also in ways I take to be morally defective. Hence whether there will be a pay-off in terms of understanding or appreciation matters more. In the cognitive case I will judge the unrewarding work to be silly, pointless and a mere waste of time. In the moral case I will, in addition, deem myself to have been seduced and gratuitously tricked into allowing myself to respond in ways I morally should not.



## V Cognitive immoralism and forbidden knowledge

Immoralism is the claim that a work's value as art can be enhanced in virtue of its immoral character. Cognitive immoralism holds that this is so because imaginatively experiencing morally defective cognitive-affective responses and attitudes in ways that are morally problematic can deepen one's understanding and appreciation. It follows from (1)–(6) that morally problematic cognitive-affective responses to works can be epistemically virtuous because they may deepen our understanding and appreciation. Where this is the case, the value of the work is enhanced. Thus cognitive immoralism holds and ethicism cannot but be false.

It strikes me as no accident that many novels, films and plays are concerned with evil, moral flaws and failings in ways we take to be morally defective. From the high art of Monteverdi's operatic love story *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Marlowe's tragic-comedy *The Jew of Malta*, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, Homer's *Iliad*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* through to lesser works such as Octave Mirbeau's *Torture Garden*, Du Maupassant's *Bel Ami*, E. W. Hornung's *Raffles: A Gentleman Thief* and the work of Patricia Highsmith, this is a common phenomenon. We value many works which are morally problematic because the ways in which they are morally defective enhance our understanding. Thus there can be, and indeed are, works whose value as art is enhanced in virtue of, rather than despite, their morally defective character. What matters is not so much a question of whether the moral perspective of a work is what we take to be the right one but, rather, whether it is conveyed in such a way that we find it intelligible or psychologically credible. If this is achieved then what matters is whether an artist can get us to see, feel and respond to the world as represented as he intends us to and how, in so doing, we come to more fully understand and appreciate things we might not otherwise have done – and sometimes this means we must traffic in, and take up, immoral responses and attitudes.

A few words of clarification and elaboration are in order. It is important to emphasise that it is no part of the above argument that morally problematic experience, either actual or imagined, is necessarily sufficient for understanding. To revert to an earlier example, someone may be bullied, delight in the bullying of others or read Greene's *The Inheritors* and be none the wiser about distinguishing between different kinds of bullying, why it is found by some to be pleasurable or how ordinarily good people may be drawn into being such. This may be for a host of reasons such as lacking, to the relevant degree required, the capacity to empathise with others, the capacity to critically reflect on the nature of one's experience or the lack of other experiences of relevantly contrasting kinds. But this is no more problematic than the recognition that, say, doing philosophy is not necessarily sufficient for developing analytic skills since someone may lack the relevant kind of capacities or background experiences which would enable them to do so. Only given

certain background capacities and experiences is morally problematic experience sufficient for understanding. What one is capable of learning from experience depends in part upon the level of moral understanding one is already at. Hence we are sometimes surprised to find that a particular work has much more to offer us than we had previously judged when we read it much earlier in life. Thus the claim is that, *ceteris paribus*, a morally problematic experience is sufficient for deepening understanding where the *ceteris paribus* clause is filled in by a relativisation to the background capacities and other related experiences which enable someone to make sense of the experience they are subject to. It should also be noted that the argument does not claim that morally problematic experience is strictly necessary, even with the qualifications in place, for complete understanding. Although this is an interesting and suggestive claim, whether it stands up would be the subject of another paper. All that is needed and has been argued for here is the claim that morally problematic experience is a primary means of understanding.

This brings me on to a matter of elaboration. We should be at pains to distinguish the epistemic claim made from its close non-epistemic neighbours. A world in which there was a greater amount of suffering, morally problematic experiences and evil actions may be one where we would be at an epistemic advantage. But it in no way follows that this would be a better world. Clearly it would not. Similarly, one may be epistemically better off were one to make a point of exploring and subsisting on an artistic diet of Swift, de Sade, Michael Powell, the Earl of Rochester, Brett Easton Ellis, Jacobean drama and Icelandic sagas. But morally speaking this would be a worse state of affairs. Not, I hasten to add, in virtue of any crude causal worries about links to action. But merely in virtue of taking up a delight in the entertainment of thoughts that, morally speaking, one should be repulsed by. But, as I have argued, in certain cases the artistic value of the work in question is enhanced by the immoral character of the work though, morally speaking, we may have good reason not to engage with it. Morally contemptible works can be great art indeed.<sup>22</sup>

22 I would like to thank Dominic McIver Lopes, Peter Goldie and James Harold for their comments and helpful discussions of an earlier draft of this paper as well as the editors for their suggested amendments.

## Make-believe morality and fictional worlds

*Mary Mothersill*

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I

Can I imagine myself to be a bad person, selfish, callous, dishonest, lazy, mean? Of course I can! On gloomy days, I not only imagine but believe it (or half believe it). (Let us assume that imagining and believing admit of degrees: believing ranges, from just over the border – from doubt – to absolute certainty; imagining can be mere supposition or absorbing fantasy. Where the object can be put in propositional form, believing and imagining are compatible with one another and also compatible both with the truth and with the falsity of the proposition in question.) So although I ordinarily see myself as a fairly decent person, I can easily imagine that I am not a fairly decent person and so come to believe (intermittently) that my character is, to put it mildly, regrettable. But can I imagine not just that I am a bad person but that it is *all right* to be that way? The question is ambiguous. I can imagine or come to believe that my bad character traits are excusable. Citing my unfortunate genetic inheritance, my unhappy childhood, the influence of evil companions, lessons in the school of hard knocks and so forth, I may be led to conclude that what is surprising is that I am not worse than I am. However, since imagining is often confused with remembering, I may come to doubt whether my childhood really *was* unhappy, my companions evil etc. and my gratifying sense of being justified may then dissolve. Can I imagine that my vices are really virtues, something to be proud of? Well, those vices could be redescribed in non-pejorative terms. I can imagine a benevolent uncle saying to me, ‘My dear, you are too harsh with yourself; you are not selfish but prudent, not dishonest but tactful, not callous but impartial’, and so forth. In short, when it comes to reflexive character assessment, the range of options for me and people like me is unlimited; although, given the widely shared desire to present oneself as a striking figure and the apparently boundless capacity for self-deception, it would not be surprising if our gallery of self-portraits contained a preponderance of heroes, innocent victims and, where moral flaws cannot be denied, then figures that are dramatically, satanically wicked.

## II

Such reflections as these make it hard for me to grasp what is sometimes called the problem of imaginative resistance, particularly as it figures in aesthetic theory. It has its roots in Plato's concern for illusion, reality and the arts, but in its more tractable modern version it was an eighteenth-century invention. In Hume's epistemology, the concept of imagination plays a major role, and in 'Of the Standard of Taste' he claims that there are limits to what can be imagined. A reader of fiction will cheerfully entertain wildly improbable hypotheses demanded by the story, but where standards of 'morality and decency' are in question, will find it impossible, at least very difficult, to imagine viewpoints contrary to his own; and, Hume continues, if it were possible, he should not do it. On the issue of what one *ought* (or ought not) to imagine, I draw a blank; but the idea that there is some peculiar difficulty in imagining characters in situations where the standards that obtain are morally unacceptable seems to me false to the facts of experience. Since I can imagine myself to be either a saint or a sinner and can imagine in both cases a judgement backed by a general (imagined) principle, how *could* I have difficulties with fictional characters who espouse ideas of vice and virtue that I find morally repellent? Since such characters live and act in a make-believe world, it is not up to *me* to decide whether the ruling principles in that fictional world are or are not acceptable. In fact it should be easier than imagining various things about myself, which is complicated by the thought that I am in some sense responsible for distinguishing truth from fantasy.

The range and flexibility of what I can imagine, I take with me when I read a novel or go to the movies. If the author (screen-writer, director) is any good at all, I find myself a willing collaborator in imagining a fictional world peopled with characters whose fortunes I follow with pleasurable excitement. I love the heroes and despise the villains. In Dickens or Trollope or Western movies, the line between the two is clearly drawn, but even works that are more complicated, where good and evil are intertwined, do not defeat me. With the help of Proust, I can imagine a world in which everyone is corrupt or, as in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, in which everyone (almost everyone) is virtuous. My opinion changes in the course of a story. I begin by finding Jane Austen's Emma obnoxious – bossy and self-important – but then I come to see that she really has a good heart. Just the opposite with Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of a Lady*: at the outset he seems a sensitive, cultivated, attractive man, but gradually he is revealed as emotionally sterile, materialistic and vulgar. I respond to fictional characters in the way I respond to people that I know only through what I read about them in history books or newspapers and the impressions I gain from portraits or photographs. That they are *fictional* strikes me as a matter of little consequence. It is, after all, an accident that there never was a Gilbert Osmond; there might have been; there may have been.

Since I believe that being intelligible is a necessary and also a sufficient condition for being imaginable (as it is for being believable), and since it does not seem to me that imagining a moral lapse is itself a moral lapse (although that is the question at issue and I do not want to beg it), I find Hume's claim puzzling. It is clear that he favours some form of what present-day critical theorists call 'moralism', namely the view that ethical considerations have a bearing on the overall value of a work of art: what is morally dubious is to some extent aesthetically bad. Hume does not defend his view, and I was interested to discover an exchange between Kendall Walton and Michael Tanner that brings the issue into focus.<sup>1</sup> Walton takes Hume to have a valid point and finds that he himself resists imagining in fiction what he finds morally repugnant in real life. But he thinks an explanation is required. We are, after all, not more convinced of the evil of slavery than we are of the non-existence of dragons and fairy godmothers. Why then should it be less problematic to imagine that there are such creatures than to imagine that slavery is acceptable? Walton explores a series of explanations that are initially plausible but which he finds in the end unsatisfactory. He offers some tentative suggestions of his own but concludes that further research is required. Tanner thinks that Walton's whole enterprise is factitious; his comments are often acute and some of his objections illuminating. He goes on to present his own positive view, which is to the effect that literary works, in particular novels, are a source of moral enlightenment: they present us with various ideals which, if adopted, would give meaning and structure to our lives. Such ideals are incompatible but may be sampled and appreciated each on its own terms. If one of them is taken seriously (and I will have questions about what that means), it will have practical consequences that manifest themselves in the reader's conduct and in her relations to other people.

In what follows I sketch Walton's paper in a combination of paraphrase and direct quotation, present and analyse Tanner's objections, and intersperse some comments of my own.

### III

Here is the passage from Hume that Walton takes as his starting point:

Where any innocent peculiarities of manners are represented [. . .] they ought certainly to be admitted; and a man who is shocked with them, gives an evident proof of false delicacy and refinement [. . .] Must we throw aside the pictures of our ancestors because of their ruffs and

1 Kendall L. Walton, 'Morals in fiction and fictional morality I', and Michael Tanner, 'Morals in fiction and fictional morality II', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68, 1994, 27–66. References are given in the text to these two works respectively in the form 'W' and 'T' followed by page number.

farthingales? But where the ideas of morality and decency alter from one age to another, and where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.

[. . .] Whatever speculative errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions which then prevailed, and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgement of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind, from long custom, has been familiarized. And where a man is confident of the rectitude of that moral standard by which he judges, he is justly jealous of it, and will not pervert the sentiments of his heart for a moment, in complaisance to any writer whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

Hume makes two claims here. (1) A work is not diminished in value because it depicts outmoded or exotic fashions. Nor should the critic complain that it promulgates speculative (i.e. scientific or philosophical) errors. What we believe to be false, we can easily imagine as true. But the critic must not tolerate a composition that endorses, or at any rate fails to condemn, false moral principles or bad moral judgements. These are defects and once recognised inhibit our enjoyment of the work as a whole. (2) It takes a violent effort to imagine a situation where false moral principles prevail and that effort is one that we are unwilling and ought not to make.

It seems odd at first that Walton in his discussion, particularly of (2), does not attach importance to the difference between being unable to, or having great difficulty in, imagining a deviant morality, and holding, with Hume, that it is not 'proper' to try to overcome the obstacle. We do not need to be alerted to the hazards of doing something that is virtually impossible. Walton has some good things to say about the inability-to-imagine issue, but he concentrates on the resistance, the *unwillingness* to imagine a deviant morality, and says very little about the alleged impropriety of making the attempt. His manoeuvre does not beg the normative question, however; it might well be that my unwillingness to imagine  $\Phi$  is based on my conviction that it would be wrong to imagine  $\Phi$ . Moreover, Walton does not follow Kant, who insisted on a sharp distinction between moral judgement and the judgement of taste: he writes in the spirit of Hume, who took aesthetics to be continuous with

2 David Hume, 'Of the standard of taste' (1757), reprinted in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 226–49.

ethics, holding that both are grounded not on beliefs but on sentiment. Pleasure, pain and sympathy provide grounds for judgement in either area. A fiction that presents in a favourable light characters agreeable neither to themselves nor to others is for that reason not agreeable to us.

Like Hume, Walton thinks that a work with a morally obnoxious message is a work we cannot whole-heartedly enjoy. Sometimes, indeed, we refuse to recognise genuine aesthetic merits and condemn the work outright. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, although a work of great cinematic beauty and dramatic power, is an explicit celebration of Hitler as hero and saviour, and a hymn in praise of the Nazi programme. (It is interesting that the Riefenstahl film is the only example that both Walton and Tanner produce and that both hold to present a problem.) Our pleasure is diminished by the blatant propaganda, as it might be when, in admiring the pyramids, we think of the slave labour that went into building them. One might, Walton suggests, deplore the inability to give each component its due and think it sad that our response to what is morally offensive stands in the way of our recognition of aesthetic value. But this all-or-none phenomenon is very familiar. A person who relishes a racist joke may say in good faith, 'That's not funny!'

*Triumph of the Will* is the only actual work that Walton cites. His other examples of repellent, hence hard to imagine messages are given in clauses such as, e.g. that genocide or slavery is an acceptable practice, that interracial friendships or marriages are to be condemned, and in the one illustrative sentence, 'In killing her baby Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.'

Consider now the first of Tanner's objections. His paper begins with an extended quotation from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, the relevance of which emerges gradually. Nietzsche rails at what he calls the stupidity of English moralists – his main target seems to be George Eliot – writers who have given up Christian theology but think they have a right to embrace Christian ethics. An obvious mistake, according to Nietzsche:

Christianity is a *whole* view of things [. . .] By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole; nothing necessary remains in one's hands.<sup>3</sup>

Tanner observes that Walton's examples are difficult to understand because they lack any supporting context. A novel may depict genocide or slavery in a favourable light, but its author is unlikely to write: 'I approve of genocide (or slavery).' Walton had said that, if in a story we encounter the words, 'In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all it was a girl', we would be appalled by the moral depravity of the narrator. But wouldn't our response

3 *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Skirmishes of an untimely man', §5, trans. Walter Kaufman (*The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 515–16).

depend on the rest of the story? In a real-life social situation, the remark that in killing her baby Giselda did the right thing would simply be a conversation stopper.

The felt need to justify one's principles has deep roots, and Tanner points out that the Nazis did not say, 'We loathe the Jews and plan to exterminate them.' Instead they presented an elaborate array of beliefs about facts based allegedly on scientific evidence. First comes an account of the inequality of the races, according to which the finer races are at risk of being calamitously adulterated by contact with the inferior ones. This account, developed at length and in detail, leads to the conclusion that the Jewish problem demands a 'final solution'. Genocide was not a good example for Walton, Tanner thinks, because Nazi ideology was such a ragbag of bogus science and racial mysticism that we are inclined to dismiss it and suppose that the genocide was not supported by *any* allegedly factual beliefs.

I think that Tanner's point here is connected to the lesson he draws from Nietzsche: programmes for social action, bad as well as good, emerge as aspects of a total world view. The genocidal programme implemented by the Nazis makes sense only as part of an overall system based on bogus science and racial mysticism. In this it is analogous to Christian ethics, which makes sense only as part of an overall system based on faith in God. In both cases, the attempt to jettison the beliefs while retaining the imperatives for action leads to incoherence. If this last claim is true (and it seems to me dubious) then it creates difficulties for Tanner's own positive doctrine.

Both Walton and Tanner accept the so-called value/fact distinction, and they agree that moral qualities or values supervene on facts. (Neither author explains supervenience, that mysterious but apparently indispensable dependency relation that is neither logical nor causal nor, in any clear sense, conceptual.) The difference is that Tanner thinks that it is impossible to assess a principle of conduct unless one is given the set of beliefs on which the principle is supposed to supervene. Walton, by contrast, thinks it unnecessary to canvas the relevant belief system since *nothing* could lend legitimacy to the claim that genocide is morally acceptable. Here Tanner seems to me to be in the right.

Later he says:

the most devastating critique we can mount of moral views is not simply that they are so disgusting that no civilised person would even entertain them but the undermining of the so-called factual beliefs on which they are based.

(T: 57)

To be fair to Walton, however, one should see his inquiry as a further development of the theory set out in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, where he starts with the idea that children's games of make-believe provide a model for the



representational arts.<sup>4</sup> Novels, stage plays and movies are like those collaborative games where participants are invited to pretend that ordinary objects are not what they seem but have new and more exciting identities. The transfers are established by fiat: ‘Let this stump be a bear’; ‘Let these mud patties be pies’; and so forth. Activities and settings are also prescribed: ‘We are in a space-ship headed for Mars and are running out of fuel.’ The objects picked out and rechristened are ‘props’; they are aids to the imagination. A figurative painting, a novel or a movie may, by analogy, be construed as a prop which guides the viewer in the construction of a make-believe, that is, a fictional world. Confronted by a splotch of paint, we are invited to imagine that we are looking at a woman leaning out a window. The first chapter of a novel invites us to imagine that there is a person, e.g. Tom Sawyer, of whom it is fictionally true that he is an orphan, lives with his aunt in a small town near the Mississippi, has various adventures, engages in escapades and so forth. The participating reader becomes, like a child caught up in the game, a spectator and also in a sense the creator of a fictional world in which propositions that are actually false are pro tem fictionally true. The intentional objects are propositions and the reader, under the direction of the artist-author is asked to entertain for the duration of the game, a set of counterfactuals. The convention is that where relevant features are not specified, we are to assume that the fictional world replicates the real world.

Walton might counter Tanner’s complaint by saying that what he presents is a schematism and not an attempt to show how moral values are arrived at or justified in our world. We are invited to imagine certain propositions as fictionally true and he wonders why it is that we are willing to cooperate in wildly improbable science fiction propositions but decline to imagine a fictional world in which unacceptable moral standards and values prevail?

Tanner has a second reasonable objection. Walton writes that

I may not want to imagine that people of one race are genetically less capable in a certain respect than people of another. And I may object to a novel in which it is fictional that this is so, one that asks readers to imagine this.

(W: 33)

Tanner comments:

We can’t be as confident as we might like to be that the Creator of the world is as morally correct as we are. It may indeed be the case that people of one race are genetically less capable in a certain respect than people of another. It may be that we are not called on to imagine that,

4 Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

but to accept that it is true. Actually it would be rather odd if it weren't. Certainly the average height of the members of various races differs, which alone makes some 'genetically less capable' in certain respects than others are. There doesn't seem to be much point to objecting morally to what is 'naturally' the case.

(T: 57)

The passage accords with my own impressions as described in Section I above. It also shifts the emphasis from being *unable* to imagine a (fictional) world in which obnoxious moral principles obtain, to being *unwilling* to imagine such a world. Of course that leaves unanswered the question of why we resist the novelist's invitation to imagine a moral system which we cannot in good conscience endorse.

Hume thought it evident that the puzzles connected with imaginative resistance arise when we are confronted by works 'from a different age and country', and Walton takes Hume at face value. Tanner observes (correctly) that it is productions of our own age and culture that raise hackles, and that we are tolerant about far away and long ago. He writes:

the more distant the culture represented, the less likely we are to read about it in any other than an anthropological spirit. Given the general view of life [. . .] of, say, the *Saga of the Volsungs*, our reactions to the behaviour of the characters in it are certainly not those that we would experience to approximately similar behavior on the part of people who inhabit 'the real world'.

(T: 63)

So far as interesting moral issues are concerned which bear on our appreciation of works of art (among other things) we are more likely to find our imaginations stretched, engaged, stimulated, outraged [. . .] by works that don't flatly contradict the most basic views that 'we', the morally correct majority, share.

(T: 52)

It is in connection with this valid and important point that there emerges one aspect of Tanner's critique that strikes me as tendentious. He objects to Walton's reliance on the first person plural, holding that it presumes a homogeneous moral community, as members of which 'we' have difficulty in imagining not holding the views that we hold, even though we realise that most people in most places have not held them. Tanner's suggestion is that although Hume (and also Walton) claim for their opinions the authority of what Kant called the *sensus communis*, the truth is that they are spokesmen for a small, local elite. Tanner writes:

Hume took it that there was a set of civilised values which everyone whom one could take seriously, not regarding them as barbarians or monkish, hare-brained fanatics, shares. And this set of values concerned not only the most basic matters [. . .] but also the overall way in which educated, rational, polite and elegant gentlemen would conduct themselves.

(T: 53)

He goes on to say that he finds Hume's moral attitudes 'quaint' and sees Walton as 'living in a time warp' (T: 53). Of course, the conventions of eighteenth-century etiquette may strike us as quaint and, as we live now, educated, rational, polite and elegant gentlemen are in short supply. But this is a 'ruffs and farthingales' item that should not stand in the way of our judgement. Hume did indeed think of himself as a philosopher whose 'refined reflections' were often at odds with the beliefs of the 'vulgar'; although as he notes, when the philosopher leaves his study, he cheerfully adjusts to the beliefs and attitudes of the vulgar. By standards of his day, Hume was remarkably cosmopolitan and open-minded. He did believe that there was such a thing as human nature and that the demands for morality are grounded on needs and feelings that are universal. But he offers the reader an elaborate and sophisticated theory in support of this view, one that cannot be dismissed without argument. Although Tanner's suggestion that Hume is not entitled to speak of 'us', he himself does not hesitate to say that 'Hume's position was in many obvious ways very different from ours', making one wonder what Tanner includes in *his* 'we'. As for Walton, he is disarmingly tentative and careful about distinguishing data derived from introspection from speculative hypotheses about the views of other people.

#### IV

Walton's thesis, according to Tanner, is that fiction

either expresses our moral views or else those that we find repugnant, to the point of being unwilling to imagine ourselves holding them. I use the term 'holding' to bypass the issue of moral realism, which seems to me quite irrelevant to the matter under discussion.

(T: 53)

The issue is one that Walton also wants to bypass. He says in a footnote that he uses the language of moral realism, he does not want to beg any question, goes on to point out that the puzzle that interests him is not avoided by the anti-realist, and hopes that a defensible version of anti-realism will be developed (W: 38 n. 10). It is not clear to me, however, that Walton can afford to shelve the moral realism issue. Walton is impressed by the contrast between

propositions to which we readily grant fictional truth, suspending our conviction that there are no dragons and that there is no such thing as time-travel, and propositions to which we refuse to grant fictional truth, such as that genocide is a morally worthy goal or that Giselda was right to kill her baby. To get his inquiry going, Walton needs to stress the parallel between factual propositions and moral propositions. He has, he says, no difficulty in accepting fictional worlds in which people, many or few, *believe* that genocide is OK or that Giselda was right to kill her baby. That is not hard for him, since he knows that in the actual world, people have substantial moral differences. (This does something to counter Tanner's charge that he is parochial.) Moreover, he can remember periods in his own life when he held moral views that he now regards as revolting. The real obstacle comes only when we are invited to imagine not just that characters in a particular fictional world hold obnoxious moral views but that they are *justified* in so doing. Walton writes:

Why shouldn't storytellers be allowed to experiment explicitly with worlds of morally different kinds, including ones even they regard as morally obnoxious? There is science fiction; why not morality fiction?

I am sceptical – sceptical about whether fictional worlds can ever differ morally from the real world. Of course people in fictional worlds can subscribe to moral principles we recognize as repugnant. Evil characters – characters who have by our lights twisted notions of morality – abound in the pages of fiction. An entire society in the world of a novel [...] might accept the practice of genocide as legitimate or condemn interracial marriage as 'contrary to nature'. But can it be fictional that they are right? Can we reasonably judge it to be fictional that genocide is legitimate or interracial marriage a sin, while insisting that the real world is different?

(W: 37)

Tragic or ironic effects, Walton thinks, depend on a reader's accepting moral principles, and we can sympathise with characters (even with a narrator) who depends on moral principles with which we disagree, but this may happen 'without its being fictional that they are true'.

Appreciation might require respect or sympathy for the characters' moral attitudes. It might even require that we imagine agreeing with them, that we imagine sharing these attitudes ourselves without requiring us to judge it to be fictional that they are true.

(W: 42)

Non-philosophers think there is a difference between someone's believing that  $p$  and  $p$ 's being true. Suppose we understand that to believe that  $p$  is to

take  $p$  to be true (with or without good reason). Walton, as far as I can make out, thinks that in the real world some beliefs are true and some not, and that in the fictional world we can imagine not just that people believe in dragons and fairy godmothers, but that it is (fictionally) true that there are such things. By contrast, while we can imagine and accept as fictionally true that characters embrace obnoxious moral principles, we cannot imagine, hence cannot make it fictional, that such principles are true. But then doesn't Walton owe us an account of what it is in the actual world to say of some moral principle that not only is it 'held', as Tanner puts it, but that it is *true*? Conscientious anti-realists have put forward various proposals and although I have nothing interesting to contribute, I do think it is an issue that cannot consistently be ignored by those who think that possible (including fictional) worlds are parallels to the actual world. Also it seems to me that unless Walton has something to say on this point, he has no defence against Tanner, who has him admitting to an absurdity, namely that he cannot even make sense of the views of someone who appears to differ from him on moral issues and certainly cannot entertain the possibility that such views are justified.

## V

There are fictional worlds peopled by fictional characters such as Tom Sawyer and his friends who engage fictionally in activities and adventures. What is the actual or real world in which we live, look at pictures, read novels and follow, as might be, the adventures of Tom Sawyer? Walton, following David Lewis, thinks in terms of descriptions satisfied and propositions true of what satisfies descriptions. An author's assumptions about which objects and which propositions are important shows in his choice of examples. Tanner says that Walton writes as if we share a view of what the world consists of 'at least in respect of what philosophers used to refer to as medium-sized specimens of dry goods' (T: 53).

It seems that when Walton talks of the real world as opposed to those fictional ones which harbour green slime and Martians he means roughly what one would perceive on an average day if one looked round one's room, took a stroll, got on an aeroplane, and so on, together with the kind of account that the natural sciences would provide of what that world consisted of.

(T: 54)

Tanner offers an alternative:

Morality concerns what has sometimes been called the human world, and there is a great deal of disagreement as to what that amounts to. Does the human world consist of free agents making choices for which they are to

be held responsible, or are we automata? Was Freud right about the overdetermination of our actions by unconscious forces, or has psychoanalysis been a big mistake? Is there such a thing as a universal human nature, or are we products of the kind of social, political and economic circumstances in which we live?

(T: 54)

No single set of answers is available, but Tanner, moving into his main thesis, invites us to think of ‘some of the great novelists, for instance Jane Austen, Stendhal, Dickens, George Eliot, Melville, Henry James, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, Proust, Thomas Mann’ (T: 54). Although there is a sense in which the constituents of the real world are the same for all of them, that world appears differently to each. These authors, in Tanner’s view are all moralists:

Their concern [. . .] is above all with how we should live, and they dwell on those aspects of the world which affect them most powerfully, seen in their sharply contrasting perspectives. In doing that they unquestionably concentrate on what they regard as permanent issues of attitude and conduct.

So they choose settings, characters, situations which they can explore in order to clarify, even to discover, what their values are.

(T: 55)

Each fictional world has its own perspective and when we find one novel appealing and another repellent, one convincing and another implausible, what we are comparing and assessing is different world views. This fact is reflected in critical practice. Someone hostile to Jane Austen will say that she is parochial and should have realised that there are more momentous things in life than who married whom in an English village while the Napoleonic wars are raging – in other words, that her moral vision is defective. A defender of Jane Austen will counter by saying that she has created an adequate microcosm of what preoccupies people enduringly whether or not there are wars close at hand – in other words, that her moral vision is *not* defective.

Judging the merits of a novel is judging the author’s perspective, by determining how adequately it answers the question of how we should live. It looks then as if Tanner is no less of a ‘moralist’ than Walton and Hume, the main difference being that Tanner thinks that the moral import of a work is conveyed by the novel as a whole and not by free-standing isolated propositions about genocide or the justification of Giselda. Tanner points out that what the hostile critic of Jane Austen would *not* say is that her description of natural qualities is fine but that her morality is claustrophobic and banal. I think Tanner is right and that the value/fact distinction (if there is one) cannot be illustrated by comparing propositions out of context. It is not so clear that he is right in suggesting that what is essential to critical judgement is an answer to the question, ‘Is this how we should live our lives?’.

Tanner has his preferences, which he expresses in terms that suggest Humean sentiment, but he thinks his sentiments are supported by reasons, hence arguable. He writes:

if, like many people, I adore Jane Austen and abominate Dostoevsky, my reasons for doing so will be expressed partly in terms of the elements those authors select from what is certainly a capacious field.

(T: 55)

Since Dostoevsky is listed as one of the ‘great novelists’, we may assume that his moral perspective is not absolutely execrable. (Hume would say of Tanner and *Crime and Punishment*, for example, that ‘he cannot relish the composition’.) Tanner, I believe, is an ethical pluralist who believes that the fundamental moral issue is the need to choose among competing ideals, each of which is to some extent eligible. He quotes Peter Strawson:

As for the ways of life that may thus present themselves at different times as each uniquely satisfactory, there can be no doubt about their variety and opposition. The ideas of self-obliterating devotion to duty or to the service of others; of personal honour and magnanimity; of asceticism, contemplation, retreat; of action, dominance and power; of the cultivation of an ‘exquisite sense of the luxurious’; of simple human solidarity and cooperative endeavor; of a refined complexity of social existence [. . .] any of these ideas [. . .] may form the core and substance of a personal ideal.<sup>5</sup>

Tanner observes that each of these ideals can be associated with one of the great novelists, a quorum he now expands to include the great philosophers:

Whether one is more likely to be captivated by a philosopher or a novelist is a matter of temperament. Both may be said, under some circumstances, to create fictional worlds which we then, if we are sufficiently impressed by them, elevate to the realm of truth.

(T: 62)

Few philosophers would welcome the idea that they create fictional worlds which, if sufficiently captivating, may be elevated to the realm of truth. (Tanner seems to assume not just anti-realism in ethics but an across-the-board scepticism.) Sometimes (to use two of his examples) I may find Spinoza attractive and at other times I am drawn rather to Henry James and come to view Spinoza’s fictional world with feelings of revulsion. Again we are reminded of Hume who held that although the joint opinion of the ‘true

5 P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 26.

judges' sets the standard of taste, there are individual differences that are personal and need not be adjudicated:

A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections, concerning the conduct of life, and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favorite author, Horace at forty, and perhaps Tacitus at fifty [. . .] it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such performances are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard by which they can be decided.<sup>6</sup>

What should we make of the claim that literary fictions offer answers to deep moral questions? It is a nineteenth-century thought, although more often directed to poetry than to novels. Mill was certainly sympathetic; Bentham would have laughed at it. Matthew Arnold and his disciples liked to dwell on the thought that literature could fill the spiritual vacuum left by the waning of religious belief. And this seems to be Tanner's thought when he writes:

Christianity supplied its adherents with ideals, or really only one: to go to heaven. Since no-one is foolish enough to retain that ideal without the whole Christian package, we turn to works of the imagination with a zest or desperation previously unknown, to see what might be on offer instead.

(T: 60)

Perhaps it was only after English literature became a respectable 'subject' at Cambridge that the novel came to be regarded as a vehicle of moral wisdom. F. R. Leavis was an influential promoter. And Tanner characterises the Leavis view as follows:

we judge art (specifically the novel) in terms of its possession of certain values, such as seriousness, maturity and depth, but allow that novels which manifest sharply different approaches to life may all possess them.

(T: 65)

If we match up Leavis with Strawson (in the passage quoted on p. 86), it is clear that for Tanner, Walton's problem cannot arise. A novel that endorses genocide or slavery or the evils of interracial friendship is not going to be in the running for Leavis, since it will lack seriousness, maturity and depth.

6 Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



One or another of the great novelists may present us with a perspective for which we have little sympathy but none of them will invite us to imagine what flatly contradicts our moral values. Tanner writes:

Genocide and slavery are taken by most people, I suspect, to be unarguably disgusting; in which case to say that they are evil is really to do no more than to specify, in part, the boundaries within which one is prepared to argue about moral issues.

(T: 60)

Strawsonian ideals may exclude one another but none of them is self-evidently ineligible; none of them calls for what Hume termed a ‘very violent effort’ of the imagination; none of them presents a fictional world that is ‘unarguably disgusting’. And the novels that Tanner sees as projecting worthy ideals are preselected. We are not to consider Sade or (less exuberantly) D. H. Lawrence, not to mention Céline or the eternally popular works of the pornographers. Moreover, isn’t there room for question even among the ‘great novelists’? I for one, find Tolstoi’s moralising quite offensive. I would not like to live in a *Republic* where he was a philosopher king.

A more important question: what are we meant to *do* with these competing ideals? Tanner offers a choice:

On the one hand, there is the delight of expanding our imaginative lives by adopting one variety of what we think of as the aesthetic attitude, in which as appreciators of art we replicate Keats’s ‘negative capability’ [. . .] On the other we are struck by [. . .] Tolstoy’s late-found insistence that art should tell us the truth and that we should reject that which doesn’t, which is bound to mean most of it – bound to, unless we are so committed to the first view that we end up regarding the adoption of ideals as something only to be taken in an imaginative mode.

(T: 65)

Leavis’s view, intended to mediate, in the end is a cop-out, for it

actively encourages a severance between our imaginative lives and our actual ones, which may give us a sense of possible liberation, but also a sense of final frustration at the gap that exists between the lives we lead and that which we might lead.

(T: 65)

Tanner’s recommendation is that, rather than surveying whatever ideals we find attractive, we should ask ourselves ‘what it would be actually to embrace the perspective on the world, and thus on how we should live, that they offer?’ (T: 65). Tanner favours, albeit guardedly, committing oneself to one exclusive ideal, although he admits that given ‘our approved promiscuity in aesthetic

matters', that will be regarded as having 'given up art' and concludes that 'there is a sense in which that would not necessarily be a bad thing' (T: 66).

I find Tanner's general approach congenial; I was brought up in the Leavis tradition to consider reading a novel serious business, not mere entertainment. (As noted above, according to categories in theory of criticism, both Hume and Walton are 'moralists'; but Tanner is an extreme case.) But prey as I am to 'aestheticism', I find it hard not only to decide which perspective I prefer but to know what it would mean to live my life in accord with a perspective that some novelist offers me. In a way, I understand it: I do not think much about Spinoza, but when I lose my car keys for the umpteenth time, I try to see my situation *sub specie aeternitatis*. But suppose I decided to let Henry James be my guide. What would that dictate? Do I make-believe that the James fictional world is the real world in which I live? But I am less mercenary and anxious about status than his main characters. (The untainted ones are victims and often die.) Or is it Henry James, the author, that should be my model? But, first of all, I am not a genius, and could not put in gruelling work days so as to be able to go out to dinner seven days a week, as James is said to have done. But perhaps, in taking the James perspective seriously, I don't have to *do* anything special: it is a matter rather of cultivating my sensibilities. That seems reasonable enough. As Spinoza reminds me to see everyday nuisances under the aspect of eternity, so James might help me through tedious social events by trying to be one of those on whom nothing is lost. What I do not see is how the helpful hints I get from Spinoza or James provide analogues to the overall system that Christianity (which I find unacceptable) affords. For that matter I do not see why it is desirable to commit oneself to an overall system. Tanner observes that it is important to recognise that

one can't permanently dwell among possibilities, for all their alluring variety. They make us think that we can lead several lives, but we all know that that may mean leading no life in particular.

(T: 66)

## VI

Walton, as noted above, discusses without clearly distinguishing being unable and being unwilling to imagine fictional worlds that enshrine a deviant morality. He remarks that it is not only moral propositions that encounter imaginative resistance but a whole range of other propositions concerned with appreciation.

Consider a really dumb joke, like this one: 'Knock, Knock. Who's there? Robin. Robin who? Robbin' you! Stick 'em up!' It is not easy to see how it could be fictional that this joke is hilariously funny.

(W: 43)

Walton goes on to raise, without attempting to answer, some analogous aesthetic questions:

Can what counts in the real world as a jagged or angular or awkward line be flowing or graceful in a fictional world (when relevant aspects of background and context are the same)? Can what in the real world makes for elegance or profundity or unity or bombast or delicacy be different in a fictional world?

(W: 44–5)

And returning to the moral issue, he writes:

Moral properties depend or supervene on ‘natural’ ones [. . .] being evil rests on, for instance, the actions constituting the practices of slavery and genocide. This, I suggest, is what accounts (somehow) for the resistance to allowing it to be fictional that slavery and genocide are not evil.

(W: 45)

Tanner’s comment on this point is that

Genocide and slavery [. . .] are not so much activities upon which evil supervenes, as part of the definition of evil.

(T: 60)

Is Tanner’s observation incompatible with Walton’s claim? It is hard to be sure because of the fogginess of the concept of supervenience. The problem here for me is more general and affects the whole attempt to bring the two philosophers’ views into alignment and to pinpoint their actual differences. Some things are clear: Tanner, who has an interest in literature and literary values that Walton appears not to share, is right in insisting that a fictional world is not created by a single proposition and hence that whether that proposition is or is not imaginable is otiose. Tanner is also right, I have suggested, in holding that the real world, to the extent that it includes more than ‘medium sized specimens of dry goods’ is the human world, one riven by conflict arising from disagreement about matters of fact and differences of sensibility, feeling and moral attitude. A fictional world, at least one created by a great novelist, will explore such conflicts and, given the novelist’s own distinctive perspective, will weave together narrative, description and evaluative assessment. Tanner disposes of Walton’s problem in two steps: the first is the one just mentioned: to grasp the moral content of a novel, you have to read the whole novel. Comparing two propositions, one factual and the other evaluative is mere artifice. (See Tanner’s discussion of the critics hostile to Jane Austen (T: 55).) Second step: the only novels worth considering are the great novels and since they meet, at a minimum, the conditions set by Leavis, they will not require the reader to adopt a moral stance that is totally repugnant.

In the original exchange, Walton is not given an opportunity to respond (perhaps he did at the actual session), but he might have defended his project as follows: the conclusion of Tanner's two-step argument does not follow. A novel may or may not convey a single cosmic message, but within the confines of the novel itself, it will be possible to distinguish narrative description from moral assessment, explicit or implied. Whether or not Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* offers us an 'ideal', it does tell the story of the hapless Fanny Price, of how she was induced, against her better judgement, to participate in an amateur theatrical. The reader is invited to share with Sir Thomas and Edmund the view that such projects are not merely improper but are to be accounted a grave moral evil. Not exactly on a level with condemning interracial friendships or approving genocide and slavery, but to many of us this is an absurd moral stance, which I, for one, find it difficult to imagine being justified. So, Walton might argue, the contrast between what was done, and what evaluative response is appropriate to what was done, can be drawn within the boundaries of the fictional world, and the Humean question will arise again.

Such a response would be fair, but it does not help with the difficulty I raised in discussing moral realism. Walton finds no difficulty in imagining characters who *hold* false or unacceptable opinions. (He says that he can remember a time when he himself found the 'Knock Knock' joke hilariously funny.) The hitch comes when we are to imagine the alien propositions to be justified or *true*. This difficulty does not arise for Tanner because he thinks that when I sign up for one or another perspectival ideal – Spinoza, as might be, rather than Henry James – and describe my favourite as 'true', the inverted commas indicate that what I say is not literal but a bit of rhetoric (like shouting for emphasis).

So we remain in the dark. My impression is that the source of the difficulty is the concept of imagination. How are we to understand, for example, the notion of trying and failing (or for that matter succeeding) in following instructions to imagine that something is the case? A ray of light comes from Richard Moran. Towards the end of an important paper,<sup>7</sup> Moran considers the passage from Hume from which Walton's inquiry takes off. Moran argues that Hume fails to observe the difference between 'hypothetical' and 'dramatic' imagination. Hypothetical imagination poses no problem: for any proposition that is intelligible, we can simply assume that it is true and see what consequences follow. This procedure is standard in mathematics and logic whenever *reductio* arguments are in play and no 'violent effort' is called for and no 'sentiments' into which we are invited to enter. Hence the ease with which we accommodate in fiction improbabilities and 'speculative errors'. But what Hume has in mind when he talks about resistance is

7 Richard Moran, 'The expression of feeling in imagination', *Philosophical Review* 103, 1994, 75–106.

dramatic imagination which is *not* purely propositional and which does not restrict imagination to objects of possible belief. Moran writes:

what such resistance applies to are the expressions of attitudes that are only partly propositional. We may resist making a certain comparison, or the appropriateness of some metaphor, even when we are not rejecting something we have been given to believe. In such a case one is rejecting a point of view, refusing to enter into it.<sup>8</sup>

imagination with respect to emotional attitudes may require such things as dramatic rehearsal, the right mood, the right experience, a sympathetic nature<sup>9</sup>

imagination with respect to the cruel, the embarrassing, or the arousing involves something more like a point of view, a total perspective [. . .] And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, ‘trying on’ the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it. It is something I may not be able to do if my heart is not in it [. . .] If we understood better why imagining in such cases requires your heart to be in it, we would understand better what is being resisted when we resist.<sup>10</sup>

Like every philosophical discovery, Moran’s distinction seems obvious once it has been pointed out. What he says about total perspectives and about ‘trying on’ I connect with Tanner’s account. When he says, for example, that he ‘abominates’ Dostoevsky, I take him to mean that he tried on Dostoevsky and found him ill-fitting.

## VII

Leaving aside the hard question of *what* it is that we resist, allowing only that it is some moral stance that we find objectionable, the question is why we resist entertaining it in our dramatic imagination. Walton canvasses some possibilities. Is it that we fear that if we imagine subscribing to a moral perspective that we consider offensive, we may come actually to subscribe to it? Walton thinks there is something to this suggestion: ‘Advertisers and political propagandists know that getting people to imagine believing a factual proposition can nudge them toward believing it’ (W: 32).

But this, as he remarks, doesn’t explain very much. Perhaps without taking seriously that our deepest convictions will simply be overturned if we imagine

8 Moran, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

other possibilities, we fear what Walton calls ‘disorientation’. If lost in the woods, my compass may show me what direction I should take while the map or picture that I imagine has east where north should be, and if I follow my imagined map, I will be in trouble. So it is important that my orientation as well as my beliefs be correct. Imagining an inversion of moral values may not cause me to give up my convictions but may *unsettle* me. (Walton does not follow up this suggestion, which seems to me quite promising. Well-made movies that are offensive have this effect on me.)

A general observation: the idea that the arts, particularly the representational arts, pose moral hazards to their audience has a long history. Plato was more or less obsessed with it and countless generations of divines have found occasion to speak ill of the arts. The nominal charge is that attending the theatre or reading a poem or a novel will bring about changes of conduct and character which may well be calamitous. What is striking is that none of the authors who push this line (and I include relatively enlightened characters such as Rousseau) ever back up their causal hypothesis with *evidence*. With Plato that is understandable, since he did not believe in evidence, but it is a tradition that persists up the present day. Polls show that a significant number of Americans believe that a steady diet of television violence is one of the main causes of juvenile crime. A recent front-page series in the *New York Times* brought to the problem of school shootings (apparently on the increase) expert opinion, a battery of tests, in-depth interviews and the resources of current statistics.<sup>11</sup> What emerged as the one common factor was a history of mental illness; poverty, divorced parents, childhood abuse and addiction to television were found to have no discernible effect on children and teenagers driven by an urge to murder their classmates and their teachers. Arguments in support of control or suppression of the arts or of other sorts of public entertainment invoke causality but depend on some obscure principle of association or resemblance. (The medievals are reported to have believed that walnuts provided a cure for madness on the grounds that the contours of a (shelled) walnut look something like a human brain, and that mercury is a good remedy for syphilis because Mercury is the god of the market-place where you are likely to contract syphilis.)

One suggestion of Moran’s is that a sense of being manipulated is what activates resistance. If we feel that an author-narrator is bent on inducing changes of feeling and attitude, we feel not like spectators but like victims, and we resent it. This thought is developed in a recent paper by Tamar Szabo-Gendler,<sup>12</sup> who rejects the claim that it is logical contradiction or conceptual incoherence that block attempts to imagine certain fictional worlds. (She offers ingenious counter-examples of plausible, hence imaginable,

11 ‘Rampage Killers’, *New York Times* 9–12 April 2000.

12 Tamar Szabo-Gendler, ‘The puzzle of imaginative resistance’, *Journal of Philosophy* 98, 2000, 55–81.

impossibilities.) Following Moran (with due acknowledgement), she proposes that imaginative resistance arises not because of what is amiss in a fictional world but rather in a concern about where we stand in the actual world. She writes:

we are [not *unable*] but *unwilling* to follow the author's lead because in trying to make [a] world fictional, she is providing us with a way of looking at *this* world which we prefer not to embrace.<sup>13</sup>

Szabo-Gendler's suggestion, again, is a partial explanation. We are a willing audience to entertaining stories but a resentful captive audience to sermons. Tanner has a relevant observation that needs to be borne in mind. Since the 'realism' prescribed to Soviet and to Nazi artists is manifest in works that are uniformly bad to mediocre, and since the explicit intent was to promote a political programme, we tend to assume that the attempt to affect our attitudes makes for bad art. But the greatest works of art, for example, religious art, are designed to affect attitudes. Tanner writes:

The contrast between 'Our Heroes Defend the Motherland against the Fascist Invader' and Michelangelo's Last Judgement, or Raphael's Sistine Madonna, is only one of degree, though it remains prodigious [. . .] One might say, since the level is at this point elementary, that all art is propaganda.

(T: 58–9)

My aim in the preceding discussion has been to explore rather than to regiment the views represented. One of the aims of philosophy is to replace what is amorphous and unarguable by what is complicated, discussable and relatively clear. My hope has been to illustrate this platitude by example.

13 Szabo-Gendler, op. cit., p. 79.

# Sentimentality\*

Michael Tanner

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The only occasion on which Oscar Wilde approached profundity was when he was accusing Lord Alfred Douglas, at prodigious recriminatory length, of shallowness. In the course of his bombardment, he wrote:

The fact is that you were, and are I suppose still, a typical sentimentalist. For a sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. You think that one can have one's emotions for nothing. One cannot. Even the finest and most self-sacrificing emotions have to be paid for. Strangely enough, that is what makes them fine. The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought – the *Zeitgeist* of an age that has no soul – and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in. You should pass out of that conception of life. As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge. And remember that the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.<sup>1</sup>

These remarks, together with some of the things that I. A. Richards says in his chapter 'Sentimentality and Inhibition' in *Practical Criticism*, seem to me the most perceptive brief general comments made on a subject that is of the first importance, but discussion of which is avoided for a variety of reasons, most of them bad. But I may as well say at the outset that I have found it too perplexing and difficult a subject to be able to offer more than a series of rather loosely related thoughts; and that my attempts to impose a greater

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1 *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, 1962), p. 501.



degree of order on it had resulted in falsehoods of an especially damaging kind – the results of trying to schematise indocile realities, which in this case at least are reflected in the unwieldiness of the concepts that we use to cope with them.

However, among the issues that I shall be dealing with, though not separately, since they are not separate issues, are these: (1) What are the usual conditions under which sentimentality is predicated of people, feelings (or emotions – for my purposes there is no need to distinguish between them), and do they form a coherent and useful set, or have they (the conditions) proliferated in a confusing and unhelpful way? (2) If some more or less coherent account of sentimentality can be given, is it to be considered, at least in its more extreme forms, as a very harmful or corrupting quality? (3) Is the often-asserted link between sentimentality and cynicism, or even cruelty, more than a contingent one, if it indeed exists? (4) Is there any evidence for a claim that sentimentality is an historical phenomenon, bearing in mind that charges of it are made very much more frequently nowadays than they were, say, three centuries ago?

It might well be felt that a satisfactory analysis of sentimentality could only proceed, or be derived from, an account in quite general terms of the emotions and their relationships to their causes and objects. Of course I hope that what I have to say can be fitted into some such account, but I am not persuaded that an analysis of sentimentality needs to wait upon one; if I were, I shouldn't be attempting it, since it seems to me that the general subject of the emotions is still in a grievously confused state. I hope, rather, that by dealing with a set of phenomena, and the concepts which we use to cope with them, where the relationship between emotions, their causes, and their objects, is pathological, we might be able to advance in our understanding of more normal cases, remembering always that normality is not a statistical matter, and that it could be the case that most of our feelings were properly categorised as sentimental.

Everyone who uses 'sentimental' and its cognates fairly often and fairly responsibly agrees with Wilde that a dominant element in sentimentality is that the feelings which constitute it are in some important way unearned, being had on the cheap, come by too easily, and that they are directed at unworthy objects. All these charges are part and parcel of the allegation that to be sentimental is to be shallow in a specially noteworthy way. But after that, analysis tends to peter out while accusations continue. I. A. Richards, in the most sustained attempt to bring order into this area, distinguished, as it was fashionable to do at that time and place, three 'senses' of 'sentimental'. The first is a quantitative one; 'a response is sentimental if it is too great for the occasion. We cannot, obviously, judge that any response is sentimental in this sense unless we take careful account of the situation.'<sup>2</sup>

2 *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 258.

He immediately continues: ‘Another sense, of which this is not true, is that in which “sentimental” is equivalent to “crude.”’<sup>3</sup> And finally:

A response is sentimental when, either through the over-persistence of tendencies or through the interaction of sentiments, it is inappropriate to the situation that calls it forth. It becomes inappropriate, as a rule, either by confining itself to one aspect only of the many that the situation can present, or by substituting for it a factitious, illusory situation that may, in extreme cases, have hardly anything in common with it.<sup>4</sup>

Richards gives an excellent example in the way that people who spent unspeakable years of misery in the war emerge remembering the wonders of comradeship, and nothing else.

Richards’ remarks, suggestive as they are, are clearly not as final as their being listed as the three senses of ‘sentimental’ would lead one to hope. In the first place, there is a reference in both the first and the third to ‘the situation’; but there are many cases of sentimentality where there *is* no situation in the relevant sense, the ones that come most readily to mind being responses to instrumental music. Or to be more precise, it is the music itself which is the prime bearer of the charge, and for most instrumental music it seems simply mistaken to say that it is concerned with a situation or has an object, in the required sense. And in those works of programme-music where there is an evoked or implied situation – Liszt’s or Richard Strauss’ symphonic poems – it is not on account of their dealing with some set of external circumstances that we make our judgements of sentimentality, if and when we do. Tchaikovsky is incessantly berated for the sentimentality of his symphonies, without a clear suggestion that they are exaggerated responses to some programmatic situation or to ‘Fate’, the ostensible subject of the Fourth Symphony, to which over-reaction would be difficult. The idea is rather that the way he is expressing himself is in itself thoroughly regrettable – that no kind of object, or lack of one, would justify this kind of response or demonstration. If that is right, it has important consequences for the usual view (I think it fair to call it that) of sentimentality as being an essentially relational affair. The only way that Richards could cope with sentimentality where there is no given or implied situation is by use of his second ‘sense’, in which ‘sentimental’ is equivalent to ‘crude’, and that will be found to be itself too crude an instrument. Continuing with the shortcomings of Richards’ account: neither the first nor the third sense seems to pinpoint the reason why we want to call the death of many a fictional Victorian child sentimental. It is surely clear that the death of a child, at least one of Little Nell’s mettle, is something towards which strong feelings are appropriate, yet that doesn’t

3 Ibid.

4 Loc. cit., p. 261.

deter us from saying truly, if normally too easily, that Dickens' portrayal of her death, as of many another terrible kind of incident, is grossly sentimental. While it is obvious that the first of Richards' senses doesn't apply, the third sounds much more promising, but we shall see that it too won't do. A third criticism is that it is only certain kinds of exaggerated, had-on-the-cheap, hand-on-heart responses that we characterise in this way. We don't, e.g. call Othello's jealousy at Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness sentimental, though it is inappropriate to its object, both in quantity and quality. On the other hand, we may well characterise Othello's attitude to himself in his final speech 'Then you must speak of one who loved not wisely but too well' as grossly sentimental, as *Othello's* best critics have done. But though that might lead to the suggestion that it's the warm, sympathetic (including to oneself) love-to-sorrow spectrum of feelings that are the only ones that, on suitable occasions, can be called sentimental, I don't think that that will work either. People who get into frightful states of anger or indignation over occurrences that they encounter or hear about may often, on that account, be properly called sentimental. The relevant difference between unjustified, rampant jealousy and vehement anger might then be pointed up by stressing that the anger and indignation of what one might call the professionally furious don't lead anywhere, whereas Othello's jealousy certainly does; and even if it hadn't, it would have been a dreadful cancer in his soul, while anger about a political extradition in a distant land, say, doesn't go beyond being simply anger – doesn't when it's sentimental, that is to say. And that would bring us back to something like the 'easiness', lack of cost and so forth, which Wilde accused Lord Alfred of. But though I feel that that is much more hopeful, it still won't work as it stands, because Othello's sentimental last speech – that is not meant to be a total characterisation of it, but an element of sentimentality is evidently present – does lead him straight into suicide. And indeed sentimentality is predicable of emotions that lead people to quite drastic actions, so that it is often the case that though they may not have earned their emotions, whatever that comes to, they pay for them, *pace* Wilde. So payment for one's emotions doesn't exempt them from being sentimental. The tendency which we undoubtedly have to align sentimentality and supineness won't work, because people are often motivated by thoroughly sentimental responses into spectacularly violent courses of behaviour.

So far, then, Richards' account of sentimentality hasn't been as incisively firm as it at first seemed. Wilde's apparently looser mode may in fact turn out to be more precise. However, it must be remembered that I have quoted very selectively from Richards, and that he has a good deal more to say on the subject. And Wilde, who was engaged less in analysis than in attack, may have been treated with surprised latitude. Nonetheless the connection between having a sentimental emotion and acting on it, for example, which would seem to be severed in his account, if 'payment' and 'action' are interchanged, might still work if we specified more precisely what occurred in someone's

being sentimental and yet acting on their feeling. For the route from motive to action, when it contains or goes *via* a sentimental feeling or attitude, might be said to be inappropriate in relation to the action. One might put it exaggeratedly by saying that Kant's view of the relation of motive to action gives the impression that all emotions, or passions, are sentimental on this modified and extended account. Every action whose motive is not the performing of a duty is inspired by feeling, and therefore at best compromised. Whereas we would more sanely want to say, despite the agreeable element of fanaticism in Kant's outlook, that there are some emotions which do not play their part in being good reasons for action, a notable class being sentimental emotions.

That still leaves open the question of what sentimental feelings actually are. One element, related to criteria I have already mentioned, but separable from them, is the having of emotion(s) for its, or their own sake. This again turns out on scrutiny to be a promising lead which doesn't do as much as one might hope. That shouldn't lead to its rejection, of course, since it seems most unlikely that any single formula will get us very far. 'Having an emotion for its own sake' is not a perspicuous phrase, certainly not if there is taken to be the suggestion of pleasure in the having. For I don't see that it can be denied that some sentimental feelings aren't at all pleasurable and yet people go on indulging them. The feelings typically associated with unrequited love are hideously painful, yet it is part of the syndrome that one goes on turning them over, inflicting ever greater degrees of torture on oneself, in no way enjoying it all, unless in the sense that, as people say, they at least know that they're alive – but alive in such a way that they might well rather be dead. In such extreme cases it might well be disputed whether the feelings *were* sentimental, since so few of the normal conditions for that obtain. Perhaps it would be conceptually neatest, and also accord most accurately with our intuitions at this point, if we agreed that only emotions in which there was a pleasurable element, of however overlaid or involuted a sort, were properly to be called sentimental, and that one might indulge feelings that were atrociously painful; and nothing more.

Yet another way, related to previous ones, in which we might try to focus on the central concept, is that such feelings tend, after a certain point, to dislocate themselves from their objects, if they have them. This is clearly related to Richards' third sense, but not identical with it. For where he stresses the dislocation alone, I would want to amplify and claim that once the dislocation has taken place, there is a tendency to auto-generation, so that it isn't so much inappropriate strength or object that is in question, but a disturbing autonomy which retains the *cachet*, if any, of the emotion when it was in more or less proper relationship to its object, which may have been a perfectly worthy one. The element of dishonesty, probably of self-deceit, that is agreed to be characteristic of attitudes, people or whatever when they are sentimental is connected with the sense of the developed feelings having lost touch with

their origins, in insidious and dangerous ways. And there is a general implication, though not a universal one, that the self-development is illicitly pleasurable. And this would help to explain our readiness to call unrequited love, sometimes, sentimental, while jealousy, the most violently unpleasant of feelings, is never considered sentimental, however ridiculous, arbitrary and unjustified it may be. It is always ghastly. Again on the other side, at least some states of grief, which have a general but not overpowering melancholy tone, can be in a certain degree pleasant, and on that account sentimental, and tending towards that not wholly disagreeable lassitude which made Dr Johnson stigmatise grief as 'a species of idleness'. So even an emotion that might seem predominantly painful may have compensations enough to lead us not to curtail it. In this slightly nebulous respect Spinoza seems to have been exactly wrong about pleasure and pain. His view, famously, is that pleasure is the passage, or the accompaniment of the passage, from lesser to greater activity, and pain the passage, or its accompaniment, from greater to less.<sup>5</sup> But just as in Book II of the *Ethics* he unwittingly shows the dangers of confusing epistemology and the philosophy of mind, so here he shows the dangers of confusing philosophy of mind and ethics. Whether he is talking of *titillatio* or *laetitia*, he is concerned that they should be by-products of something which he regards as always good: increased activity. But apart from having the strange consequence that God cannot be happy since he is unable to become more active, it fails, as his account does at every stage, to take account of the pleasures of indolence, routine or 'wallowing'.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, like all fascinated and exasperated readers of Spinoza, I feel that he has got hold of something of great importance, while doing nothing to make clear, by examples or any other means, what it is. But his stress on human bondage to the passions, though he suggests an over-intellectualised way out of it, which is inevitable given his general cast of mind, may help us to see why we regard sentimentality as at least regrettable, and at worst thoroughly vicious. For Wilde's brief against the sentimentalist, and Richards' three senses of 'sentimental' all have in common, contained implicitly in them, the passivity of the mind in relation to feelings. The only activity which the sentimentalist manifests naturally is, one might say, the activity of rendering himself more passive. It is characteristic for the sentimentalist to inhibit those checking devices which are available, though hard to handle, for interrogating one's experiences, for asking whether one's feelings are primarily controlled by their object, if they have one, and what *kind* of communication they are maintaining with it. And though Spinoza gives us no help on the subject, there

5 *Ethics*, Book III, Definitions II and III of the Passions.

6 I am aware that Spinoza means something fairly different from what we ordinarily mean in his use of such terms as 'activity'. I should be grateful if, in showing my naïveté on this subject, some Spinozist would also show precisely how Spinoza uses ordinary terms, and that he does not lapse into attaching the force to them which they normally have, *if* he doesn't.

clearly is a distinction to be made between feelings which we allow to happen to us, and those which we activate, though it is not a clear distinction.<sup>7</sup> But that, even so, won't demarcate sentimental from unsentimental feelings for us, because it is of course perfectly possible to lead a thoroughly sentimental yet highly active life, one characterised by that kind of abandoned enthusiasm for which the German *Schwärmerei* is so incomparably expressive a term. The *Stürmer und Dränger*, and the heroes and heroines of sensibility in the eighteenth century, energetically courted emotions that then took over, got out of control, and were therefore attributable to the workings of destiny. Bearing such specimens and their latter-day descendants in mind, it would be tempting to suggest that there are two broad categories of sentimentalist: those who let life do what it will with them, and languish in more or less exquisite torment; and those who seize every opportunity for 'drinking life to the dregs' etc. and therefore require a quite different account of their emotional lives. But striking as the differences are, it is the underlying identity of their feelings which is crucial. For in the end both court the same emotions, and it is simply a question of whether they think they can indulge them most satisfactorily by adopting a preliminary active or passive rôle, the aim of both being that variety of passivity sometimes called 'being carried away'.

At this point, when many suggestions have been toyed with, and none developed, it may seem likely that the drift of my selection is towards a set of stringent recommendations for emotional hygiene, in which I may finally produce an account of sentimentality which will suggest that the vigilance with which we monitor our emotional lives may well leave little chance for *any* emotions to survive; and indeed there are anti-sentimentalists whose aim would seem to approximate that, and who do not, in Wilde's term, take any bank holidays, who can't be said to be sentimentalists in matadors' clothing. It will not, in fact, be the upshot of my argument that a censorship of the feelings should be established, but rather – and the suggestion is no doubt as banal as its execution is uncommon – that what should be established is an education and discipline of the feelings, the ideal condition of man being one in which he has no fear of his feelings, however voluminous and powerful they may be, because of his confidence in their vitality and their vitalising effect on others. An ideal *so* 'ideal' may well seem to most people not worth enlarging upon.

Returning now to consider further the possibilities of analysis that I have sketched, the first question to cope with is whether there is anything intrinsic to sentimental feelings by virtue of which they are so categorised. I think that the answer is that sometimes there is, and sometimes not; in the latter set of

7 For a helpful but difficult discussion of related issues to this, see Richard Wollheim, 'The mind and the mind's image of itself', in *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

cases, there is always the possibility that they will slither towards the first class. My first and chief reason for thinking that there are some feelings that are intrinsically sentimental is derived from the phenomenon of instrumental music, with which I have already dealt briefly. Whatever we may think of the usual list of musical sentimentalists, unquestionably some music is sentimental. There is often no prospect for analysing sentimentality here in terms of a misplaced or displaced relationship to an object, since there is no object. A weaker suggestion of a familiar kind would be that though there are no objects in these cases, it is *as if* there were. The emotions embodied in César Franck's Piano Quintet, to take an obviously noxious example, are very like the emotions expressed in some of the oleaginous religiose passages of French operatic composers from Gounod to Massenet. That granted, one may have been spared exposure to *Thaïs* and its ilk, and indeed to any pseudo-religious dramatic and vocal music, and still find the Piano Quintet shocking, as even Liszt did. Nor need one express one's objections to it in an 'as if' form, in order to stigmatise it as sentimental. That isn't to say that one won't characterise it by the use of 'life' terms – 'masturbatory' seems to be an obvious candidate. But that still doesn't mean that it has even an implicit object; the feelings it expresses, and in suitably responsive listeners evokes, are comparable no doubt to the feelings one has when there are objects around – objects of one's feelings, I mean – but objects being regarded sentimentally. That is, there is the strongest sense of emotions which have been best described by Wilfrid Mellers as 'eroticism curbed, or rebellious passion that struggles to break free.'<sup>8</sup> One can tell from the music itself (I leave aside the verification-procedures in this type of enterprise) that it is *curbed eroticism* that is being expressed, and curbed eroticism of a particularly enjoyable kind; part of the enjoyment comes precisely from the curbing, which means that it can continue more or less indefinitely, as Franck's music often threatens to do. There is thus a very sharp contrast with the Prelude to Act I of *Tristan*, where the eroticism which is curbed for the first half is very evidently straining to be unleashed, and indeed is unleashed with notoriously overpowering effect. But that doesn't, naturally, clinch any point, for there have been innumerable would-be *Tristan* Preludes since the original, in which passion is unleashed but the whole thing is rotten, rancidly sentimental. The varied assessments that I'm handing out are no doubt based on reactions that I wouldn't have if I hadn't had some relevantly similar emotions in contexts where there were objects. But though one way of arguing from that would be that the relationship between the emotion and the object in *those* situations was what led me to call the emotion a sentimental one, and that it was the similarity in emotional tone which led to the same attribution in objectless

8 Alec Harman, Anthony Milner and Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and his Music: The Story of Musical Experience in the West* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1962), p. 915; Wilfrid Mellers, *Romanticism and the 20th Century (from 1800)* (Bristol: Burleigh, 1957), p. 115.

situations, there is a quite different line which we might more wisely take; that even though the emotions found in a piece of music were similar to the emotions found in situations where there were objects, it is not on *that* account that they are sentimental: rather, perhaps, one can see from the instrumental-music cases that sentimentality is an intrinsic quality of some emotions, though it may be tempting when one thinks of situations where there are objects to claim that the sentimentality resides in the relationship between the feelings and what they are feelings about, or towards.

Neither of the positions strikes me as true *überhaupt*, but I think, though I should have great difficulty in marshalling adequate arguments to persuade the unconvinced, that each of them is true for some cases. An opponent of my second suggested line might, for instance, press on with his claim that the feelings expressed and aroused by a piece of instrumental music may be sufficiently like those expressed or aroused by some situation where there is an object calling forth undue quantities, or the wrong quality, of emotion for it to be said that there is an implied object. And it could be argued, I think incorrectly, that when we call a piece of music sentimental it is always because it suggests implied objects; though that clearly wouldn't be a sufficient condition for sentimentality in music, since some evidently unsentimental pieces also have implied objects. The Eroica Symphony, which is not in the least sentimental, is in an interminably debatable sense 'about' heroism, which could thus be said to be its object. The Adagietto for strings and harp from Mahler's Fifth Symphony, on the other hand, is sentimental without being about anything at all, not even death in Venice; it was sentimental from the day that Mahler composed it, which was why it came in so handy for Visconti's piece of prolix kitsch.

The opposing views about whether sentimentality can be an intrinsic property, or is necessarily relational, can probably only be satisfactorily dealt with by introducing further and wider considerations about the inner life. My view is that it would be preposterous at the present ill-formed stage of the philosophy of the emotions to take up a strong line. But I do think that recent Anglo-American philosophers have underestimated severely the incidence of objectless emotions, partly because they have been in general behaviouristically inclined, partly because they have preferred to discuss feelings for which there are frequently employed names. They have neglected to observe that the connections between the emotional lives of almost everyone and the objects that those emotions have, when they have them, are loose to an extreme degree. What might have been felt to be Wilde's insufferable elitism in writing 'The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair' seems to me to be perfectly just, and he erred only, in thinking that the emotional lives of most extraordinary people – he was thinking particularly of himself – are in a better position. In spite of constant appeals from some literary critics, educationalists and novelists – I think here of Lawrence's remark that 'a man who is *emotionally* educated is as rare as



a phoenix<sup>9</sup> – most people are content to remain, to a great extent, in bondage to the passions, perhaps because no one has ever suggested to them that the emotions might be educated, or been truthful about how arduous a business it is. Considering how much almost everyone is in hapless thrall to their feelings, it is truly astounding how little interest they take in precisely what they are; and philosophical interest in them is a very stop-go affair too. There was a brief period in the late 1950s when English philosophers debated whether there was a huge number of indefinitely discriminable emotions, or very few, the criterion being chiefly a matter of variations in overt response. After a couple of interesting books, the subject seems to have been virtually abandoned again. Yet it does seem obvious that if the education or cultivation of the feelings is feasible, it is of the utmost importance, since most people spend their lives in the limbo between boredom and misery, and the misery, granted a solution of what Lawrence refers to as ‘the bread-and-butter problems of alimentation’, has largely to do with the disorderliness of their emotional lives, a very large ingredient in which is sentimentality – aimless or pointless feelings, existing prior to any object fitting or unfitting, and therefore always ready to latch onto the first even faintly plausible candidate for their expression, or betrayal, to use Collingwood’s apt word.

There is a clear danger that in attempting to locate the central aspects of sentimentality one will oscillate between dealing with specific feelings and with the people who have them, trying to get to grips with the concept by dealing with a given emotional state, and moving outwards from there into the pattern of life of a person whom we would call sentimental, and hoping that this oscillation will give the impression that it is, indeed will be, a dialectical progress towards understanding. It won’t. The difficulty is exacerbated by the extreme proximity of at least some sentimental feelings to a phenomenon that ‘flourishes in the same hedgerow’ and yet is in all crucial respects quite different: the phenomenon of emotional generosity, something that I take to be, together with vitality, to which it is closely linked, the most desirable of all human qualities. Now one way in which we distinguish, if we recognise the quality of emotional generosity at all, between it and sentimentality, is in the freedom with which the generous (the adverb ‘emotionally’ is to be understood from now on) act on their feelings without anxiety about the point and value of doing so – and the lack of anxiety is well-grounded. So once more feeling and action become fairly closely linked in making the distinction between sentimental and other feelings. And from the outsider’s point of view, there may rarely be anything more to go on in making the essential discriminations. But there is a further difference. I have, in order to support that claim, to report on my findings about myself, an activity that angels left to fools about a quarter of a century ago. However:

9 *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1936), p. 539. Lawrence’s italics.

in the complexity of the relations between my feeling and my actions, I feel confident in assessing some of my emotions as being of a kind that naturally leads to action, unless there are other inhibiting factors, as of course there naturally often are. It might be that it is the recalcitrance of the world in refusing to suffer one's emotional expressions that leads to so many of them remaining wholly within, and either dying of inanition or burgeoning without point, and thus leading one willy-nilly to sentimentality. But it also seems to me that some of my feelings are of a kind that inhibit action, because they themselves are enjoyable to have, but if acted upon, one would cease to have them, and one doesn't want to. Such a feeling does seem to me intrinsically sentimental, even though there may be equivalent feelings which prompt one to action. The kind of feelings I am thinking of are righteous indignation on the basis of which no action can be taken, and in general that range of feelings which helps to increase one's sense of one's own superiority so long as no activity is required. An enormous amount of meditation on the sufferings of the Jews in the Third Reich is of this kind, though it is almost impossible to persuade indulgers that it is. It is in this region that Wilde wrote more wisely than he knew when he spoke of having emotions without being prepared to pay for them. But the emphasis should fall on the being prepared; payment may not be required, or it may not be expected but have to be made. Many sentimentalists pay horribly in the end for their sentimentality. It is the attitude they adopt towards the payment that marks them as sentimental or not.

So far we can say that sentimental people have been shown to (1) respond with extreme readiness to stimuli; (2) appear to be pained, but actually enjoy their pangs; (3) respond with equal violence to disparate stimuli at an amazing pace, the amazement being engendered by the speed with which one piece of intensity is as it were casually replaced by another; (4) avoid following up their responses with *appropriate* actions; or if they do follow them up appropriately, it is adventitious.

But this needs modification. We would call a person sentimental precisely on account of certain things he did, which were entirely appropriate to his feelings. A man who goes to inordinate lengths to avoid treading on snails is in a difficult position; we are very likely to call him sentimental for making such a fuss over snails, and perhaps more likely if he puts his feelings into practice than if he doesn't. It is in such cases, where sentimentality is predicated of someone irrespective of whether or not he puts his beliefs into practice, that it finally becomes clear that all such predications are made on the basis of a set of standards regarding the relationships between feelings, attitudes, beliefs and actions which will necessitate, if we are to defend them (as I, of course, cannot, here), a full account of our deepest moral commitments.

So: it is sentimental to feel in a certain way towards some objects, on account of what those objects are; or to feel in certain ways irrespective of

the objects concerned; or to feel in certain ways and not to act accordingly. Sentimentality, then, is the name of several kinds of disease of the feelings, in which the elements of feeling 'in the void', of unfocused emotion, and of being prepared for huge bouts of emotional response to virtually random, or alternatively direly predictable stimuli, are all closely connected. The point can be made clearer by returning to music. The greatness of some interpretative artists, of whom the obvious and overwhelming example for our time is Maria Callas, consists precisely in their focusing our attention on what, in other hands, or from other larynges, becomes simply an excuse for indulgence. Only after one has listened to Callas sing '*Un bel dì*', for example, is one at all likely to know what it is about in any but the vaguest way, and what progression of feeling it so movingly notates.

Opera and song provide some particularly helpful material for dealing with some of the issues I've been discussing. It is notoriously characteristic of opera that many of the most popular works in the genre have ludicrous or indecipherable plots, absurd words, and that the dramatic situations merely provide an occasion for display of various kinds, ranging from the bloodless Melba-type coloratura to the flamboyantly expressive. Verdi's works are largely in the second category, except that the emotions in the majority of them are so blatantly primitive, or as the apologists put it, 'painted in primary colours', that it is *de rigueur* to regard him as honest, forthright and wholesome, while Puccini, whose operas are distinguished by vastly superior texts, is brusquely dismissed because of his indulgences, languors and stridency. We tend to have a strange prejudice that female slaves captive to Babylonians and singing brash tunes are somehow superior to seamstresses dying of consumption in Parisian garrets. But if one is to defend emotional purity – though not at the cost of wholehearted emotional commitment – it is all the more important to be firm about one's lack of snobbery about the life of feeling.

The poems of Wilhelm Müller which comprise the cycle which, reordered by Schubert, constitutes *Winterreise* are in no way superior to some of the most despised opera libretti, except that there are no plot difficulties to cope with. The reason why the poems, mostly, are embarrassingly sentimental, achieving only an odd moment of distinctive and striking imagery, while the cycle as a whole – Schubert's cycle – is one of the supreme things in art, possibly the greatest of all modern tragedies, is that Schubert not only by a variety of means turns the commonplace into the uncanny and the searching, but that Müller's indistinguishable dollops of goo achieve, thanks to Schubert's inspiration, a sharp separation when they are made parts of a genuine and agonisingly honest exploration, a pilgrimage into an insanity of self-knowledge. The youngster who begins the cycle as an unremarkable sufferer from unrequited love stumbles on, driven by the pain of what lies behind and the desperate search for what may still await him; and even when what lies before him is a hazy Romantic equation of rest and death, he is still

a figure of truly heroic stature by virtue of his cruel refusal of comfort from the direction of a mawkish churchyard, by his Nietzscheanly explosive high spirits in the deranged 'Mut': '*Wenn kein Gott auf Erde sein, sind wir selber Götter*',<sup>10</sup> and by his final acceptance of the unrelievable misery of his condition; any amelioration would be a failure to face the truth – a condition that has, by the end of the cycle, become universalised to a degree where the fact that he was driven onto his pilgrimage by rejected love has become irrelevant. Schubert, art's most terrible loss, provides here, as so often, the test-case: the enormous pull towards the ideals of oblivion, 'lapsing-out', unspecified and unspecifiable forms of merging and the knowledge that it is impossible, a dream that can only be lingeringly entertained if it is firmly placed in a context of realism. He knew so much about some forms of sentimentality that he could incorporate them, seemingly without critique, only to leave us with a final impression that nothing has been shirked, no unrealities finally allowed.

To revert to Wilde, and his claim that sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism. The ease with which the sentimentalist has his emotions, gets rid of them, and moves on to another set, is not casually related to cynicism. For it is definitive of cynicism to regard human beings as shallow, manipulable and crudely categorisable. To be a cynic is to reject any analysis of human motivation which appeals to depths and complexities of the selfish and the noble, the spontaneous and warm intertwining with the calculated and therefore in some sense 'cold'. It is a view of men which, by predicating necessary shallowness of them, is itself condemned to shallowness. It is thus especially appropriate to the vulnerable adolescent seeking protection from a world seen as threatening, to the manipulator of people who would hate, nonetheless, to feel that the human material he was manipulating was susceptible to more than a very limited amount of damage or pain, and to the disillusioned middle-aged whose feelings have been sufficiently often disregarded for him to want to deny their existence, if they have survived. But each of these classes of people, even the second, is liable to experience the impact of the, to them, painful fact that there *are* feelings which others value and organise their lives upon. But the feelings which are worth having are those which it costs an effort to have – which doesn't mean that the effort is what makes them worth having, but is a consequence of the complexity of the data with which we have to deal. To have them it is necessary to understand what they are. To understand what they are it is necessary to run the risks involved in the depth-probing which results in their emergence and growth. The process is long, slow, time-consuming, painful and demanding of a degree of commitment that it is fearsomely difficult for most people to make. In this sense most people are cynics and sentimentalists. For a further feature of sentimental feelings is that analysis of them – placing

10 'If there are no gods on earth, then we ourselves are gods.'

them in relation to their objects, positioning them in relation to other items in one's emotional economy – shows that they are 'easy', easy to come and easy to go, parts of 'undisciplined squads of emotions'. Unsentimental emotions are typically deepened and made more secure by pondering and analysis; which is one reason why the alleged dichotomy of thought and feeling is so harmful.

While the alleged connection between cynicism and sentimentality seems clear, it is less evident that a strong connection exists between sentimentality and cruelty. It is admittedly likely that someone whose feelings come and go so swiftly and easily that they are more aptly described in the reductive Rylean terminology for the whole of the inner life of twinges and pangs, will not think hard before wounding someone else, but what has been more noteworthy is the sentimentality shown by the cruel than the cruelty shown by the sentimental. Rudolph Hoess weeping at a performance of the Verdi Requiem given by Jews who were to be incinerated the next day is certainly a bizarre episode, but I am not at all sure that making an Adorno-type meal of it, taking it as darkly indicative of the moral ambiguity of art, and so forth, is necessary or desirable. It does show how far sentimentality can go, and how staggeringly superficial people can be in the presence of great art, but that is no news. The episode is merely to Hoess' discredit, and not at all to Verdi's, or anything else. Or if it is, that remains to be shown. Any discussion of the subject that I have read suggests more a thrilled sense of inscrutable connections than a desire to understand anything.

I return, finally, to the notion of paying for an emotion; when Wilde invoked it he was appealing to something very deeply rooted in our view of the world, namely that an inner life which is self-generating and insufficiently related to the world of action is corrupting and dangerous. It is a fascinating aspect of the work-ethic, all the more surprising coming from Wilde. But important as we feel it is that feeling shouldn't terminate in utterance and gesture, we don't usually enquire to what degree the correlation should be maintained, and it's worth mentioning music for the last time to make things clearer. William James' famous claim that whenever one is moved by a piece of music one should go out and *do* something, as a specific against irresponsible cultivation of the inner life, strikes most people as touchingly wrong-headed; if only because it isn't clear, after listening to most pieces of music, what kind of thing one should do which would in any serious sense be relevant to them. And on the rare occasions when music does convey particular injunctions, they tend to be of the 'Embrace the world!' variety, which may be hard to manage. Yet unless we are going to take an incredibly drastic view, and regard music as an illicit stimulant, those of us for whom it is among the two or three most important things in life need to be able to cope with the allegation that we are merely being sentimental in a rather grand and unusually impenetrable disguise. That threat doesn't seem to me to be difficult to ward off, though it deserves lengthier treatment than I can give it.

But the object to which we respond – the music itself – is something that, when it does offer emotional stimulus, may be judged as sentimental or not by a sense which we acquire and develop of the degree of organisation that is possible in the emotional life. The greatest instrumental music is that which offers us symbols or patterns of something like an ideal of intensity and balance of feeling; the most corrupting music is of the kind that urges an illusion of order, or offers the exciting and appalling temptations of disorder. And the most recent example of elephantiasis in music, leaving aside the anti-musical endeavours of Stockhausen in his bitterly regrettable latest phase, was of course that which followed in the wake of Richard Wagner: huge bombastic tone-poems, of which Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande* is one especially blatant case. It isn't surprising with an artist of such supreme quality that the sense of something desperately wrong, a spiritual sickness expressed as an artistic tumour, led to the production of a 'system' which, if not used with the intelligent plasticity of its originator and his most gifted disciples, resulted in boring rigour or the illusion that because the music could be analysed in a particular way, the feelings expressed in it were to be apprehended as fully formed and controlled, though in fact they were nothing of the kind. All sentimentality, one might say, aspires to the condition of music. But much music is the surest safeguard we have against the temptations of sentimentality.

But I am inclined to think that nothing can secure us against sentimentality to anything like the degree that we need. Most of our basic attitudes and feelings are sentimental, on the analyses I have adumbrated of the concept. For my answer to the question whether sentimentality is a historical phenomenon is that it is, to this extent: enormous numbers of our feelings and attitudes towards the most basic issues are based on some more-or-less traditional Christian outlook. But we are no longer living in a Christian society, in any serious sense, and most of us are not Christians. Our general view of the world is not at all like Christ's. And yet we depend for much of our emotional and spiritual succour on art and teaching that not only presupposes the truth of Christianity, but actively propagates it. Many an atheist thinks that the *B minor Mass* is one of the greatest works of art; that is what I feel. But I am not at all clear that I should. The brevity with which I have mentioned this matter means not that it is an after-thought, or tangential to the subject-matter of the paper, but that I am too disconcerted by it to know what to say.

At various points I have contrasted sentimentality with the fullness of emotional vitality which I take as the ideal of life, even if it involves, since these things cannot be calculated very finely, risks of overdrawing our emotional reserves. Against the pointless inner proliferation of feeling which is sentimentality we may place, as something at least as frightful, the state depicted by the *Wasteland*, as it is summarised by Collingwood, our greatest English aesthetician:

The poem depicts a world where the wholesome flowing water of emotion, which alone fertilizes all human activity, has dried up. Passions that once ran so strongly as to threaten the defeat of prudence, the destruction of human individuality, the wreck of men's little ships, are shrunk to nothing. No one gives; no one will risk himself by sympathizing; no one has anything to control. We are imprisoned in ourselves, becalmed in a windless selfishness. The only emotion left us is fear: fear of emotion itself, fear of death by drowning in it, fear in a handful of dust.<sup>11</sup>

Reckless indulgence of emotion, or terror of it, may equally be the consequence of living on the emotional inheritance of the Christian era. Of the two alternatives, abandonment to unearned feelings may well be the lesser evil; certainly Collingwood's chilling prose makes the other seem even worse. But sentimentality deserves to be taken more seriously than it takes itself.

11 *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 335.

## The concept of decadence

*José Luis Bermúdez*

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### I

The idea that moral considerations might usefully be employed in criticism is one that finds few supporters today. Many seem to feel that when morality and criticism meet there is only one possible outcome. The critic will indulge in a form of crude moralising, condemning some works according to criteria irrelevant either to their conception or their form, while praising others for a crude didacticism that just happens to be promoting what he wants to see promoted. There are, of course, plenty of examples of such deplorable tendencies. But they barely scratch the surface of the complex interdependencies between the realm of the moral and the realm of the aesthetic. This becomes clear when we reflect that certain concepts feature in both moral and aesthetic evaluation. The concepts of sentimentality, shallowness and decadence, for example, are apparently univocal when they feature in judgements of value, whether those judgements are applied to works of art, to forms of character or to actions. The fact that these concepts do seem to be univocal in this sense suggests that there may be significant parallels in the structure of the justification for moral and aesthetic judgements, and hence in the responses that such judgements strive to regiment. But, more basically, their univocality imposes a theoretical burden that anyone who tries to cordon off the domain of the aesthetic from the domain of the moral must discharge – the burden of showing either that serious use cannot be made of these concepts in discussing art, or that they are not really as univocal as they appear to be. Conversely, the aesthete who wishes to explore the interface between art and morality would be advised to pay serious attention to these concepts.

Michael Tanner's 1977 essay on sentimentality (reprinted in this volume) was, and remains, a pioneering study in this difficult area. He explored the idea that the distinguishing, and rightly censured, characteristics of 'the pointless inner proliferation of feeling which is sentimentality' (this volume, p. 109) include the sentimentalist's failure to allow feeling to feed into and control action; an extreme susceptibility to emotional stimuli coupled with a



passive flitting from one feeling to another; and a tendency to take a detached form of pleasure in feelings that ought, in virtue of their origins and intrinsic qualitative nature, to provoke at the very least a serious engagement with the state of affairs that brought them about. For Tanner what unites this cluster of pathological symptoms into a single and important syndrome is the antithesis that they jointly and severally pose to the ‘fullness of emotional vitality’ that he, in common with Leavis, Lawrence and (in some of his moods) Nietzsche, sees as ‘the ideal of life’. The opposition between the sentimental and the emotionally vital is, of course, an opposition that can be posed and explored in one’s responses either to art or to life, and Tanner’s essay shifts (without equivocating) between them.

The most significant antecedent within a broadly philosophical tradition of this style of exploration of the interface between aesthetic and moral evaluation lies in Nietzsche’s lifelong attempt to articulate and make sense of his own responses to the music and personality of Richard Wagner. Yet Nietzsche himself too often steers dangerously close to the sentimental and the decadent, immersed in the details of his own emotional involvement (not to mention a good deal of bombast) in a way that prevents him from stepping back and getting the same sort of distanced and detached perspective that he used to such good effect in his analysis of Judaeo-Christian morality in *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*.

There are two aspects of Nietzsche’s discussion of Wagner that are worth highlighting. The first is that Nietzsche is constantly holding Wagner and his music up to the standards of an ethico-aesthetic ideal, although he shifts of course from the view that Wagner more or less incarnates that ideal to the no less extreme (or more plausible) view that Wagner embodied everything that is antithetical to it. The second is that Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner is simultaneously a critique of the age that could produce not just a figure like Wagner but also a public (relatively) receptive to his works. This is perhaps not surprising, given Wagner’s own view of himself as a world-historical phenomenon, and it certainly runs through all Nietzsche’s engagement with Wagner, from the early, effusive and slightly embarrassing piece ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’ to the later, more considered and certainly more vituperative *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. The critique is not just historical, but also historicist. Nietzsche had a very nineteenth-century view of civilisations; their inner strengths and their tensions; their rise and subsequent inevitable decline and fall. And this, of course, is one of the reasons why it is impossible to separate out what he has to say about morality from what he has to say about art. The morality of an individual cannot be viewed independently of the vitality and *mores* of his culture which, in turn, find themselves reflected in that culture’s art. There are no dividing lines to be drawn.

The background assumptions that made these two themes so important for Nietzsche are unlikely to find much support today. We are now no longer

supposed to believe in overarching world-historical narratives, let alone jeremiads of the sort that Nietzsche indulged in; and the idea that one might measure art against the yardstick of an ethico-aesthetic ideal will strike even those who accept that one work of art might be better than another as bordering on the risible. This poses a challenge for anyone who still thinks that the nexus of issues arising in the case of Nietzsche's various explorations of the fluidity of the boundaries between art and morality are centrally important. Can these issues be addressed without committing oneself to unwelcome historicist baggage and to an untenably prescriptive conception of the 'good life'?

The issue is particularly pressing for someone who thinks, along the lines I suggested at the beginning of this paper, that it would be profitable to explore these issues by analysing some of the key concepts that can be deployed in both ethical and aesthetic evaluation. The applicability of several of these concepts seems to presuppose one or other (or indeed both) the background assumptions that it would seem we have to forswear. Tanner's analysis makes the point for the concept of sentimentality. It seems even clearer for the concept of decadence. This concept seems to have two dimensions, and correspondingly two domains of applicability. It can be applied to individuals (whether persons or works of art) and thereby connotes a state of moral decay that it is most natural to view as a falling away from a state of moral excellence. It is not clear how we can make sense of this dimension of the concept of decadence without the counterpoint of an ethico-aesthetic ideal. The second dimension of the concept seems pretty historicist. It is hard to see how to understand the decadence of a culture or artistic movement without contrasting it with a golden period of flourishing and excellence – as Nietzsche so memorably did in *The Birth of Tragedy* in his unfavourable comparison of the tragedies of Euripides with those of Aeschylus, and his concomitant comparison of the two societies within which they were embedded.

What I will be exploring in this chapter is whether we need, and indeed whether there is any chance of obtaining, what might be termed a formal concept of decadence – that is to say, a concept of decadence that can be deployed in thinking about the moral dimension of art and yet that brings with it a minimum of prescription, whether overtly historical and tacitly moralistic or overtly moralistic and tacitly historical. We need to begin, though, by reviewing the raw materials we have at our disposal to obtain an overview of the principal ways in which the concept has been deployed within criticism. In particular I would like to highlight two central roles that the concept of decadence has been called upon to play. The first is its role as a more or less descriptive term to characterise a particular period in literary history. The second is its role as a descriptive-evaluative term in particular approaches to history (most prominently cultural history or the history of particular art forms, but also, as we shall see, in such surprising areas as the history of philosophy). There are, of course, vital overlaps and family resemblances

between these different deployments of the concept and they will be explored further below, but it is useful to begin by trying to separate out the different strands.

## II

In its narrowest sense ‘decadence’ has been used as a label for two fairly circumscribed movements in literary history – one of the more important of the strands of experimentation taking place in France during the 1880s and in England during the 1890s.<sup>1</sup> Although the origins of the Decadent movement are no doubt to be found in France, in certain elements of the poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, as well as in Huysman’s famous novel *À Rebours*, the major French authors usually cited as Decadents are too complex and wide-ranging (with the probable exception of Huysmans) to be subsumed individually, let alone collectively, under a single label.<sup>2</sup> The first mention of ‘Les Décadents’ as a name for an artistic movement was in 1884, or thereabouts, and a journal entitled *La Décadence* appeared in 1886. But the journal and associated movement were peopled largely by minor figures. Apart from a few poems by Verlaine and even fewer by Mallarmé, contributors were forgotten names like Albert Aurier, Paul Vorsin and Jean Ajalbert. Verlaine’s association with the writers who proclaimed themselves Decadents was ambivalent at best.<sup>3</sup> Mallarmé had his own idiosyncratic agenda to pursue, having published ‘L’après-midi d’un faune’ in 1876 and been the high priest of the Symbolist movement ever since. Baudelaire, of course, had died long before (in 1867).

The canonical Decadents in the English-speaking world were writers of considerably greater homogeneity, inspired by a certain impression of what was going on over the Channel.<sup>4</sup> Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson and Lionel

- 1 R. K. R. Thornton, ‘“Decadence” in later nineteenth century England’, in I. Fletcher ed., *Decadence and the 1890s* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979) is a useful survey of the period, as (at considerably greater length) is K. Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992). I will use capitals when referring to the Decadent movement.
- 2 The idea of decadence had a complicated history in nineteenth-century France. The self-proclaimed Décadents were merely the tip of the iceberg. The theme of decadence was prominent, for example, in the essay ‘La vie et l’oeuvre de Charles Baudelaire’ which Théophile Gautier wrote for the publication of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*, and nineteenth-century French literature was full of comparisons between Paris and decadent Rome. Details will be found in K. W. Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth Century France* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).
- 3 See Philip Stephan’s *Verlaine and the Idea of Decadence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).
- 4 The chapter on Arthur Symons in Ruth Temple’s *The Critic’s Alchemy: A Study of the Introduction of French Symbolism into England* (New York: Twayne, 1953) is an excellent account of a leading Decadent’s assimilation through translation and criticism of his French contemporaries and immediate predecessors.

Johnson were central figures, as indeed was Oscar Wilde in some of his moods – with Aubrey Beardsley the leading light in the visual arts.<sup>5</sup> The Decadent movement was remarkably self-conscious and its leading lights devoted a considerable amount of energy to spelling out just what they were up to. Key essays are Arthur Symons's essay 'The decadent movement in art and literature' in *Harpers Monthly Magazine* (November 1893) and Lionel Johnson's slightly earlier 'A note upon the practice and theory of verse at the present time obtaining in France' in a curiously-named periodical, *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* (April 1891).<sup>6</sup>

An interesting feature of the discussion about the purpose and nature of the Decadent movement is that participants were divided between several different conceptions of decadence, and consequently of the eponymous movement. On the narrowest conception, decadence is seen as primarily a matter of style. There certainly was a stylistic element to decadence. A common theme running through both French and English Decadents was praise for the style of the later Latin poets and early Christian fathers, as opposed to the classical Latin of Virgil and Horace. The description of Des Esseintes's library in Chapter 3 of *A Rebours* is an interesting example. A rather more irritating manifestation is Ernest Dowson's habit of giving very short poems very long Latin titles – entitling an eight-line poem 'Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam', for example. The Decadents also cultivated somewhat archaic forms such as the villanelle (as in Dowson's 'Villanelle of the poet's road').

Arthur Symons, who by this time had turned away from the Decadent movement and revised many of the ideas in his earlier essay, wrote the following retrospective passage in *The Symbolist Movement in Art and Literature* (1899):

Meanwhile, something which is vaguely called Decadence had come into being. That name, rarely used with any precise meaning, was usually either hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance. It pleased some

- 5 R. K. R. Thornton and Marion Thain's *Poetry of the 1890s* (London: Penguin, 1997) is a thematically organised anthology of the poetry of the period in which the Decadent movement was one of the central strands.
- 6 From the viewpoint of cultural history an interesting feature of the Decadent movement is the impetus it gave to the little magazine. *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* was short-lived, but one of the most important of the magazines associated with the movement. Set up in 1884 by two architects, Arthur Macmurdo and Herbert Home (best-known as the rediscoverer of Botticelli), and committed throughout its life to woodblock, calligraphy and polemics against impressionism, it published work by members of the Decadent movement from 1886, when Lionel Johnson became associated with it, to 1893, when a new series was launched, running only to three issues. I. Fletcher's 'Decadence and the little magazines', in Fletcher ed., op cit., outlines the history of the *Hobby Horse* and the other little magazines (most famously the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*) associated with the movement. See also Chapter 10 of Beckson, op. cit.

young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as unsatisfied vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé, for instance, which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence.

(pp. 6–7)

Arthur Symons no doubt had his reasons for adopting this minimalist reevaluation of his former self (and it is certainly interesting to compare the opening pages of the book with the famous article written a few years earlier, in which we find Symbolism classified as a sub-species of Decadence). The tone of the later piece is, if not straightforwardly dismissive, then at least trying to downplay the significance of Decadence as an artistic movement. It is striking to compare Symons's conception of the distinctively decadent style (a vision of tortured syntax, preciousness and linguistic experimentation for its own sake) with the passage by Paul Bourget describing the characteristic style of Decadence quoted by Havelock Ellis in his essay 'A note on Paul Bourget' (written for the *Pioneer*):

A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word.<sup>7</sup>

There are important differences between Ellis's and Symons's respective conceptions of the decadent style. Ellis sees it primarily in structural terms, as consisting primarily in the loss of an organic unity, in a passion for the particular – whereas Symons understands it more formally, at the level of syntax and grammar.

But the contrast runs deeper – and takes us on to the second of the ways of understanding the Decadent movement that emerged during the 1890s. Ellis draws an explicit, and very Hegelian, parallel between the organic unity of the work of art, lost in the decadent obsession with the particular, and the organic unity of society, lost in the decadent obsession of the individual with himself. Earlier on in the paragraph we have already looked at, Ellis had written:

A society should be like an organism. Like an organism, in fact, it may be resolved into a federation of smaller organisms, which may themselves

7 See Thornton, *op. cit.*, pp. 19–20. Paul Bourget was one of the leading and most influential theoreticians of decadence in France. His *Nouveaux essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Lemerre, 1886) included a famous essay on the Goncourt brothers as well as one on Baudelaire.

be resolved into a federation of cells. The individual is the social cell. In order that the organism should perform its functions with energy it is necessary that the organisms composing it should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy; and in order that these lesser organisms should perform their functions with energy it is necessary that the cells comprising them should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy. If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the lesser organisms will likewise cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy and the anarchy which is established constitutes the *decadence* of the whole. The social organism does not escape this law and enters into decadence as soon as the individual life becomes exaggerated beneath the influence of acquired well-being and of heredity.

This idea of the Decadent movement as mirroring, at the level of style and form, a more general social and cultural atomism is the second of the conceptions of decadence that emerged during the 1890s.

The third identifiable conception of decadence is related to this idea of social and cultural atomism. Many contemporaries were quick to find an erotic shock-value in the works of several of the leading figures of the Decadent movement, and many of the Decadents pursued a cult of artificial eroticism and what they fondly imagined was sexual perversion. Oscar Wilde is probably the easiest to fit into this mould. The not-so-latent homoeroticism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the rather bizarre desires, bordering on necrophilia, of Salome in the eponymous one-act play caused a certain amount of moral outrage. Just after Wilde's trial for gross indecency in May 1895, the publication of Arthur Symons's *London Nights* met with a torrent of abuse. Reviewers took considerable exception to the alleged degeneracy of the various poems about prostitutes. It is hard to see what all the fuss was about. 'Stella Maris', a poem that reviewers particularly delighted in excoriating, contains nothing more louche than the lines:

I feel the perfume of your hair,  
 I feel your breast that heaves and dips,  
 Desiring my desirous lips,  
 And that ineffable delight  
 When souls turn bodies, and unite  
 In the intolerable, the whole  
 Rapture of the embodied soul.<sup>8</sup>

8 The complete poem, which has a certain charm, can be found in Thornton and Thain, op. cit. In fact, the critical response was also pretty restrained. An anonymous reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* commented: 'Every woman he pays to meet him, he tells us, is desirous to kiss his lips; our boots too are desirous, but of another part of him, for quite another purpose' (quoted in Beckson, op. cit., p. 68).

And, hard though it is today to imagine reacting to the illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley with anything more violent than mild boredom, Beardsley's illustrations to the English translation of Wilde's *Salome* so scandalised his publisher that he had to redraw three of them. Beardsley's penchant for drawing hermaphrodite figures caused particular offence.

As far as the public at large was concerned, this transgressive conception of decadence was perhaps the dominant one. But there was a fourth, and certainly more interesting, conception of decadence. This is the idea of a Decadent sensibility. Such an idea is very clearly present in Arthur Symons's essay 'The decadent movement in literature' where he famously wrote that decadence '[. . .] has all the qualities we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity'.<sup>9</sup> The Decadent sensibility is devoted to the particular, to the quest for a purity of experience and sensation. As Symons put it later in the same essay: 'To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul; that is the ideal of decadence.' Yet, for Symons, the Decadent sensibility does not exist in a vacuum. It is a child of its time. The Decadent sensibility is

typical of a civilisation grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct. It reflects all the moods, all the manners of a sophisticated society; its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature; simplicity, sanity, proportion – the classic qualities – how much do we possess them in our life, our surroundings, that we should look to find them in our literature – so evidently the literature of a decadence.

So we see two different strands of the self-understanding of the Decadent movement coming together. The Decadent sensibility reflects the decadent age. It is the only appropriate response to the *fin de siècle*.

We can, then, distinguish four separate strands in the literary-historical use of 'decadence' as a label for a movement. The Decadent movement can be characterised on four different levels. The first level is purely stylistic. Yet the Decadent style (and this is the second level) can be seen as a self-conscious reflection of a perceived breakdown in social and cultural unity. The third level picks out the way in which the Decadents sought to hasten this breakdown, with many of the self-proclaimed Decadents pursuing a vision of sexual transgression. These three levels can all be seen to culminate in the

<sup>9</sup> The essay was originally published in *Harpers Monthly Magazine* (November 1893). It is reprinted in Symons's *Dramatis Personae* and in K. Beckson's anthology *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s* (New York: Vintage, 1966), as well as in R. V. Holdsworth ed., *Arthur Symons: Poetry and Prose* (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1974).

fourth, in the idea of a decadent sensibility, passionate for details, obsessed with the artificial and perpetually seeking to pin down the nuance of a moment or the contours of a gesture.

### III

Let us move on, then, to the second of the roles that the concept of decadence has been called upon to play. 'Decadence' has been widely used as a descriptive-evaluative term in particular approaches to history. The historical conception of decadence covers many different ways of looking at history, and has been applied to many different stages of many different things, but it is based on a single broad assumption about the progress of history – namely, that the progress of history involves periods of growth and flourishing followed by periods of decay and exhaustion. This basic assumption can be taken as narrowly or as broadly as one pleases, depending on what one takes as one's basic historical unit. For cultural critics with the grandiosity of Oswald Spengler it is Destiny and the Culture-Souls that flourish and decay. Those with slightly more circumscribed visions, such as Gibbon or Joseph Needham, will write of the rise and fall of civilizations. But the same basic idea can be applied just as easily to the development of blue-and-white porcelain or indeed to just about anything else that has a traceable history that lends itself to the detection of troughs and peaks.

There are two principal ways in which this broadly historical conception of decadence has been used within criticism. I will call them the external and the internal. An external deployment of the concept of decadence is really an exercise in evaluative contextualisation. A work is studied by being placed within a historical context that is identified as decadent. That is to say, the work is explored through the way in which it reflects its period, while the period is itself viewed prismatically through a narrative of decline and decay. It is natural to think of this manner of evaluating works of art as primarily negative, but that would be a mistake. Many critics who have adopted an external conception of decadence have employed the contextualisation it permits as a counterpoint to bring out the originality and distinctiveness of their subject matter. A passage in Gautier's perceptive essay on Baudelaire is a case in point. We find there an early and rather well expressed formulation of the now familiar idea that the sensibility of a declining age calls for the expansion and refinement of its poetic vocabulary:

The poet of the *Fleurs du mal* loved what is improperly called the style of decadence, and which is nothing else but art arrived at that point of extreme maturity yielded by the slanting suns of aged civilisations: an ingenious, complicated style, full of shades and of research, constantly pushing back the boundaries of speech, borrowing from all the technical vocabularies, taking colour from all palettes and notes from all



key-boards, struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is vague and most elusive in the outlines of form, listening to translate the subtle confidences of neurosis, the dying confessions of passion grown depraved, and the strange hallucinations of the obsession which is turning to madness. The style of decadence is the ultimate utterance of the Word, summoned to final expression and driven to its last hiding-place. One may recall in this connection the language of the later Roman Empire, already marbled with the greenness of decomposition and, so to speak, gamy, and the complicated requirements of the Byzantine school, the last forms of Greek art falling into deliquescence. Such indeed is the necessary and inevitable idiom of peoples and civilisations in which factitious life has replaced natural life, and developed unknown wants in men. Nor is it an easy thing, this style disdained by pedants, for it expresses new ideas using new forms and words that have not yet been heard. Unlike the classic style it admits shadow, and in that shadow there move confusedly the larva of superstition, the weary ghosts of insomnia, the terrors of the night, the remorse that quivers and reappears at the slightest noise, the monstrous dreams that only impotence cuts short, the dark phantasies that would astound the day, and everything shadowy, diffuse and vaguely horrible that the soul keeps hidden in its darkest and furthest recess. One would be right to think that the fourteen hundred words of the Racinian vocabulary are quite insufficient for an author who has set himself the arduous task of rendering modern ideas and things in their infinite complexity and multiple coloration.<sup>10</sup>

As this evocative passage clearly indicates, to say that a style mirrors a declining age is not to identify a declining style. The contextualisation to an age of decadence can help bring out precisely why and how Baudelaire was so innovative in style and imagery.

Since, as we began by remarking, the taste for world-historical narratives of cultural decline and fall is considerably less widespread than it was in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, it is unlikely that an external conception of decadence will find many takers. But the concept of decadence can also be applied in an internal sense. And here it seems of potentially wider appeal. Instead of being placed within a cultural context, a work of art might count as decadent in terms of the evolution of the relevant art form, genre or period – depending on one's unit of evaluation. Many of those who are deeply suspicious of the notion of decadence as applied to civilisations or cultures would have some sympathy for its application in a more circumscribed field.

10 Théophile Gautier, 'La vie et l'oeuvre de Baudelaire' in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1956), pp. 20–1. Most of the translation is borrowed from Havelock Ellis's translation in his essay on Huysmans in *Affirmations* (London: Walter Scott, 1898). The remainder is my own.

All such internal applications of the concept of decadence will employ a conception of the classic that yields the standard against which the decadent is evaluated. These standards of course change, and from a cultural historical point of view it is extremely interesting to note how what is part of the decadent for one critic or generation can swiftly be absorbed into the classic for those who come after. Désiré Nisard was one of the first critics in modern times to use the notion of decadence as a critical tool. The second volume of his *Études de mœurs et de critiques sur les poètes latins de la décadence*, taken up with a single study entitled 'Lucaïn et la décadence' is devoted to a theoretical analysis of the decadent style in ancient Rome. His judgement on imperial Rome has stood the test of time. The epic poetry of Lucan, Persius and Statius will still strike the majority of readers as decadent in comparison with the poets of the Golden Age. But what is interesting is the final chapter in which he compares the poets of ancient Rome with his contemporaries. He does not mention any by name but one assumes, from what he says and when he was saying it, that he had in mind such figures as Lamartine, Vigny and Hugo, whom we would not now tend to think of as standing in the same relation to their own poetic tradition as the three Romans just mentioned stood to theirs.<sup>11</sup>

The most straightforward application of an internal conception of decadence is straightforwardly negative. The classical ideal is held up as a stick with which to beat the unfortunate (alleged) decadent, as illustrated most magisterially in Pliny's remark on Greek art after Lycippus: 'Deinde cessavit ars.'<sup>12</sup> This sort of polemic is largely uninteresting, although often entertaining.

But there are of course also ways in which an internal conception of decadence can be indispensable for understanding and appreciation. The force of a work might only be comprehensible once we see it, if not as a commentary on, then at least as juxtaposed with, the forms of its classical predecessors. We see this basic idea worked out in two very different ways by two of the main approaches this century to the mannerist art of the sixteenth century. The first historians of art to rehabilitate the mannerist painters and sculptors after centuries of neglect stressed the necessity in appreciating the paintings of Pontormo, Vasari, Rosso Fiorentino and their contemporaries of seeing just how their paintings contain underlying tensions, anxieties and distortions that emerge only when we put them side by side with the works of the High Renaissance masters. This was the

11 The comparisons Nisard draws are in fact rather to the point, which makes one wonder whether a reevaluation is not due for either our view of the Latin poets of the Silver Age or our view of the French romantics. The recent anthology *Roman Poets of the Early Empire* (London: Penguin, 1991), edited by A. J. Boyle and A. P. Sullivan, makes a powerful case for the former (without any reference to Nisard).

12 Translation: and then art ceased. Quoted in J. Boardman, *Greek Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985).

conception of mannerism as anti-classicism associated primarily with Walter Friedlaender.<sup>13</sup> We can get a flavour of this approach to mannerism from a passage in F. David Martin's interesting essay 'Enjoying decadence' where he discusses the *Deposition* Pontormo painted in a side chapel to the right hand side of the entrance of the Church of Santa Felicità in Florence:

Juxtaposed with the vivid concreteness of Pontormo's form is the imaginative contrast of the generic structures of the High Renaissance forms, and perhaps also the specific structures, such as those of the early Michelangelo. The *Deposition* is nervous and unreal, colours are off-key, space is crowded and irrational, figures lack mass, faces are masks, movement is strained, proportions are strange, but to be fully aware of these peculiarities necessitates contrasting them imaginatively, to a large extent automatically, in the trained observer, with the classic forms, for otherwise they would not be felt as either peculiar or meaningful.<sup>14</sup>

There is a certain plausibility in Martin's analysis of this particular work by Pontormo, although as a general account of mannerism the approach is deeply flawed – where is the strain and anxiety in the works of a Cellini or a Parmigianino?<sup>15</sup> More plausible, to my mind at least, is the style of criticism emerging out of the more traditional approach to mannerism that we find so eloquently expressed by Bernard Berenson in *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, an approach that finds the roots of mannerism in the *maniera* that gave it its name. Berenson, who had a relentlessly teleological conception of the evolution of the visual arts in the Renaissance and was convinced that after Michelangelo the only way on was down, found himself disturbed by his admiration for some of the mannerist painters. He posed the question: 'what is the aesthetic value of the earliest phases of art's decline?'<sup>16</sup> The answer he came up with is a perceptive illustration of how an internal conception of decadence can shed light on works that might otherwise be inscrutable. He starts with what he sees as the perfection of the classic:

Michelangelo's own purpose, to take him as an instance, had been to give the figure its utmost realization as form, and so to articulate it that it

13 See his *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

14 F. David Martin, 'On enjoying decadence', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, 1959, 441–6.

15 The mannerism as anti-classicism approach has been widely criticised. See, for example, John Shearman, *Mannerism* (London: Penguin, 1967) and Craig Hugh Smith, *Mannerism and Maniera* (Vienna: ISRA, 1992). Elizabeth Cropper's introduction to the second of these two works gives a fascinating overview of how conceptions of mannerism have changed during the course of the twentieth century.

16 B. Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 3 vols, vol. 1, p. 300. I was led to this book by the article cited in note 14.

would be capable of the requisite freedom of action. This absorbed all, or nearly all, the energies even of this historical giant. With the sweat of his brow he attained this end, and was jealous of his preparatory studies lest it should get abroad by what hard and repeated blows of Vulcan's hammer Minerva sprang out of his head fully armed. But his followers found a seemingly easy task. Form and movement had apparently been conquered and overcome forever.

Once form had been perfected the next step was its emancipation as style (*maniera*) and play.

This or that shape, this or that attitude which Michelangelo created, not at all for its own sake, but as a by-product of his endeavour to solve some haunting product – let us say the problem of how to give a certain figure its utmost action with the least change of place – these shapes and actions appealed to his followers rather as revelations of a new beauty than as solutions of noble problems. and this new beauty they preferred to see isolated, and of course exaggerated, as everything is when isolated from its native concomitants. It needed only this isolation and consequent exaggeration of certain of the master's shapes and attitudes and their recombination with no purpose dictated by the essential and eternal requirements of the figure, to change the grandeur and dignity of Michelangelo into the decorativeness, the elegance and the distinctions of Cellini and Pontormo.<sup>17</sup>

Berenson did not explicitly say, but he no doubt believed, that the direction of appreciation could go both ways. Just as we can appreciate mannerist decadence as a reification of the formal achievements of the classic, so too can we use the mannerist exaggeration as a filter through which to re-examine the technical solutions of the High Renaissance masters.

The points made by both Berenson and Martin are genuine insights – and nor is it obvious that they are as incompatible as Martin, for example, seems to think they are. But it is hard to see how one might extract from them broader theses that could serve as the basis for a concept of decadence to be applied beyond the sphere of sixteenth-century mannerism. Any such proposal would seem to be caught between the two horns of a dilemma. On the one hand there is the danger that the concept of decadence will become too inclusive. We do not want the concept of decadence to be a concept that subsumes every artist whose work is to an important extent defined against the legacy of their predecessors. So we need to find some way of demarcating just which instances of the dialectic between tradition and the individual talent are to count as decadent. But this brings us to the other horn of the dilemma.

17 Both this passage and the preceding from Berenson, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

Taking mannerism as a model seems to force us towards an excessively teleological conception of that dialectic, counting as decadent only those artists for whom the legacy and the problem is precisely the formal perfection of their immediate predecessors. But this seems hopeless, possessing as we do, in a way that Vasari, for example, did not (although Berenson perhaps ought to have had), a broader conception of the different problems that art forms were dealing with at different stages in their development. Why should any particular one of these problems count as the problem whose solution would be the *ne plus ultra* for that art form? There seems little hope for genuine illumination down that road.

But what about the possibility, not of juxtaposing the decadent artist with the artist of an often mythical golden age, but rather of seeing how the decadent style or decadent themes have emerged from an internal crisis in the classic style. Decadence often seems to appear when the rules start to break down. The distinctiveness and particularity of a artist can often only be appreciated when we see their work, not as a continuation of what went before, but as a response to a perceived crisis in the evolution of an art form – and these often include the artists that tend to be classified as decadent.

The history of orchestral music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides a particularly clear illustration, both of how this idea might be applied – and also of why it seems no more plausible as the foundation for a more general critical concept of decadence than our earlier examples. It is certainly true that we cannot understand either Brahms's (alleged) neoclassicism or Mahler's semi-ironic mixture of *schmalz*, bombast and profundity except against the background of the crisis of tonality precipitated by Wagner.<sup>18</sup> And the same is true of the works of Szymanowski and Alkan – the rarefied tonalities and pseudo-orientalism of the former and the highly cerebral and cold piano music of the latter. But noting that simple fact does not take us very far forward. The second pair qualifies as decadent in a way that the first pair just doesn't. But why not? The historical dimension of the internal conception of decadence is of no help to us in trying to spell out why this is so, for all four composers were, roughly speaking, in the same historical boat. The best we can do in this general area is a distinction between those composers who responded to the crisis of tonality by departing from the classical tradition (such as the composers of the Second Viennese School and, less abruptly, Stravinsky) and those composers who tried to respond using the resources of the classical tradition. Such a distinction gives us nothing more fine-grained than the general category of the late Romantics, whereas what we want is a tool that will allow us to make distinctions within that general category.

18 I describe Brahms as an alleged neoclassicist in deference to Arnold Schoenberg's essay 'Brahms the progressive' in his *Style and Idea* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

## IV

A suitably explicated concept of decadence, if it is to be useful as a tool for aesthetic criticism, must be what Bernard Williams has termed a ‘thick’ evaluative concept. That is to say, it must both accurately describe a significant proportion of the works of art that are generally described as decadent and be a concept with a certain evaluative bite. This second requirement is difficult to spell out clearly, but nonetheless holds the key to understanding the concept. It is not at all the case that decadent works of art are always to be censured. Quite the contrary – as emerged very clearly in the previous section. On the other hand, describing a work as decadent is far more than the sort of relatively straightforward categorisation involved in describing a piece of music as neoclassical. A decadent work of art is in some sense flawed – although not necessarily in a way that prevents it from being great at the same time. Indeed, when a decadent work does incontestably achieve greatness, its greatness can arise precisely from those features that render it flawed. Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a case in point.

The mention of Proust might make one wonder whether the last of the descriptive features of decadence that emerged in the discussion of the 1890s might not hold the key here. One of the themes running through the Decadent movement was the idea of the decadent sensibility, immersed in the ephemeral details of the passing moment and pursuing the cult of heightened and artificial sensations. If the flaws of decadence are associated with the cultivation of the decadent sensibility, then this would give us not only a bridge between the descriptive and evaluative components of the concept of decadence, but also a clear explanation of the moral dimension of decadence. The decadent sensibility is, one suspects, morally reprehensible – although it is far from easy to specify why.

Fortunately, there is no need to go into the decadent sensibility in much detail, since it is far too limited in scope to serve our purposes. The problem is that it does not seem applicable to more than a relatively small proportion of the works that one would like to describe as decadent – those that seek actively to portray either the decadent sensibility or the world as refracted through the decadent sensibility. *À la recherche* may well fall into both of these groups, but it will have for company only a small minority of decadent works of art. The fact that a work was produced by a decadent sensibility seems neither here nor there. It might well be the case, although I have no firm evidence, that a significant proportion of decadent works of art happened to have been produced by individuals who cultivated the decadent sensibility. But this hardly explains why the works themselves should be classed as decadent. Let us suppose, as many people believe, that Wagner’s mature music dramas should be classified as decadent. There are various ways in which this claim might be defended (although to my mind such defences will almost certainly be unsuccessful). But it would be hard to take seriously

the suggestion that *Parsifal* is decadent *because* its composer liked to work on it in rooms draped in fine fabrics and liberally doused with expensive perfumes.<sup>19</sup> Nor conversely would one argue against the proposition that Mallarmé's poetry is decadent by drawing attention to his career as a school-teacher and the quiet life he led with his wife in a bourgeois corner of Paris. We are looking for a critical tool that we can use to discriminate between works, not to pass judgement on the biographies of their producers.

Turning, then, to the works themselves, it seems almost platitudinous that decadence involves some sort of imbalance. If pressed most people would, I suppose, characterise the imbalance either as one of form over content or in terms of an obsession with style and the surface features of a work. The two are not of course equivalent, as can easily be seen when one reflects that it doesn't make sense to talk about the balance or imbalance of form and content with respect to most pieces of music, although it does make perfectly good sense to talk about their stylistic features. The concept of form is properly applied to the structural or organisational features of a work, whereas the notion of style is both vaguer and broader, comprising both elements of genre and inherited vocabulary as well as the more individual nuances of the artistic voice. Yet neither of these proposed imbalances can really help us to demarcate the realm of the decadent. For one thing, if decadence were simply a matter of an imbalance in favour of style or form, then it is hard to see how there would be any moral dimension to decadence. It would be unwise to place too much stress on this, however, due to the obvious risk of begging the question.

More significantly, the suggested imbalances seem neither necessary nor sufficient for decadence in artworks. To see how they fail to be necessary one need only consider some of the more obscure and less frequently read novels that appear early on in Zola's Rougon-Macquart cycle. Such volumes as *La Faute de L'Abbé Mouret* and *Le Ventre de Paris* have an undeniable air of decadence about them, and yet can hardly be described as preoccupied with form or style. The same can be said of some of the more leaden novels of Herman Hesse. In music an obvious example is Richard Strauss. The decadence of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* has little to do with form or style, and everything to do with content (this being one of those pieces of music where talk of content forces itself upon one). Moreover, there are plenty of works of art exemplifying one or other (and indeed both) of the proposed imbalances that do not seem to count as decadent. Many of the more cerebral types of organ music, such as, say, Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, might plausibly be described as excessively preoccupied with issues of form and

19 Insight into Wagner's composing habits can be gleaned from his letters to Judith Gautier while composing *Parsifal*. See letters 453 and 458 in Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington eds, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London: Dent, 1987).

technique, but hardly qualify as decadent. Nor is a preoccupation with style a guarantee of decadence. Watteau is no decadent.

Yet, although neither of these conceptions of decadence seems viable, they do seem to be at least in the right general area. To make further progress we need a different way of thinking about the three-way division between content, form and style. It is helpful, I think, to introduce the notion of *expressive form*. A work's expressive form is the contribution its formal features make to its expressive capacity. The concept of expression is being used here in a broader sense than one finds in, say, Collingwood. No commitment is implied to the basic idea that the essential function of art is the expression of emotion. Ideas can be expressed no less than emotions and the concept of expression (as it is usefully employed in aesthetics) has family resemblances with concepts of communication, articulation and elucidation.

The notion of expressive form is, of course, deeply normative, and like many normative concepts it is best appreciated in the breach rather than the observance. A work is deficient from the point of view of expressive form when its formal features are not in harmony with its expressive aims. This can of course work in both directions. A work's expressive aims can outstrip its formal resources. This is one of the ways in which a work can be bombastic, for example – or maudlin or sentimental. Conversely, a work can display formal features that are doing no work in realising its expressive aims. Most simply this can occur where there are no expressive aims to speak of, as is the case with music written purely to display the virtuosity of the performer, or poetry written to illustrate an arcane metrical scheme. But most frequently it occurs when too much formal machinery is brought to bear on an expressive task that cannot bear the weight.

It seems clear that the notion of expressive form is a useful critical tool – and one, of course, that is often used, although perhaps not quite under that name. One might wonder whether any progress has been made over the earlier proposals that decadence is to be construed in terms of an imbalance in favour of formal and/or stylistic features, particularly since any such imbalance is going to count anyway as a failing in expressive form. The real advantage of the notion of expressive form is clearly not that it can immediately give us an extensionally correct characterisation of decadence. The point rather is that it can be refined in a way that will reopen the link between aesthetic criticism and morality, eventually allowing us to home in on the concept of decadence. Our attempts to give an account of decadence have so far foundered on one or another horn of a dilemma. If we try to characterise decadence in terms of what might loosely be called biographical features of the artist, as when one approaches decadent works of art through the idea that there is a distinctively decadent sensibility, then we derive a conception of decadence that has a clear moral dimension. But the price we pay is losing touch with what makes the work of art itself decadent. If, on the other hand, we stress the imbalance of form over content or the preponderance of the



style then we focus attention back on the work itself – but at the cost of losing the moral dimension.

The notion of expressive form, however, offers a way of avoiding the impasse – in virtue of the norms that underpin the notion. This emerges when one reflects that an important class of breakdowns at the level of expressive form can be characterised using an essentially moral vocabulary, as when one says that a work of art essentially reflects a lack of integrity and self-discipline to capture the mismatch between its formal structure and its expressive pretensions. The issue is not so much the integrity or self-discipline of the artist himself. As we discussed earlier, it matters little whether artists prefer to drink themselves into oblivion or to go for character-building walks in the rain. There seems little correlation between the integrity/self-discipline of the artist and the integrity/self-discipline of the work. This is not to deprive the notions of self-discipline and integrity we are dealing with of a moral dimension. To describe a work of art as lacking in integrity is not to deliver a moral judgement on the artist – but it is a moral judgement nonetheless. The concept of integrity is being extended outside its normal domain of application, but it is being employed with its usual sense. There are differences, of course, between applying predicates like ‘honest’ or ‘sincere’ or ‘displaying integrity’ to works of art and applying them to people, but these differences do not add up to a difference in sense. The differences seem much closer to those between using such predicates to describe people’s characters and using them to describe their actions. A work of art is honest more in the way that an action is honest than in the way that a person is honest. (I am assuming, of course, that there is more to a person’s being honest than their being disposed to perform honest actions, and more to an action’s being honest than its having been performed by an honest person. This clearly requires more discussion, but one might make a start on motivating it by noting that an individual’s honesty is tied up with other facets of their character in a way that the honesty of any one of their actions doesn’t seem to be.)

What this points to, I think, is the significance of what might be termed the moral psychology of art. By this I mean the study of the way in which moral vocabulary can be applied in criticism – but to the work of art itself rather than to the artist or to the ‘moral’ or ‘message’, if any, which it offers. There is a critical vocabulary here that needs to be brought into the open and elucidated. The notion of expressive form will, I am sure, play a central role in this elucidation because the precise target for a large proportion of the moral vocabulary will be the relation between a work’s expressive aims and its formal structure.

Returning to the main thread, the suggestion is that the notion of decadence in aesthetic criticism should be understood in terms of breakdowns at the level of expressive form best described in the quasi-literal moral way that we have been considering. This still does not narrow the field down far enough,

however. We have still to identify the type of breakdowns in expressive form that are peculiarly decadent – and the distinctive moral vocabulary that should be used to characterise them. The thread to follow here is the idea that decadence is basically a form of excessive individualism. We spoke earlier of how a common source of failure at the level of expressive form is lack of self-discipline, and many would think that decadence is best characterised in these terms. But there are all sorts of ways in which a work can lack self-discipline without being decadent. Decadence comes with a distinctive type of lack of self-discipline – the lack of self-discipline that stems from self-indulgence and self-absorption. The decadent work of art is autistic. It does not look beyond itself. In terms of expressive form, the problem is often that it is hard to work back from the work to identify its expressive aims. This is the grain of truth in the frequently discussed idea that decadence is somehow tied up with the idea of art for art's sake.

Taken at face value the idea of art for art's sake is not really very useful. The mere fact that a work of art is produced by an artist who believes that art has no instrumental purpose does not make the work decadent. Nor with every decadent work can one work back to an artist's ideological commitment to art for art's sake. Some of Zola's novels again provide a useful example. But a constant feature of decadent works of art is that the project of communication seems, if not to have been abandoned, then at least to have been sidelined. The decadent work of art is designed for an audience, but it is not intended to engage, or to engage with, its audience. There is of course a sense in which this can be described as the work of art becoming an end in itself – but that description doesn't really give any indication of why this should be considered a defect.

It is important that the notion of engagement should not be taken here in too narrow a sense – particularly since criticising a decadent work of art for failing to engage is tantamount to making a degree of engagement a normative constraint upon works of art. By saying that a work of art should engage with its audience I do not mean that it should arouse a particular set of emotions in its audience. That is indeed one way of engaging – but it is also something that can be done without any engagement being involved (as with the average military march). Nor do I mean that it should communicate a particular message or set of ideas. That too is neither necessary nor sufficient. By engagement I mean simply the eliciting of an active response from the critical faculties of the reader, listener or viewer. This active response can be more cerebral than emotional, or more emotional than cerebral. There is a sliding scale with no optimal setting. But the audience cannot be purely passive, as it would be if its response to the work were restricted to admiration for the artist's technical dexterity or formal accomplishment – or indeed to luxuriating in an easily elicited emotional reaction.

**V**

The overarching problem we have been addressing is how to define a conception of decadence that captures the core of the notion without falling into one or other of two extremes. We do not want a conception of decadence that rests upon a determinate ethico-aesthetic ideal. Nor do we want it to rest upon a particular narrative of flourishing and decay of the sort we find in Spengler. What we need, I suggested, is a formal concept of decadence – one that can be employed in thinking about the moral dimension of art and yet that brings with it a minimum of prescription. The conception of decadence that is emerging is based on the idea that decadent works of art display a deficiency at the level of expressive form – a mismatch between expressive aims and formal structure that can be described through the moral vocabulary of self-indulgence, self-absorption and lack of communication. This seems to succeed in steering between the two extremes.

This notion of decadence is not based upon a normative conception of human flourishing and the good life. It does not prescribe how the good life should be lived, or what makes a civilisation flourish. Yet it remains a normative moral notion. The notions of engagement and expressive form are moral notions, even when applied to works of art in the quasi-literal way discussed in the previous section. Moral agents can display a lack of engagement, both with the world and with other moral agents – and this clearly deserves moral censure. More speculatively, the concept of expressive form can itself be applied outside the domain of the aesthetic. There is a sense in which a human life can itself display expressive form. Something like this may well have been Nietzsche's view,<sup>20</sup> and it is clearly worth exploring further.

Moreover, decadence as it has been sketched out is not a historicist notion. That is to say, there is no reason to think that the lack of engagement characteristic of decadence will emerge only at specific moments in the evolution of a particular artform or, more ambitiously, of a particular culture. But, on the other hand, it is a simple matter of historical fact that this lack of engagement has been a prominent feature of works of art in the periods most often characterised as decadent by commentators of a historicist persuasion. Decadence as we have analysed it is certainly historically applicable, and indeed in a manner that coincides extensionally with many historicist approaches, even though it is not itself historicist.

20 See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

# Critical conversions

Aaron Ridley

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“My judgement is *my* judgement”, Nietzsche once remarked: ‘no one else is easily entitled to it.’<sup>1</sup> The surprising thing about this remark is not to find Nietzsche making it, since it is wholly characteristic of him and versions of it crop up throughout his writings, but rather to find that the issues it raises, especially for aesthetics, have been largely ignored. It is more or less a cliché to say that art must be judged at first hand if it is to be judged at all. In that much, my judgement, if it is an aesthetic judgement, can hardly fail to be mine. But it surely needn’t be *mine*: I may, upon seeing Michelangelo’s *David*, experience and describe it as ‘noble’ almost entirely because of a near-imperative embedded in the culture that I should indeed have that experience and offer that description. In this case, my judgement, for all its being occasioned by an actual encounter, is clearly not first-hand in the strong sense that Nietzsche invokes. So what is it for my judgement to be *mine*? And how, even if not ‘easily’, could anyone else *possibly* be ‘entitled’ to it? I won’t attempt to give remotely full answers to these questions here. My present purpose is merely to clear the ground a little, primarily by exploring the specifically ethical character of critical judgement which, *inter alia*, Nietzsche highlights. The thought I want to develop is that the practice of criticism owes its ethical dimension to the fact that in confronting and responding to a work of art, and in trying to capture something of that response in words, the critic must (i) attempt to do justice to the work, (ii) attempt to do justice to his experience of the work and (iii) attempt, in articulating his experience, to order and negotiate between the various values by which that experience is informed. Together, I want to say, these considerations go some way toward explaining what it might be for someone to be entitled to a critical judgement as his own, and so also some way toward explaining why, as may be suggested by Michael Tanner’s thought that fine criticism ‘shows what the impact of great [art] was on minds impressively susceptible to it’<sup>2</sup>, such criticism represents an ethical success.

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), section 43.
- 2 Michael Tanner, ‘Understanding music’, in S. Kemal and I. Gaskell eds, *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 99. I say a little about the notion of impressive susceptibility in section IV, below.

**I**

Conditions (i), (ii) and (iii) are intimately related to one another, and may not in the end be fully separable. But it is still possible, and perhaps also worthwhile, to say something about them individually. The first requirement, that one must attempt to do justice to the work, raises issues that extend far beyond the scope of this essay: I confine myself here to two remarks. First, I take it that the attempt to do a work justice places a fairly obvious kind of ethical constraint on the critic, namely, that he be truthful – not only about his experience and the values that inform it, but about the work itself. He must approach the work seriously, and attempt to take it, in that notoriously slippery phrase, ‘on its own terms’. He must allow his experience to be shaped by the work, by its nature and characteristics. The work must be in the driving seat, as it were, and what he says about it must answer to it. The demands here, enjoining an honest and responsive open-mindedness, are very much as they would be in a court of law; and just as justice would not be done there, were evidence and circumstance to be ignored, or testimony over-looked, so justice would not be done to a work of art were no notice to be taken of half of it, say, or the fact suppressed that it had been produced by a six year old.

Second, and not inconsistently with that, I take it that there is no single set of honest responses to any given work of art that answers, uniquely, to it. This point needs to be taken in two related, but again distinguishable, ways. The first way concerns interpretation (broadly speaking). Here, the point is that in almost all cases, for almost any minimally rich or complex work of art, there will be more than one way to understand it – more than one set of interpretative responses that do justice to it in the sense outlined above. So, to take a well-worn example, *The Turn of the Screw* can justly be read as a ghost story or, with equal honesty, as a Freudian psychodrama. That is to say, there is no principled way, in terms of justice, of deciding between these interpretations – no way, that is, of showing that one or the other mode of response is, or must be, unjust.<sup>3</sup> (Indeed, if at least this much were not the case, the debate over the truth or otherwise of incompatible interpretations could never have got going, and certainly could never have been of any critical or – therefore – philosophical moment.<sup>4</sup>)

The other way of taking the point concerns evaluation. Here, I want to say that the demands of justice are not, or need not be, satisfied uniquely by any single set of evaluative responses. And I want to say this independently of questions about interpretation. It is not simply that diverging, but just, evaluations might attend diverging, but just, interpretations, although that is true; it is, rather, that even in the absence of interpretative divergence, just

3 Or consider cases in which a passage of music can be heard equally well as being in either of two keys.

4 See, e.g. Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1997), Part II.

evaluative responses may diverge – even to the point of incompatibility. This claim is perhaps contentious.<sup>5</sup> There is, perhaps, a pressure to think that to respond justly must be to respond truly (rather than truthfully), and so that two conflicting or incompatible evaluative responses cannot both be just. But if so, the pressure should be resisted. For the evaluation of a work of art rests, at least in part, on an evaluation of the experience it offers,<sup>6</sup> and there is no reason to think that each work of art offers just one experience.<sup>7</sup> The experience offered by the *St. Matthew Passion* to a Christian is not the same as that offered to an atheist; the Christian's values are different; what he takes seriously – how, how much and when – is not the same as what the atheist takes seriously; and these differences feature in, and so shape, the experiences they respectively have. It is possible, of course, that one or the other of these experiences fails, as a matter of fact, to do the work justice. It may be, that is, that certain kinds of evaluative baggage can debar a person from responding to some particular work honestly, in a way that answers to it. But there is no reason to insist that this must always be the case. There is no reason, that is, to insist that one or the other experience (or some third sort of experience) *must* be veridical; for this would be to insist that there must be some standard *external* to any given truthful response which determines whether that response really answers to the work.<sup>8</sup> It would be to insist, in other words, that the evaluation of a work of art depended, not on the value of the experience it offers, but on an independent evaluation of the values that inform that experience. And clearly, I take it, any such insistence would either beg the question, if based on a prior evaluation of the work or the experience it offers, or miss the point and beg the question, if based on some general, a priori account of aesthetic experience and of the values by which it may permissibly be informed.<sup>9</sup>

I am not claiming that any experience is as conducive to a just response as any other. I am claiming only that, if the value of a work of art is at least

- 5 For a related, and much-discussed, version of it in a political context, see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 54–8. Rawls' focus, however, is on the possibility of reasonable disagreement; and that issue is distinct from the question whether two incompatible responses to a thing can both be said to do it justice.
- 6 I offer no argument for this claim here, although I think that it has in fact been accepted by pretty well every major philosopher of art. For a recent defence, see Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* (London: Allen Lane, 1995), Chapter 1. (I have no idea whether Budd would endorse the kind of pluralism advocated here.)
- 7 It might be worth pointing out that talk of 'experience' here doesn't signal a slide into discussion of requirement (ii). In this section, I invoke the idea of 'experience' for its place in an explanation of what it is to do justice to a work of art. Only in the next section do I turn to the question of what it is to do justice to the experience itself.
- 8 Note that this allegedly 'external standard' cannot be, simply, the work itself: the work must be evaluated under some interpretation or other, and there may be more than one of those that does it justice.
- 9 I include paeans to 'disinterestedness' under this latter head.

partly determined by the value of the experience it offers, then – because no critical appreciation of a work’s value is independent of the values by which the critic’s experience is informed, and because there is no principled way of specifying any *single* experience as the one that is, uniquely, offered – there is no reason whatever to think that there must be some single set of responses that does justice to a work of art. There is no reason, that is, to think that the notion of justice, in this context at least, is ultimately detachable from the values that individual critics happen, as a matter of fact, to have.<sup>10</sup> Doing justice, here, must be a matter of truthfulness rather than truth.

## II

The second of the requirements set out at the beginning was that the critic, in confronting and responding to a work of art, must attempt to do justice to his experience of it. In part, of course, this simply means that the critic must attempt to be truthful about his experience, in exactly the same way as he must attempt to be truthful about the object of it. So, for example, one fails to do justice in this context if one suppresses or disowns significant aspects of one’s experience of a work, or if one discounts the fact that its character on some particular occasion has been largely the product of inattentiveness, say, or of a hang-over. One must be honest.

But here the parallels with requirement (i) come to an end. The reason for this, crudely, is that the work of art, as something to be done justice to, stands in a different relation to the critical endeavour from that in which the critic’s own experience stands. The critic can certainly adopt a spectatorial, inquisitive stance with respect to his experience of a work of art, just as he can toward the work itself: indeed he must. But, in doing so, he alters the experience. For, still crudely, an experience reflected upon, as it has to be if it is to be articulated at all, becomes an articulated experience, however minimally, whereas a work of art reflected upon remains exactly what it was. The consequence of this is that the room for the sort of pluralism discussed in the previous section changes: it disappears altogether in the case of interpretation, and it assumes a quite different shape in the case of evaluation.

Interpretatively, there is no possibility of pluralism at all. The experience and the interpretation of it are too close together for that; indeed they are mutually constitutive. The reason for this is, in effect, the reason that R. G. Collingwood gave for denying that an emotion can be distinguished from the expression it receives: expression is a process of clarification, and a thing that has been clarified is a thing that has been transformed. On this account, then, an emotion is not so much revealed for what it is by being expressed; rather,

10 Which is why, as Oscar Wilde put it, an ‘unbiased’ judgement is always absolutely worthless: ‘The critic as artist, part II’, in *Intentions* (London: The English Library, 1907), p. 153.

it becomes what it is by being expressed.<sup>11</sup> The inseparability of emotion from expression that Collingwood insists on here requires a special, although familiar, conception of what it is to realise a particular kind of intention. He puts the point like this: ‘There is certainly here a directed process: an effort, that is, directed upon a certain end; but the end is not something foreseen and preconceived, to which an appropriate means can be thought in the light of our knowledge of its special character.’<sup>12</sup> The special character is that of the emotion to be expressed; and knowledge of that character is the *result* of the process of expression, not an independently specifiable standard against which the success of that process can be gauged. Stuart Hampshire makes the same point in *Thought and Action*:

What I actually intend to do is not necessarily the same as I would honestly say that I intend to do, if I were asked. I may very easily make a mistake in the description or identification of my activity [. . .] without being confused in my practical intentions. That my intentions were clear in my own mind [. . .] would be shown when I recognised something as happening contrary to my intentions, or recognised it as happening in accordance with them. I might say truthfully ‘*This* is not what I intended,’ even though I point to something that accords precisely with my own declaration of my intentions [. . .] But it does not follow from this that I did not know what I was doing, in one familiar sense of this treacherous phrase.<sup>13</sup>

Again, then, the intended outcome is not something that can be specified independently of its realisation – it is not, that is, available as an independent measure of success. But success (and failure) are none the less possible for that. One can say ‘There – *that’s* what I was after’; or, equally, ‘No, I haven’t got it yet’. Exactly the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of an experience and the interpretation, or articulation, of it. It is only in being articulated that the critic’s experience acquires its determinate character, and this means that, once the experience has been fully articulated, its character just *is* that articulation, and so there is no point in asking whether that articulation *matches* the character of the experience, since there is nothing to the point to be said about the experience independently of the articulation it receives. And since there is therefore no room for the thought that two distinct articulations might each capture the same experience, there can be no room, either, for the thought that more than one articulation might do that experience justice. Here,

11 R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 109–14. For discussion, see Aaron Ridley, *R. G. Collingwood: a Philosophy of Art* (London: Orion Books, 1998), pp. 25–40.

12 *Principles of Art*, p. 111.

13 *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), pp. 95–6.



then, pluralism can get no grip.<sup>14</sup> Any appearance of multiplicity – as, for instance, when a critic offers distinct accounts of his experience – indicates either that his experience has changed, or else that all, or all but one, of those accounts represent unsuccessful or partial attempts to articulate it. (It is worth noting here that this does not mean that any successful articulation must be internally consistent: a just articulation, like the experience it articulates, may be riven by tensions, even by contradictions.)

When we turn to evaluation, on the other hand, we find something rather different – or we do, at any rate, once we've got clear what it means to evaluate one's experience of a work of art. For there are two quite separate senses in which one might be said to have done this, and only one of them has any bearing on the question of justice. The irrelevant sense concerns the evaluation of one's experience prior to, or independently of, its interpretation or articulation – of one's experience, that is, construed as a brute bit of phenomenology. Here, the evaluation is unlikely to go much beyond a straightforward expression of liking or disliking, depending on whether the experience strikes one as nice or nasty.<sup>15</sup> And there is clearly no question of such an evaluation being, or failing to be, just: for whether or not a person reacts to something in a certain way is simply a fact about him, and talk of success or failure in such a context is meaningless. The relevant sense of evaluation, then, is the evaluation of one's experience of a work of art *as* interpreted, or *as* articulated. Moreover, since an (articulated) experience of a work of art is shaped, not only by the nature and characteristics of the work, but also by the values that the critic happens, as a matter of fact, to have, the evaluation of that experience is an evaluation of something that is already, as it were, evaluatively structured. And this means that the critic is, in effect, bringing his own values to bear upon themselves: both his evaluation and the object of his evaluation – his experience – are informed by the values that he has (although clearly they need not be exactly the same values, or indeed all of his values: they may be separate or overlapping sub-sets of his values). So what about justice here: is it possible to succeed or fail in evaluating one's own experience justly? And – if it is possible – is there, or might there be, more than one just evaluation? It should be plain by this point that the answers to these questions must await consideration of requirement (iii).

14 This is not, incidentally, because a just articulation is in some sense veridical; it is because an articulation and the experience it articulates are inseparable.

15 Actually, this is an over-statement. There may be other sorts of evaluative reaction that are potentially more interesting – for instance, that the experience was rich, or scary – and it may be that these reactions play a significant role in our subsequent aesthetic behaviour. But these reactions are not judgements; they are not yet backed up by reasons; and as soon as they *are* backed up by reasons, which is to say as soon as they start to be grounded on articulated aspects of the experience to which they are reactions, they cease to be brute reactions to bits of phenomenology.

### III

The third requirement was that the critic attempt, in articulating his experience, to order and negotiate between the various values by which that experience is informed. The preceding discussion should have given some idea of what a complex and involved requirement this is. For one thing, and as we have seen, the critic's own values must feature in an explication of either of the other two requirements. Those values simultaneously inform the critic's experience, come under pressure from the work of art which is the object of that experience, and to which the critic is to attempt to do justice, and determine, perhaps in ways that have been shaped or shaken by the encounter, the value of the work in question. And for another thing – as if this weren't enough – the critic's values may themselves, and quite properly, be plural, in the sense of being incommensurable or irreducible to just one<sup>16</sup> – which is of course another reason why they may need to be negotiated between, or ordered (and also a further reason not to expect that a critic's just articulation of his experience must always be internally consistent.)

So what, really, is one envisaging here? Take an absurdly over-simplified example. Imagine a critic who approaches works of art with just two values in mind – seriousness, say, and intensity – and suppose that of these it is the first that typically has the edge with him. The critic is aware of the existence of other values, certainly; but his previous experience suggests that these two are the only ones that really matter to him. Such a critic is therefore predisposed, other things being equal, to value highly works that can be experienced as serious, and also as intense. Now imagine the following aesthetic encounter. The critic engages with a work that can indeed be experienced as serious and intense, and yet he finds, upon attempting to articulate his experience in those terms, and with seriousness to the fore, that he is not doing justice to the impact that the work has had on him. He realises that a third value – elegance, say, for which he has not previously had much use – must be invoked; but then he finds, upon introducing it, that a tension has been set up with the value of intensity, thereby forcing a reassessment, not necessarily of his commitment to intensity, but certainly of his understanding of it, and perhaps also of its relations to his other values. He is now more satisfied with the articulation that he is able to offer of his experience, but is not yet home and dry. For he finds, on reflection, that an indirect effect of his reappraisal of intensity has been subtly to undermine his sense of the work's seriousness. He is now faced with a choice. His unexpected acknowledgement of the value of elegance means that he must either conclude that seriousness, at least as he had understood it, cannot be quite as important as he had thought, or else that seriousness is just as important as he had thought, but that the work, at

16 I won't argue in detail for this claim here. Suffice it to say that if, as I argued in Section I, incompatible, but equally just, evaluations may be offered of the same work under the same interpretation, the claim is surely true.

least as he now understands it, cannot be quite as valuable as he had supposed. And, depending on which way he decides, the articulation he offers of his experience, and *hence* his evaluation of that experience, will change.

Artificial and schematic though it undoubtedly is, the example does enough to indicate in a crude way what kinds of outcome the critical negotiation of value may have. The just articulation of a critic's experience might, first, leave the critic's value-orderings unchanged, either because his experience of the work conforms to them, or because it fails to conform, but not in such a manner as to force a revision; second, leave the critic with essentially the same values, but now ordered in a different way; third, involve the critic's acknowledging a new value or values, together with the possible consequences that that might have for his pre-existing values, and for the relations between them; or, fourth, involve his rethinking one or more of his pre-existing values, together with whatever the consequences of that are for his other values and the relations between them. In addition, and whichever of these possibilities is realised, the example shows how the articulation of a critic's experience, because it must involve the critical negotiation of value, is *already*, in effect, the evaluation of it. Given which, it is clearly the case that such evaluation can be, or can fail to be, just: the articulation of an experience which does it justice is, by that very fact, also its just evaluation.

The first of the questions left dangling at the end of the previous section is thus answered; and an answer to the second question – a negative answer – might appear to follow directly. For if, as I argued in that section, there is only one way that a critic can articulate his experience justly, then, if that articulation is also an evaluation, there is surely only one way – the same way – in which he can evaluate it justly. There is no room for pluralism here, it would seem.

But this is too quick. I noted in Section II that the values up for negotiation in any particular case may be only a sub-set of the critic's values taken as a whole. The consequence of this, for present purposes, is that while a critic's articulation of his experience of a work of art may do it justice, and while his articulation may *in that much* – which is to say, with respect to the sub-set of his values up for negotiation in that case – comprise a just evaluation, nothing follows from this about what the critic's evaluation of his experience, and hence of the work of art that is the object of it, finally is. The sub-set of his values relevant to the particular case, ordered and understood exactly as they are in virtue of that case, may stand, simply as a matter of contingent fact, in any number of relations to his values taken as a whole. And this means that, depending on the shape of his overall hierarchy or hierarchies of value, his final estimation of the value of his experience may not be determined by the estimation embodied in his just articulation of it. Some *other* value (or sub-set of values) not involved in the original negotiation may determine that.

An example may be helpful here. Suppose that I encounter a very simple picture, and succeed quite easily in articulating my experience of it in an entirely just way. I note the assured use in the picture of a two-tone colour scheme, the clean, block-like quality of the figures depicted in it, and the basic symmetry of its design.<sup>17</sup> Not many of my values are drawn upon for negotiation in this experience, but, with respect to the ones that are, the evaluation embodied in my articulation is perfectly positive. It is quite clear, nonetheless, that my final estimation of the value of my experience may be fairly dismissive: from the perspective of values I take more seriously (call them A and B), the experience may not be worth much at all. Or, alternatively, if my more important values happen not to be A and B, but C and D, and if these bear upon the ones mobilised in my experience in a different way, my final evaluation of the experience may be very positive indeed. There is nothing, *ex hypothesi*, to tie the small sub-set of values actually negotiated in the experience to a value-hierarchy including A and B, say, rather than to one including C and D; which makes the relation between the evaluation embodied in the just articulation of my experience and the evaluation that I have called my 'final estimation' utterly contingent. At the level of final estimation, then, it appears that there may indeed be room for more than one evaluation of my experience that does it justice.<sup>18</sup>

This much is certainly true of fairly simple aesthetic encounters, in which the critic's experience is shaped by a relatively small sub-set of his values. But as the object of the experience becomes more complex, as the critic's engagement with it becomes more wholehearted, and the set of values up for negotiation grows larger, so the evaluation of the experience given in the just articulation and the evaluation given in the final estimation will tend to converge – until, at some notional limit, at which the whole man, as one might say, is engaged, they converge completely (perhaps, if the critic's values are incommensurable with one another, on an internally inconsistent evaluation). At this point, I take it, all room for plurality disappears.<sup>19</sup> (Notice the difference here between incommensurability in aesthetic judgement and in certain kinds of moral judgement. Someone finding himself in a serious practical dilemma may, if the conflicting demands upon him are of comparable weight,

17 The picture I have in mind here, for what it's worth, is *Danza del Bisoite* by Amado M. Peña.

18 As at the end of Section I – and, *mutatis mutandis*, for exactly the same reasons – the notion of justice, in this context at least, is not detachable from the values that individual critics happen, as a matter of fact, to have.

19 The rather formalistic, not to say formulaic, quality of the point here may be ameliorated somewhat by noting that pluralism, even at quite high levels of engagement, is a real, rather than merely a theoretical, possibility. Imagine someone who has justly articulated experiences of both Brahms's F-major symphony and Franck's D-minor symphony. His final estimation of the Brahms might include the judgement 'better than the Franck'; but, equally, it might not; it might even include the opposite judgement.

justly elect either of the courses of action open to him. But he must elect one of them. Even if the dilemma is such as to engage him from top to bottom, so that the whole man is involved, and so that his evaluation of his situation is frozen, as it were, in an attitude of hand-wringing irresolution, still he must act. Here, the circumstances might be said to force a decision upon him from the outside, a decision that is – at the limit case – effectively independent of the values that he actually has. There is nothing comparable to this in the aesthetic domain.)

So the position would appear to be this. In his efforts to do evaluative justice to his experience of a work of art, the critic may be involved in either of two kinds of endeavour. First, he may be involved in an attempt to do justice to his experience from the perspective of the values actually drawn upon and negotiated in that experience. In this case, there is only one evaluation that does justice to his experience, and that is the evaluation embodied in the just articulation of it. Second, he may be involved in an attempt to do justice to the experience so articulated from the perspective of values not drawn upon in that articulation, or from the perspective of his values taken as whole. In this instance, by contrast, and short of the limit-case mentioned above, there may be more than one evaluation – more than one final estimation – that does justice to the experience so articulated, depending upon the particular configuration of values that the critic happens, contingently, to have.

#### **IV**

The fine critic, according to the account developed in the preceding three sections, is someone who is serious and discriminating about his own values, sensitive to the quality of experience that those values make possible and preclude, and capable of reporting that experience in such a way as to give the object of it its due, which is to say honestly. And the criticism that he produces, if what I've argued is right, clearly betokens an ethical success, a kind of systematic triumph of truthfulness over laziness, insincerity, pretentiousness and self-deception and indeed over any of the many ways in which the character or force of one's own values can remain obscure, especially to oneself.

As yet, however, the conditions I've discussed, while sufficient to establish the ethical dimension of criticism, are not sufficient to establish that any criticism that satisfies them must, in virtue of that fact, be fine. One might, that is, be wholly truthful in all of the respects I've mentioned, and still produce criticism that is, in the end, humdrum and unremarkable. This is why, one imagines, Michael Tanner talks of the fine critic's being 'impressively susceptible' to the impact of great art, rather than being merely truthful in the face of it. But what might impressive susceptibility come to here? The answer, I take it, must have to do with the values that the critic happens, as a matter

of fact, to have, and perhaps also with his capacity to negotiate between them in particular ways. The thought is this: for any given (great) work of art, there are richer or thinner experiences to be had of it, the quality of experience being determined, at least in part, by the values up for negotiation in the articulation of it. If fine criticism is the articulation of a rich experience, then, its fineness is due, at least in part, to the critic's having a set of values that happens to make for such an experience in the context of that particular work of art (and perhaps, although not necessarily, in the context of other works: a critic may be more or less narrow). His having those values constitutes his susceptibility.<sup>20</sup> And the impressiveness of this susceptibility is almost entirely of a natural, rather than an ethical, kind: it is the sort of impressiveness that might be found in a talent, say, or in a wicked sense of humour.

## V

My knee-jerk response to the *David* as 'noble' isn't a judgement that is 'mine' in any strong or interesting sense. The reason for that should now be clear: my judgement neither represents a just articulation of my experience of Michelangelo's statue, nor a final estimation of it. For a judgement to be one's own, then, for one to be 'entitled' to it, is for it to be the product of one's own experience, informed by one's own values, and by one's own negotiation between them.<sup>21</sup> Which means, of course, that one can be perfectly entitled – in the relevant sense – to judgements that are shallow, misguided or simply silly. A judgement can be *mine*, that is, quite independently of the question whether it does justice to the work that is the object of it.

If this is what it is for a judgement to be one's own, how might anyone else be or become entitled to it? There is one sort of case which raises no problems. If you and I, as a result of our respective experiences of a work, arrive at judgements about it that are effectively identical, then the only thing to be said is that we both make the same judgement: questions of your entitlement to my judgement, or of mine to yours, don't arise. Each of us is entitled to his own. Questions of entitlement arise, then, only when the fact of someone's making a particular judgement is consequent upon someone else's already having done so – when, that is, one person's judgement is influenced, or shaped, by another's. The worry here, of course, is that the person who is influenced might be reduced to aping, to reporting a pointless and second-hand sort of experience, counterfeited out of a repertoire of value-feelings that is, ineluctably, somebody else's. And because patterns of influence can be quite subtle, so the worry, too, can be subtle. So, for example,

20 Or, as Wilde has it, his 'personality': *op. cit.*, p.127.

21 I am not denying that values, and hence experiences, are culturally conditioned. I am only denying that this fact, if it is one, is such as to prevent them from being authentically one's own, rather than simply off the shelf.

I might take over from you, not this or that particular judgement, but a whole *style* of judging, perhaps as embodied in a critical vocabulary that I find peculiarly seductive, or, in your hands, peculiarly powerful. But the terms one uses, obviously, frame and shape the kinds of experience that one is capable of articulating and the kinds of values and value-orderings by which those experiences might be informed; and so, again, there is the danger of being reduced to aping, to going on about art in ways that have nothing, at bottom, to do with how it actually strikes one or with values that are in any serious sense one's own.<sup>22</sup>

In these cases, the failure is ethical. One has failed, in whatever spirit, to be sufficiently truthful to, with and about oneself to meet the requirements that (ii) and (iii) exact; one has failed, in short, to do justice to one's experience. Success, however, is surely possible – which is to say, a genuine critical conversion is surely possible, fully entitling one, provided only that the demands of truthfulness have been met, to a judgement or style of judgement that is not originally one's own.<sup>23</sup> This might happen at several levels. First, the influence of a critic might simply be to get one to see something about a work that one had missed, or that one had not fully appreciated, so prompting one to attempt a just articulation of one's experience of the work as that experience now, newly, is. Second, the critic's articulation of his experience may lead one to recognise something in one's own experience to which one had failed, hitherto, to do justice; again, the way is clear for a re-articulation. Third, and most diaphanous, the critic may enlist values that have not featured or been prominent in one's own experience, or negotiate between values in a manner that one had not done oneself, with the result that one's own sense of what matters – of what values count, how much and when – has been altered or augmented. Here, one's experience of a range of works is likely to be affected, and one's efforts at re-articulation to be accordingly further-reaching. At any of these levels, however, the critical judgement or style of judgement by which one has been influenced does not operate as a substitute for one's own judgement, but only as a prompt or starting-point for one's own attempts to articulate one's own experience, as modified by the encounter, as justly as one can. In this much, then, no one can ever be entitled to a critical judgement that is not their own. Rather, that entitlement comes, and it may not come easily, or at all, only when they have made that judgement *theirs*.<sup>24</sup>

22 I suspect that adopted critical vocabulary is, or has been, a particularly rich source of critical failure – think of the hollow tone of the average Leavisite.

23 This is not of course to say that criticism must be converting if it is to be worthwhile. Even if one is not persuaded, the encounter with worthwhile criticism ought at least to force one, if one is oneself serious, to revisit one's values and value-orderings in the context of something one genuinely cares about.

24 My thanks to Maria Alvarez, Alex Neill, David Owen and the editors of the present collection for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

# Love in Wagner's Ring

Roger Scruton

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One of Michael Tanner's most significant contributions to British intellectual life has been his advocacy of the music of Richard Wagner. He has pursued this cause in articles, reviews and a luminous book; indeed, it would be only a slight exaggeration to say that he has devoted his life to it. When I went up to Cambridge to study natural sciences, I was, despite my love of music, suspicious of Wagner, and ignorant of his artistic achievement. I began to read philosophy, hoping to learn why art, literature and music were so much more meaningful to me than physics and chemistry had been. Only one philosophy lecturer showed any awareness that art, literature and music exist, and that was Michael Tanner. He told his students, with feeling and authority, why the late operas of Wagner overshadow virtually everything that has since been created. He persuaded many of us; and I was one of them. Since leaving Cambridge I have returned again and again to Wagner's masterpieces, and especially to *The Ring of the Nibelung*, hoping to capture in words some small part of the meaning which lives in the music. This essay is one tentative attempt, and it is an attempt that I should never have made, but for Michael Tanner.

*The Ring*, nobody will deny, is a work full of meaning. Indeed it is super-saturated with meaning. We have but to plant the tiniest seed of interpretation and the whole drama crystallises around it, an interlocking structure of mutually reinforcing symbols. Invariably, however, the structure seems flawed or incomplete. And the ease with which, from another seed, a wholly conflicting precipitation is instantly obtainable, leads to a peculiar sense of enigma. The superabundance of meaning hides the meaning. And this too is part of what it means.

*The Ring* should be understood on four levels: mythic, dramatic, political and spiritual. The music brings the four levels together, and many of those who belittle Wagner's achievement do so because they do not understand the music as the primary vehicle through which the action is accomplished. The composer's remarkable gift of synthesis is of course already displayed in the libretto, which tells a rich and exciting story with remarkable economy. Although the narrative is punctuated by paradox, this lies in the nature of



myths, which are attempts to see the temporal world from a point of view outside it, and which therefore abut at every point on the inexplicable. At the same time the music is able to overcome the paradoxes, to propel us through them, while not relinquishing the thread of emotional logic binding scene to scene and character to character in a drama which presses on relentlessly to its end, which is the end of everything.

In *The Perfect Wagnerite* George Bernard Shaw famously dismissed the story of Siegfried and its culmination in *Götterdämmerung* as ‘grand opera’, in other words, as a derogation from the story of the gold, its theft, and the world’s enslavement. This is largely because he could not see how to integrate the individual psychic process which is played out in Siegfried with the mythic and political message of *Rheingold* and its sequel, to which he gave a Marxist interpretation. Like many commentators before and since, Shaw backed up his interpretation with little musical analysis. Once we turn our attention to the music, however, it is obvious even from the beginning of *Rheingold* that the political and the personal are one and the same.

At the time when he completed the text of the cycle, Wagner was a follower of Ludwig Feuerbach, the Young Hegelian whose debunking of Christianity (*The Essence of Christianity*, 1841) had such a profound effect on Marx. Feuerbach’s central thesis was that divinities are projections of human virtues, which we worship in order to set our own perfection at a distance from us, so excusing our moral indolence. Wagner did not endorse that thesis entirely: his gods are far lower in the scale of perfection than the humans whom they exploit. Nevertheless, the Feuerbachian ontology is fundamental to the mythic structure of *The Ring*. The gods and Nibelungs are projections – images formed from the raw material of human emotion, and representing forces which are realised in us, and which *need* us for their realisation.

These forces are of three kinds. Some belong to our pre-personal and pre-political nature (our ‘species-being’ in Feuerbach’s idiom). These, represented in the Rhinedaughters and the Norns, in Erda and Loge and the woodbird, shroud the world and its origins in mystery. They also intrude into the flow of events, setting inscrutable limits to what can be done or hoped for, and impressing on us the image of a more innocent, more organic, and less conscious mode of being than the one to which the protagonists are fatally drawn.

The second kind of force is represented by the gods – beings who have freed themselves from the natural order sufficiently to take charge of it, and who enjoy the sovereignty which enables them both to satisfy their needs and to live in the civilised leisure of Valhalla. Although the inspiration for Wotan and Fricka lies in the Greeks, and ultimately in Homer, they are also distinctly modern creations. Wotan represents the aspiration for personal power – that is, for the freedom and sovereignty of the self. And there is embodied in his character and wanderings all that pertains to the search for self-realisation: freedom, intention, guilt, anxiety, the need for personal

satisfaction and interpersonal love, and the things which make all these possible and also constrain them: law, and the categorical imperative that plants law deep in the soul.

To understand Wotan in his full psychological meaning, we should look not to Feuerbach but to his master, Hegel. The Hegelian theory of consciousness tries to show how *Geist* or spirit realises itself as an individual – i.e. as a self-conscious person. *Selbstbestimmung* – a term from Fichte which means self-consciousness, self-determination, self-certainty, self-realisation and self-delimitation all at once – occurs in two spheres: that of ‘objective spirit’ and that of ‘subjective spirit’. Spirit becomes determinate both in the world of institutions and laws, and in the free individual. That which exists objectively as sovereignty and law, exists subjectively as self-knowledge and will. Hence Wotan has both these aspects, and the spear on which all oaths are inscribed is both the rule of law which upholds them, and the will that intends them. This will shapes the individual, and sets him apart from nature. But since no being, not even a god, can be wholly apart from nature, law and will are subject to mutation. (Hence Loge flickers at the point of Wotan’s spear, burning away the runes inscribed there.) The force of law, and the force of personal existence are both projected in the character of Wotan. And both involve a defiance of the species, a *hubris*, from which punishment must follow. At first Wotan does not understand this. But gradually, as the gods become incarnate in the mortals whose dreams they are and whose suffering they have required, they are filled with knowledge, and released from the burden of existence.

The third kind of force is represented by Nibelheim: the perversion of self-hood that comes through seeking power without law. The separation of spirit from nature can either acknowledge others, as Wotan does, or work like Alberich to enslave them. Alberich must renounce love, and with it the conception of the other as an end in himself. His world therefore involves a loss of inner freedom, a self-enslavement, and this self-enslavement is the objective reality of sin. Projected in the characters of Alberich and Mime are the forces which tempt us from the realm of nature in pursuit of power, and which lead to our spiritual destruction – the destruction portrayed in the preludes to *Siegfried* Act 1, and *Götterdämmerung* Act 2.

Just as the political order pulls the world from its primeval timelessness and places it in the flow of history, so does the individual will pull us from the changeless realm of natural needs – the realm of the species – and set us upon the path of self-realisation. It is this dual departure from the natural order that is placed before us by *Rheingold*, and which is the true subject-matter of the *Ring*.

The prelude to *Rheingold* is familiar to every musicologist, as the longest deliberation on a single major triad before Philip Glass deprived such things of their interest. It evokes a primeval world, lying outside time and change, the Ur-matter of existence, which has yet to be shaped by will. It is the

musical equivalent of the 'state of nature', which does not precede history but lies, as it were, beneath it, the unseen depth of an innocence forever lost, because never truly possessed, and yet always imagined and endlessly longed for.

This world beyond history is filled with currents and eddies which might at any moment break through the mould of changelessness and shape themselves as will. We hear this happening; beneath the unbroken surface of the E flat major triad the horns move in counterpoint, each entering some space as another leaves it. To the undiscerning ear, all is changeless and still, a single chord, spread out over musical space, held constant in root position. But voice-leading and instrumentation ensure that the unisons in this chord are not real unisons; they are points where musical movements coincide, as they hurry on to distant destinations. Beneath its superficial calm the music is beginning to wrestle and break free. Of its own accord the triad becomes animated, pushing against the fragile seam of E flat, B flat and G, until finally bursting forth in an A flat major arpeggio, and incarnating itself as a voice.

The classical economists remarked on a strange paradox – namely, that those things which have greatest value in use, such as air, water and corn, tend to have little or no value in exchange, and this not because they are necessarily abundant or always easy to obtain. Conversely, things with great exchange-value – such as gold and gems – tend to have little or no value in use. And money is the supreme instance of this paradox: it is an object *all* of whose value is concentrated in its power of exchange, and which has no other use whatsoever. Ricardo and Marx tried to explain the paradox in terms of the labour theory of value; but the true explanation has to do neither with labour nor with scarcity, but with the innate structure of desire. For those things which satisfy a natural and recurring need our desire is quickly satisfied; beyond a certain quantity we are surfeited. Such things have a rapidly diminishing 'marginal utility' – water and air being obvious instances. As for money, however, its very volatility, its ability to transform itself into any shape, so as to gratify now this desire and now another, means that its marginal utility hardly diminishes as its quantity grows. And precisely for this reason does it exert its terrible psychological power: the means to all ends, whose hold is endless.

The prelude to *Rheingold* shows three primal elements, water, and through that water the air and light which, mingling with its surface, are in due course to create the insubstantial vision which is the gold of the Rhine. The prelude continues to the point of saturation and beyond, so as restlessly to turn away from the surfeit. It is the pure expression in music of the dwindling marginal utility which pertains to our natural elements, and to the natural use we make of them. Adumbrated in this musical episode, therefore, are the premises of the four levels of meaning: the myth of nature; the dramatic temptation to break free of nature; the political transition from use to exchange; and the awakening of the individual from the species, as he sets forth on the journey

towards personality, freedom and power. Already we sense, in the purely musical movement concealed within the E flat triad, that these four levels are merely different levels of a single process, and that this process is *us*.

At the political level, the theft of the fantasm that glitters on the water's surface represents the original usurpation by which nature becomes property and power. The subsequent forging of the ring represents the transformation of use-value into exchange-value (or, in more modern idiom, the conversion of value into price). That is Alberich's route to power; but the original usurpation, we discover, comes in other forms. Wotan too is a usurper, but his usurpation is so deeply hidden that only little by little during the course of the drama do we discover it, and always with a measure of admiration for the god who could have projected his will so deeply into the heart of things.

The ring is not money, but all that money means to us – the concentration of power that results when our labour is devoted to exchange and accumulation. Need is now transferable, volatile, and unassuaged. As such, money is a symbol. It stands for the tendency of human beings to accept one thing in lieu of another, to exchange one thing for another, to situate each object in its class of substitutes. This tendency is the first temptation, the original sin. Transfer it to the human world, and the sin becomes the denial of love. This is because the object of love is the individual *in his individuality*, the incarnate self for which there is no substitute since he can be wanted and cherished only for the particular thing that he is. That is why those who choose *this* route to social power – the route of exchange and accumulation – must in their deepest being foreswear love, as Alberich did.<sup>1</sup>

That thought is put in play from the outset. The gold of the Rhine appears to Alberich at the very moment when his attempts to obtain love have been frustrated: and the gold appears as a substitute for love, which can be seized only if love is foresworn. Until seized, however, the gold is merely another aspect of the unspoiled natural order – it is the light that glitters in the primeval world, and which those who play in that world would never think of capturing or owning. They are guarding it only as nature guards her resources, with an innocent unconcern for rational plans.

The original innocence that attaches to the gold is apparent from the theme which introduces it: an arpeggiated chord of G major beneath oscillating strings. (These oscillating strings will reappear as the voice of nature in Siegfried's ear.) (Ex. 1) The theme is transparent, radiant, yet empty – a smile on the face of nature. It is followed by the Rhinedaughters' greeting (Ex. 2), which expresses a joy without concupiscence, a delight without the desire to possess or exchange. As *The Ring* unfolds it is this two-chord motive which suffers the greatest transformation, becoming gradually poisoned by greed,

1 For more on this theme see Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore, D. Frisby and K. Maengelberg (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 376–7, and Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1986), pp. 156–60.

Ex.1

Ex.2

Ex.3

Ex.4

We - he, Ach, We - he!

resentment, anger, and grief, and amalgamating at last with two other motives: Alberich's cry of woe (Ex. 3), and the motive of the curse, to form Ex. 4. (The curse is contained in the first chord – see below.) The subtle musical transformation here, from a V-I cadence to a keyless shift from a Tristan chord on to a dominant seventh, conveys the vast distance in emotion, between joy in the gold, and the hate-filled need to repossess it after many thefts. Yet the thing itself, the music implies, is the unaltered object of these mutating desires.<sup>2</sup> Ex. 4 is the symbol, or rather the musical enactment, of *where we have got to*, since Alberich's original transgression – a transgression on which we all depend, just as the gods depend upon Alberich's theft to pay for their own usurpation. Ex. 4 has this meaning on account of its musical history. A continuous symphonic development has enfolded this cadence, sucked out its innocent life, and filled it with poison.

The Ring becomes a symbol, not merely of money and accumulation, but of an outlook on the world which disregards the personality of people, and looks upon them as we look on objects. Wagner shows us that this outlook exists at both the personal and the political level, portraying in his evocation of Nibelheim a world which has been voided of love and personality in both their inner and their outer meaning.

Commentators influenced by Shaw like to see in this political aspect a foreshadowing of the Marxist critique of capitalist society – and the interpretation seems all the more plausible when set in the context of Wagner's

2 Wagner himself commented upon this transformation in *Über der Anwendung der Musik auf der Drama* (1879), in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Berlin: Deutsches Verlagshaus Bong & Co., 1913), vol. X, pp. 189–90. The passage is summarised in Ernest Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist* (London: John Lane/Bodley Head, 1925), pp. 238–9.

involvement with the 1848 revolutionaries. My own view, however, is that Wagner was too great an artist, and too subtle a thinker, to be entirely taken in by Young Hegelian socialism, and that, like Schopenhauer, he was instinctively averse to optimism, whether in private life or in politics.

The political vision of *The Ring* is through and through tempered by the thought that the political and the spiritual are one. It is composed of glimpses into the inner, phenomenological reality of power. Hence the need for myth, which shows decisions and passions to be larger, less explicable and more lost in their causes than the schemes of rational economic man. For us, late witnesses to the calamity which *The Ring* foretells, Nibelheim is a glimpse into the world of totalitarian government, in which human beings are treated not as subjects but as objects, in which the paramount concern is survival, and in which the moral life is therefore eclipsed by calculation.

Personal government, by contrast, respects the freedom of its subjects, and is accountable for what it does. It is mediated by law, which binds the ruler as well as the ruled. All actions, whether of individuals or groups, are justiciable, and the state itself wears the aspect of a person – not merely in the legal sense of being liable for its actions, but in the moral sense, of being an object of loyalty, praise and blame. Personal government respects the distinction between the public and the private, and is reluctant to intrude on the sovereign rights of subjects. In *The Ring* the nearest approximation to personal government lies in the sovereignty of Wotan: the spear which both confers authority and also qualifies it, by subjecting it to law. This law is natural law, enshrined in the maxim that *pacta sunt servanda*: treaties must be honoured. We should not be surprised to find such jurisprudential ideas evoked in *The Ring*. From *Tannhäuser* onwards, the Wagner operas show a growing interest in law, as a social force which also shapes the inner life of those who honour it.

In Nibelheim we witness power without law. Here, in this lower realm, the mask of personality, which mediates between people and moralises their dealings, has been stripped away, leaving force and trickery exposed. Wagner saw clearly what this means, both politically and personally. All people in this nether world are objects, and even Alberich's victims lose the capacity to relate to each other as persons. (Mime recounts to Wotan how the Nibelungs had lived before Alberich's usurpation, and gives a touching portrait of a people bound to each other by natural law. Since then, he implies, all natural relations have broken down, giving way to craft, cunning and the war of all against all.) In Nibelheim power comes not through law but through *spells* – mysterious devices which can never be traced to any source, and which confer invisibility and impunity on the one who has mastered them. The Tarnhelm is an instance of this, and recalls the panopticon of the police state: wherever you are and whatever you do in that impersonal world, 'they' are invisibly watching you, and can strike you down at any time. You have no defences, no rights, no freedoms, but only whatever temporary barriers you are able to

construct through caution and subterfuge. Moreover power can afflict you in a thousand forms: ‘they’ are ubiquitous and protean, changing shape with every attempt to confront or avoid them. All institutions in the totalitarian state are forms which the ruling Party takes in order to achieve its implacable and inscrutable purposes. Those corporate persons – schools, churches, universities, clubs and teams – which form the stuff of social life under personal government are not persons at all. They take no responsibility for their actions, and in any case make no decisions of their own. Under impersonal government there is only one institution – power itself, which penetrates all relations, all hopes and fears, reminding each subject that he is utterly dispensable and can be ‘vaporised’ at any time.

Nibelheim is perhaps the first premonition in Western art of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And it is all the more prophetic in portraying the evil as simultaneously political and personal: Nibelheim remains in the soul of those who escape from it, for it is the objective form of an inner privation – the privation of love which will not acknowledge the personality of the other, or confront him as one free being confronts his equal. All this is conveyed inimitably in the Prelude to Act 1 of *Siegfried*, in which the obsessive mind of Mime is given musical expression. And the music of Alberich, of Mime and of Hagen persuades us that this world of pure power is also one of inner misery and moral destitution.



Here we should pause to consider two of the puzzles that have occupied students of the leitmotif. The first concerns Ex. 5. Nineteenth-century Wagnerians called this the *Entsagungsmotif* – the motive of renunciation – because it is first sung by one of the Rhinedaughters to the words: ‘*Nur wer der Minne Macht entsagt*’ – only he who forswears love can acquire the magic that will forge the Ring – thus launching Alberich on his bid for world-domination. Later appearances of the motive, however, belie this description. It appears, in the original key of C minor, to the words ‘*Heiligster Minne höchste Noth*’ – the highest need of most holy love – as Siegmund pulls the sword Nothung from the ash tree. It appears as Wotan kisses away Brünnhilde’s divinity, and lays her to sleep on the rock, without the faintest suggestion on Wotan’s part that Frau Minne has anything to do with what is going on. (Though deep down, Brünnhilde’s ‘mortalisation’ is Minne’s work.)

What this shows is not that Wagner is inconsistent, but that the old habit of assigning a meaning to leitmotifs from the context of their first occurrence is based on a misunderstanding. Leitmotifs do not have meaning as words do – by convention. Otherwise Debussy’s mocking complaint against ‘visiting

cards' would have some force. Leitmotifs *acquire* their meaning during the course of the drama; they acquire it not only from what is happening on the stage, but also – and crucially – from what is happening in the pit. In an illuminating study<sup>3</sup> William Mann catalogues all occurrences of Ex. 5 and writes as follows:

[Ex. 5] is about heterosexual attraction, about the relation between love and material power, about the ring which was forged as a consequence of the curse, about true and false remedies for the crisis. If you can find one summary label that fits all these meanings, you are cleverer than I am. I know what it means – and if you have traced the connection in all these references, you also know – but to name that connection was never intended by Wagner, which is why he wrote *The Ring* as music drama.

To put the point in another way: the leitmotif is not describing things but subjecting them to a process of *musical* development. If, in retrospect, we can summarise this process in a word or a phrase, all well and good. However the knowledge enshrined in the motive is not 'knowledge by description', but 'knowledge by acquaintance'. Wagner expressly compares the orchestra to the chorus in a Greek tragedy: it is not merely accompanying the action, but *responding* to it.<sup>4</sup> Hence it forges a connection between episodes, by responding to them in a similar way. We too enter into the orchestra's ubiquitous sympathy, and feel in ourselves the deep-down relation between the things that the music connects. In all the occurrences of Ex. 5 there is a common core of feeling: these are the points in the drama where world and spirit coincide, and the world is changed through an action which is both choice and destiny. The music recuperates moments which foreshadowed the present one, and amalgamates them in the listener's response.

This is how we should understand the second problematic motive: Ex. 6b. The nineteenth-century Wagnerians described this as the 'flight' motive, since it first appears appended to Freia's theme (Ex. 6a), accompanying her flight from the giants. Deryck Cooke has famously exploded this piece of nonsense.<sup>5</sup> The theme, derived from a four-note cell which occurs so widely in Wagner (for example in the grail theme from *Lohengrin*, Ex. 7) that Ernest Newman has described it as a Wagnerian tic,<sup>6</sup> is associated almost every-

3 William Mann, 'Down with visiting cards', in John DiGaetani ed., *Penetrating Wagner's Ring* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press London/Associated University Presses, 1978), pp. 303–6.

4 *Opera and Drama*, in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, ed. William Ashton Ellis (St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1972), vol. 2.

5 Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: a Study of Wagner's Ring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), Chapter 3.

6 Ernest Newman, *Wagner Nights* (London: Putnam, 1949), reissued as *The Wagner Operas* (London: Putnam, 1961).





where else in the cycle with love and the suffering of love. It is *the* leading device of *Walküre* Act 1, where it persuasively sympathises with what is, from the standpoint of traditional morality, the most criminal of all sexual unions. (See Ex. 8.) The theme is noteworthy not only for its poignant beauty, but also for its harmonic versatility. It can effortlessly modulate from C sharp minor to C minor in the space of a bar (Ex. 9); it can go on falling for bar after bar, or even, though rarely, find completion in a great rising arch, as at Ex. 10. In all this it conveys some of the abandon of erotic love, and also the acceptance of suffering that comes through love.

But there is one place where the occurrence of this theme has seemed mysterious – which is in the descent into Nibelheim, where Wagner first evokes the bondage which has entered the world with the forging of the Ring. The theme does not merely occur here: it binds everything together, first in an agitated diminished form (Ex. 11), which anticipates the hammers of the factory below, and then, introduced by the Rhinegold motive (Ex. 1), in an



augmented version (Ex. 12) which takes us in trepidation down to Nibelheim. All this occurs before the theme has acquired its subsequent identity, as a theme of love and the suffering of love. Until now we have heard it only in association with Freia, who represents not love but, so to speak, the plastic material from which love is moulded.

However, nothing could be more gripping or dramatically right than this descent into Nibelheim, and when, in *Walküre*, the passage is recalled in quite another context, that too sounds right. Why is this? The answer goes to the heart of the drama. Love, in *The Ring*, means two different things: the need implanted by the species – that natural force which spreads its fickle attentions far and wide – and the longing which is also an existential choice, a meeting of self and other and an assumption of responsibility for another life.<sup>7</sup> Personal love grows from the invisible root of sexual need, and the pre-personal voice of the species sounds through this, our most free and individual endeavour. Alberich is susceptible to the first kind of love – the need which flits from object to object, as he flits from one Rhinedaughter to another in his vain efforts to seduce them. But he cannot attain to love of the second kind, the love which wins the heart of an individual and overcomes the base-ness of desire. Therefore he renounces it, and with it every hope of personal fulfilment: now there is nothing for him to strive for, save power. Hence, for Alberich, even love of the first kind is a cause of suffering, and launches him on the loveless path which he thereafter follows.

Freia's charms and youth belong with love of the first kind; hence Ex. 6a is a 'nature' theme in *The Ring*, sounding always with the voice of the species. It is ethereal, impersonal, conveying the primordial delight of sensual love. But when Freia first appears she has been precipitated into another and more passionate love – that of Fasolt, before which she trembles. A force greater than Freia's divinity threatens to overwhelm her, and the motive flees before this force in terror.

7 Wagner has something to say about the two kinds of love in *Opera and Drama*, §352: 'The nature of woman is love; but this love is one of conception, and of unreserved devotion in conception. Woman only attains to full individuality at the moment of this devotion [. . .] The look of innocence in the eye of the woman is the endlessly clear mirror in which the man can perceive only a general capacity for loving, until he has been able to discern his own picture therein.' The whole passage which follows (to §362) helps to illuminate what the later operas of Wagner dramatise: the need in sexual feeling for *individual* love and a self-transcending act of possession of the kind that only free and responsible individuals can engage in.

In other words the two parts of Freia's original theme point in two quite different directions. The first is eternal, immutable, the Ur-principle of carnal love. The second is agitated, variable, pursued and filled by circumstance: in other words, it has a *history*. Hence the character of this second motive is *acquired* historically, so that, by the end of the cycle, it bears an enormous accumulation of meaning. By then it is overborne by personal tragedy and by the catastrophe of erotic love – a catastrophe which cannot be avoided, since the attempt to avoid it, as Alberich shows, is simply catastrophe of another kind. Freia's double theme captures a metaphysical truth about the erotic: that it is a mysterious synthesis of a primeval, pre-personal force, with that which is most intensely personal and most deeply compromised by time, history and circumstance. While the first is always pure delight, the second, which grows from it, is fraught with shame and fear and tragedy. Hence the first part of Freia's theme innocently soars, while the second part sinks constantly lower, borne up from time to time by a forlorn yet renewing hope, but ineluctably sinking nevertheless under the weight of its own tragic message.

When Ex. 6b reappears during the descent into Nibelheim, the context is again one of suffering, the ultimate cause of which is the first kind of love – Alberich's desire for the Rhinedaughters. The suffering is amplified by Alberich's inability to transcend the first kind of love, and by his foreswearing of the attempt. The music consequently curses love and its suffering, takes hold of the motive and hammers at it in order to annihilate its power. Ex. 11 is, as it were, beaten flat by the relentless 9/8 rhythm, losing all trace of organic emotion and transforming itself at last into the mechanical smithing theme of Nibelheim (Ex. 13). Only then does the augmented version – Ex. 12 – sound through the orchestra, now in tones of helpless lamentation for a world deprived of love in its personal form.



Return now to the motive as it appears in *Walküre*. Here it conveys not lamentation but a kind of grieving gentleness. Love has passed from the general to the particular; two individuals are in the grip of that anguished concern for each other which admits no substitutes, and in which the vocabulary of love – glance, caress, kiss, silence – has taken on another and higher meaning. Siegmund and Sieglinde are face to face, and the music outlines them with supremely erotic tenderness. At this new, personal level, the suffering of love is a premonition of bereavement, a recognition of the irreplaceability of another life, in which the self and its glance have become the focus of commitment. At this higher level, the suffering of love is also a vindication: a sign that the lovers have risen above the natural order and possessed themselves of the individuality and the freedom which justify the trouble of existence, and of which bereavement is the price.

There is a premonition of this higher state in *Rheingold*. Although the giants are initially attracted to Freia as a personification of love in its natural form, one of them, Fasolt, is afflicted by her beauty. He cannot, in the end, relinquish her, until she is hidden from view. The hair which shines above the piled-up hoard represents the incarnate object of love – that which is caressed by the lover for whom natural appetite has been transcended into personal tenderness. Freia's hair can be hidden only by the Tarnhelm, the thing which hides the individual behind an infinity of disguises. But Freia's glance – her *Blick* – remains, the direct expression of that individual self for which there are no substitutes and no disguises, and which is the focus of Fasolt's desire. It is at this point that Ex. 6a sounds in the orchestra, completed by Ex. 6b in its shortest possible statement. Only one thing can take away the glance of Freia, namely the thing which was forged by renouncing love. Freia is exchanged for the Ring. Fasolt seizes the Ring from Fafner, with the cry: 'Back, thief! the Ring is mine – it is due to me for Freia's glance' (*Mir blieb er für Freias Blick*).

This episode shows the meaning of the Ring: it is the spell which undoes love, by dissolving everything desired – even the object of love – in the stream of substitutes. Fasolt's premonition of suffering is verified immediately: he is murdered for the sake of this object without a use. This is not merely because the Ring is *wanted* by Fafner: it is because it has already colonised the soul of Fafner, telling him that the only love known to him – brother love – can be exchanged for something better.

In the fate of the giants we see, in fact, the artful way in which the political and the spiritual are fused. Of all the treaties and bargains struck in *Rheingold* it is only that between Wotan and the giants which has a genuine moral basis. Freia is promised in reward for a creative act, whereby something of value is brought into the world: Freia is the price of labour. Fasolt's touching description of the need of '*Uns armen*' for woman's beauty and charm, which the gods enjoy in abundance, makes it clear that the giants worked so hard precisely because love was to be their wage. Freia is not promised in exchange for an object, but in exchange for labour, and this labour embodies the soul of the giant, all that is 'properly his'. The Ring, therefore, is no mere trinket, but the means to transfer the goal of labour from use to exchange – from the intrinsic value of love, to the instrumental value of power. A creature whose essence is labour can accept this transfer only by losing his soul. He has wasted his self on a thing with no use.

In referring to love and power I am using the language of Wagner and his contemporaries. But the point can be put in a more up-to-date idiom. The Ring comes into being because Nature has been repudiated. It is the mark and product of a primordial alienation, a loss of that innocent contentment in which life is an end in itself. It casts its spell over all desire and all aspiration, so that everything – the Ring included – is demoted from end to means. That is what power amounts to: a perpetuum mobile which feeds on itself and knows no point of rest. The forging of the Ring involves,

therefore, a universal restlessness, which can be overcome only in the individual soul, by regaining, though at a higher and more self-conscious level, the sense of one-ness that was lost when the Natural order was left behind.<sup>8</sup> This higher unity occurs through love, which is, in Wagner, the symbol of every condition that can be understood and valued as an end in itself. The passage from Nature through power to love therefore has the structure of Hegel's dialectic: it is a passage from innocent one-ness and contentment, through alienation and separation, to a higher and freely chosen unity, in which the experience of value is regained. What is un-Hegelian in Wagner is precisely that which distinguishes him from all the young Hegelians: namely, his profound pessimism – or rather, his profound realism – which leads him to understand the final goal as simultaneously freedom and nothingness. Death knowingly accepted is the end of love and love's redemption.

If the Ring is crystallised power, however, why is it so useless to those who gain control of it? Nobody who possesses the Ring is able to keep it, or to use it to ward off danger. It is taken from Alberich by Wotan, from Fasolt by Fafner, from Fafner by Siegfried, from Brünnhilde by Siegfried; it is also the cause of Siegfried's death, against which it offers no protection. In what then lies its power – the power which is supposed to offer world-domination to the one who wields it?

Only one protagonist uses the Ring to gain power over others, and that is Alberich. By renouncing love he has already prepared the way for this power. He views others as instruments, means to his ends; hence he can avail himself of the gold – not only by forging it into the Ring, but also by using the Ring to enslave his fellows. What confers power on Alberich is not so much the Ring as the spiritual process – the self-alienation – which enables him to forge it. Only someone who had undergone that process – Mime, for example, or Hagen – could use the Ring as Alberich uses it, in order to enslave the world. For the free being the Ring is inert, a mere trinket.

Moreover, the possession of the Ring does not protect Alberich against those who live in the world of freedom and personality, as Wotan does. For – as the drama reveals – these free beings have a capacity to relinquish power. Only love, freely given, can satisfy their need for others, and their salvation consists in understanding that love demands mortality and therefore the acceptance of death. The Ring cannot protect Fasolt from Fafner, since the giants live in a world of brute strength, without intelligence, and even instrumental power has no clear meaning for them. Hence, having gained the Ring, Fafner can do nothing with it. He merely sleeps on the hoard, with no conception of its value. Nor can the Ring protect Fafner from Siegfried, who is immune to its charm. Yet it *does* protect Fafner from both Alberich and

8 The Ring is therefore a potent symbol of the regime of mass consumption, which is rapidly destroying the natural world. It is one of the oddities of the now standard *Marxisant* productions of Wagner's drama that the natural world is routinely banished from the stage. For this neutralises one of the most important political messages that the work conveys: namely, that power divorced from love is an ecological catastrophe.

Mime, because they live in the world of instrumental values, where the power of the Ring prevails. In an important sense, nevertheless, the power of the Ring remains, like the gold from which it was made, illusory.

We can understand this illusory quality if we return to the parallel with money – pure ‘exchange-value’. Money is entirely useless, except in so far as it can be exchanged for something useful. In an emergency you cannot eat it, fight with it, or shelter beneath its roof. Nor can you exchange it for love, kindness, friendship or anything else that is needed for self-growth and self-knowledge. Purchased love is not love but prostitution. Only when dealing with those who want money – who are themselves prey to the illusion of its usefulness – does money become useful, and only because it can be exchanged for other things. Its utility lies in the socially sustained illusion of its utility. Upon this illusion the institution of exchange is founded. Money has dominion only where people measure the value of everything in terms of what can be exchanged for it – in other words, only where nothing has value, but everything has a price.

Of course, that indictment is exaggerated. Nevertheless it was repeated and refined by the Young Hegelians, and bequeathed by them to Marx and Wagner. Moreover, it enables us to see more deeply into the Ring and its meaning, since it suggests another aspect of that impersonal power which prevails in Nibelheim. There is a ‘power illusion’, which parallels the money illusions studied by nineteenth-century economists – that is to say, an illusion of power which makes power real. It is exactly this that has been described by the witnesses to totalitarian government: a habit of fear and evasion, from which power arises ‘by an invisible hand’ – power which belongs to no one and which oppresses everyone, including those who appear to wield it.<sup>9</sup> Such is the power of the Ring, which while nominally Alberich’s, is in fact dispersed through the capillaries of Nibelheim, and perpetually regenerated from the illusion that someone – someone *else* – possesses it.

Wagner gives us a masterly portrayal of this illusory power, self-generated by those who fear it, in the passage which follows the Wanderer’s departure from Mime’s hut. (*Siegfried*, Act 1.) Mime stares out into the sunlit forest, dazzled by the light, and promptly gives way to his fear of Fafner the dragon. The music, playing with the magic fire motive and using keyless augmented chords, conveys the nature of Fafner’s power, which is the phantom product of Mime’s emotion. The real power which steps from behind the veil of illusion is not Fafner, but Siegfried, the hero who knows no fear. A profound inner drama is contained in this musical transition, and also in the ensuing scene, in which Mime tries to teach fear to the hero, but alerts him instead to

9 The *locus classicus* here is Václav Havel’s essay, ‘The power of the powerless’ (trans. Paul Wilson, in John Keane ed., *The Power Of The Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, London: Hutchinson, 1985), though of course the spiritual condition that he relates has been foretold many times: by Kafka, Orwell and Dostoevsky among others.

the mystery that sleeps in the heart of things, and which it is his personal destiny to awaken.<sup>10</sup>

But what of the curse? The dramatic logic of this is evident: Alberich exchanged love for the Ring, and did so by a curse. That he is robbed of the Ring, with which his soul is mingled, is the worst thing that could happen to him. So he says, in effect, to Wotan. Hence he must transfer the burden of the curse (which is the loss of love) to all who try to exploit his property. In the new world of exchange and mutation, the curse becomes transferable. It haunts the cycle thereafter, reminding us that nature has been deflected from its course, that all is unsettled and at odds with itself, that the cry from the deep must be answered, if the world's equilibrium is to be regained.

The curse acts at all four levels of the action: mythical, dramatic, political and spiritual. Curses have a particular importance in myths, for they attach the will of absent people to present objects – they symbolise the traps that are everywhere laid for the unwary, the inexplicable danger by which we are always surrounded, as we encroach on what has been fought for and died for by people whom we shall never know. A curse activates and makes present some part of the immeasurable suffering that precedes us.

Dramatically the curse is attached to a specific character and his projects. It is the means whereby Alberich's will and bitterness are projected forward through the drama, so as to poison everything that happens. This bold conception would have been impossible to realise with the force that Wagner intended had he not hit upon a brilliant musical idea, which is worth analysing if only because it again shows how the music welds the political and the spiritual into a single movement. The curse motive is built up, both melodically and harmonically, from thirds (Ex. 14). Here is how I would describe it: over a prolonged but muffled F sharp pedal on the timpani the melody rises from F sharp through the triad of A minor to E. These four notes form a half-diminished seventh – the chord which, suitably inverted and spaced, is the famous Tristan chord.<sup>11</sup> The melody drops an octave, and spells out the triad of C major, the F sharp still sounding in the base. All three notes of the C major triad are then sounded in the orchestra, using clarinets in the lowest register and bass clarinet. The resulting contaminated sound is poisoned still further by the F sharp pedal below. This, surely the murkiest C major triad in all music, sets up a bitter conflict in the ear of the listener, which continues as the triad is 'resolved' on to a discord – the dominant seventh with minor ninth on F sharp – so enabling the music to settle on B minor for Alberich's blood-curdling prophecy.

The motive divides into two parts: the half-diminished chord (A minor plus

10 I have analysed this subsequent scene in 'In defence of Wagner', an essay which has been published in Dutch in the journal *Nexus* 19, 1999 (Tilburg, Netherlands) devoted to *The Trial of Richard Wagner*.

11 See the discussion by Carl Dahlhaus, in John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 120–1.

Ex.14

Ex.15

Ex.16

F sharp), and the C major triad, both over an F sharp pedal. The first chord forms a harmonic condensation of the curse motive, and one that frequently reappears. (See Ex. 4 above.) The chord contains a tritone clash – C and F sharp – which is spelled out more overtly by the second half of the theme. This tritone becomes a central motive of evil in the *Ring* – as in the dragon's motive, Ex. 15, and Hagen's motive, Ex. 16. Extract it from the curse-chord, and what is left is a perfect fifth. The dialogue thus established between fifth and tritone is one of the leading ideas of *Götterdämmerung*, the fifth being associated with the Gibichungs, and the tritone with Hagen, in rhythmic patterns which emphasise their disturbing identity-in-difference. In the magnificent scene in which Brünnhilde and Siegfried swear on Hagen's spear, the melody, taken over by Brünnhilde, is harmonised over a succession of curse-chords. It first rises a fifth, and then settles on the curse-chord in its original key (Ex. 17). The falling fifth – E to A – is at once answered in the bass by the falling tritone – C to F sharp. The entire passage is constructed by the dialogue between these two intervals, miraculously woven into a musical structure in which heroic defiance and sneering venom move in mutual excitement. The curse never sounds in this passage: but it is there in the music, whose harmony and melody are both determined by it. Even what is most free and defiant – and surely there is nothing more defiant, more full of spirit, than this melody given first to Siegfried and then to Brünnhilde – has now been ensnared by the curse.

I give the example as one of many, in order to illustrate the way in which Wagner, by exploiting the musical potential of his motives, moves forward on the political and the spiritual levels simultaneously. The workings of power are displayed here, both in the public sphere of the Gibichung



Ex.17

household, poisoned by the presence of Hagen, and in the inner sphere of Brünnhilde's passion, where her heroic defiance is negated by the catastrophe that has undermined the public world.

The pedal note of F sharp is of some significance in understanding the dramatic potential of the curse motive, it being identical with G flat, the first note of Alberich's cry of woe in its B flat minor version – B-flat minor being the key of Alberich's most important music, as in the inspired prelude to Act 2 of *Götterdämmerung*, just as its relative major, D flat, belongs to Wotan. Keys had an enormous significance for Wagner; instead of reiterating a leitmotif, he would sometimes return to the key in which it first appears. (This often happens with the E major associated with Brünnhilde, and with Siegfried's C major.) The penultimate appearance of the curse begins with the curse-chord at its original pitch – an A minor triad over an F sharp pedal – as Brünnhilde, in her final soliloquy, informs Wotan that she knows and accepts what must be. Here the curse-chord is used to introduce the 'fate' motive (Ex. 21, in distorted and non-resolving harmonies (Ex. 18). The F sharp pedal continues until E flat sounds below it, the F sharp becoming G flat, the first note of the curse in a new statement. The curse-chord sounds now as a G flat minor triad, rendered unstable by the major sixth in the bass. This miraculously resolves to the Rhinedaughters' praise of the gold in its original harmonisation, recalling, in the A flat triad over an E flat bass, the key structure of the first scene of *Rheingold* (Ex. 19). Then, with a slight shift in the harmony, we find ourselves in D flat, for 'Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott!' (The curse occurs one final time, at its original pitch, as Hagen tries to snatch the Ring and is dragged to his death by the Rhinedaughters.)

Ex.18

This whole extended movement is condensed into the final cadence of *Götterdämmerung*, in which the curse-chord is treated as it sometimes was by baroque composers, as the subdominant minor – here as G flat minor, resolving through that mischievous added note, on to the D flat major of

Ex.19

Ex.20

Ex.21

the tonic (Ex. 20). This – Wagner’s favourite cadence (see especially the final bars of *Tristan*) – epitomises the story of *The Ring*: the resolution of Alberich’s curse by Wotan’s resignation. Key, harmony and musical movement all emphasise this spiritual process, which occurs not merely in the depths of things but throughout the observable cosmos. By purely musical means, Wagner has made the curse penetrate the world of his drama, and also work for and achieve its final quiescence.

That is one small instance of a general observation about the *Ring*. Whenever the action seems incomplete, contradictory or mysterious the puzzle is resolved by the music, so that we feel, even if we do not understand, the rightness of what is happening on the stage. It is primarily through the music that Wagner is able to project the cosmic drama of Alberich and Wotan into the background, so that it becomes part of everything that happens, so as to be re-enacted in the story of Siegfried and his death. In conclusion, therefore, I shall briefly attempt to show why the story of Siegfried is, as Wagner intended it to be, the focus and resolution of the drama.

At several points in the cycle Wotan and Alberich confirm their mysterious identity – the first is Licht-Alberich, the second Schwarz-Alberich. They arise from the same psychic condition, which is the separation of the individual from nature, and his need to affirm himself against it. Each acquires power by usurpation; and Wotan, in stealing the Ring, makes Alberich’s crime his own. Wagner’s conception parallels the story of man’s Fall. Just as in the

political realm, leisure, law and citizenship are made possible only at the cost of exploitation and exchange, so in the private sphere, personal freedom is dependent, in the end, on the apt deployment of power, and all that power implies by way of disloyalty. Even our highest emotions are polluted by the lust for substitutes, and when Siegfried receives from Hagen the drink that will wipe away the memory of Brünnhilde, the action makes explicit what is implicit in love itself. The inner identity of Wotan and Alberich illustrates Schopenhauer's description of original sin as the 'crime of existence itself'.

If we see the gods and Nibelungs in that way, then we will locate the moral centre of the drama where Wagner located it – in the story of Siegfried's death. The myth which frames this story and exalts it to an archetype, is only a projection into cosmic regions of the light generated by the Wälsung's lonely tragedy. This light is reflected in Wotan, whose character is bestowed by his equally lonely obsession with the mortals whom he has fathered, hoping to borrow and make use of their freedom. That Wotan is *unfree* in all the respects in which his mortal offspring are free is a corollary of his nature as a psychic residue. In effect he is their creation, made real by their suffering and by their (ineffective) prayers to him, and – in a spectacular inversion of Christian doctrine – Wotan must be redeemed by them, and redeemed precisely by sharing their mortality.

The logic of this becomes clear in Act 2 of *Walküre*, in Brünnhilde's encounter with Siegmund. The goddess, having announced the hero's death, is overcome by his selfless love and grief; as a result she identifies with his fate, so jeopardising and ultimately losing her godhead. The idea came from a hint in one of the Eddas; but the realisation of this extraordinary change of heart – or rather acquisition of heart – is one of Wagner's most original achievements. Here the verse makes a decisive contribution to the *Legenden-ton*, to borrow Schumann's apt expression: the avoidance of pronouns; the sequence of pregnant questions; the slow, magnificent unfolding of Siegmund's destiny like a great curtain being drawn back from the icy stars – such things recall the mystery of the Eddas, and also the Greek tragic stage.

The opening motive (usually known as the 'fate' motive – Ex. 21) is a perfect condensation, in music, of man's relation to the gods: an infinitely sorrowful 'why?' And the motive which follows (Ex. 22) is not merely a natural continuation of this question, but also, through its constantly evolving harmony and melodic drive – its almost unbearable search for an answering phrase – a confirming, substantiating, and making concrete of the metaphysical 'why?'.

Ex. 22 is a question, but also a yearning, and by giving it to Siegmund, and repeating it always with softer orchestration, Wagner illustrates two things: first the structure of man's relation to God, in which yearning and interrogation are the crucial ingredients; second the evolution in time of our predicament, the working of the great question into the heart of what is most personal – into love itself. At the same time the question never loses its *cosmic*



character, suggesting always that in death we face the mystery of creation, the illuminated edge between being and nothingness. (Hence Ex. 22 reappears in the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, accompanying each Norn as she passes the rope of fate to her sister.) The 'fall' of Brünnhilde into the world of mortal sympathy occurs when she suddenly takes up the motive, now inseparably joined to another in the bass associated with Wotan's frustration (Ex. 23). It is now Brünnhilde's turn to be penetrated by a metaphysical question, as she announces the immutable law of the gods, knowing it to be a sham:

You saw the Valkyrie's withering glance:  
With her you now must go!

This is set to Ex. 22, constantly punctuated by the memory of Wotan's suffering (Ex. 23), reminding us that Brünnhilde is also Wotan's other self. The climax comes when Brünnhilde tells Siegmund that the one who sent him the sword now sends him death, at which Siegmund gives way not to despair on his own account but to pitying love for Sieglinde, in a version of Ex. 6b (Ex. 24) – the whole passage shifting between D flat major and B flat minor, as if to remind us of the cosmic contest which is being played out in this intimate sphere. And then Siegmund turns on the Valkyrie with the cry 'Shame on him who bestowed the sword, if he give me shame, not victory!' This pierces Brünnhilde, since she is, in a sense, the very person whose will is being so acutely criticised. At this Ex. 24 is joined to a vigorous ascending chromatic scale, which recalls Wotan's anger at Fricka's victory

Ex.23

Ex.24

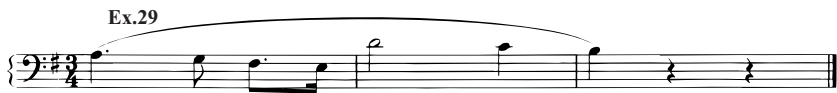


and his mental bequest of the world to Alberich (Ex. 25). Brünnhilde responds with her own amazed and brooding question – troubled beyond measure at the thought that someone might care more for a mortal woman than for all the joys of immortality. Exs 22, 23, and 25 are combined, and Ex. 22 elaborated (Ex. 26) to form the passionate denunciation which Siegmund then hurls at Brünnhilde and by implication at all the gods. Because Ex. 22 is always elaborated, but never answered, the music, which becomes ever more excited, with a wholly credible sympathy for Siegmund's predicament, passes the hero's defiance into the soul of Brünnhilde. In preventing him from killing Sieglinde, she acts as the immortal projection of his mortal will. From this moment the forces are in place that will lead to her own mortality.

Ex. 22 is later varied, to form the subject of the fugal chorus sung by the Valkyries in their vain attempt to protect Brünnhilde (Ex. 27). In this ironed-out and reharmonised version, the motive at last finds an answering phrase, Ex. 28b. This foreshadows Brünnhilde's pleading with Wotan, to grant that her incarnation in the world of mortals will also set her on the path of redemption (Ex. 29.) The completed melody sounds softly on the bass clarinet, as Brünnhilde steps forward to receive what is at first a punishment, in retrospect a redeeming gift (Ex. 28). The very fact that the passage is wordless, reminds us that we have been brought to this wholly convincing turn of events by the *musical* elaboration of Siegmund's defiance.<sup>12</sup>

Why does this concluding scene resolve the drama of *Die Walküre*? Why do the emotions of two doomed and mortal lovers find their quiescence between god and god? *Walküre* makes sense, it seems to me, only as a preparation for new life; all the protagonists, mortal or immortal, are committed to this life as the one thing that will validate their striving. This is explicitly conveyed in the scene between Brünnhilde and Sieglinde, when the Valkyrie hands over the fragments of the sword – the god's broken promise, which can be redeemed only by a man.

12 Porges gives a beautiful description of the melody in Ex. 29, in his account of Wagner's rehearsals. See Heinrich Porges, trans. Robert L. Jacobs, *Wagner Rehearsing the Ring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 72.



And then, at the end of the opera, after all these tragic conflicts have been not so much solved as dissolved in Brünnhilde, and are now held in solution in her, the drama returns to the same emotion: the emotion of the 'womb of time'. This secret, lying at the heart of nature and awaiting discovery, is the fruit of an obscure cooperation between god and man, in which the destiny of each is equally at stake. The unawoken wisdom of the world has come into being from transactions in which god and man, mortal and immortal, are equally necessary and equally compromised. That idea, and its realisation in music in which magic, wonder and grief are woven inextricably together, provides the most sublime moment of *The Ring*, the point between two worlds, where destiny is handed on from god to mortal – a moment whose authority, artistic, moral and metaphysical, ought not to be questioned by anyone who understands music.

At the end of *Die Walküre* the divine has been made flesh, and sleeps in vacant anticipation. The awakener is the individual, the free being who realises his freedom in the outward-going energy of love. *Siegfried* is a series of awakenings, as one by one the characters of the drama are confronted with their own predicament, and forced, too late, to acknowledge it. The last awakenings are the most significant. First Wotan's awakening of Erda, who in turn awakens Wotan to the intransigence of fate. Second, the scene between Brünnhilde and Siegfried, in which the hero is awakened first to fear and then to love, while Brünnhilde is awakened first to the radiance of mortal life, and then to the fateful love which is its consequence. In their mutual awakening,

the two lovers achieve the personal union which is the mortal incarnation of divinity – the flow of free emotion which occurs when individual love defies its mortal destiny, and briefly affirms itself as pure personality and will.

The magnificent prelude and summoning of Erda in Act 3 of *Siegfried* are vitally necessary even at the most superficial level of the action. Until Wotan's will has been shown once again to be deeply at variance with itself, still struggling in the midst of resignation, it will seem as though he merely *decides* to be angry with Siegfried and to block his passage. But in that case his gesture would be spurious. Wotan has understood that Siegfried's freedom will be a reality only if the hero defies him. In a sense, therefore, Wotan *offers* his spear to be shattered by Siegfried. But the anger that Wotan expresses in this scene is real, for it is a last surging of his divine autonomy, a final futile resistance to the knowledge that it must now be surrendered. It is also part of the process whereby the destiny of the world is transferred from god to man.

We should see this encounter in terms of Wagner's inversion of the Christian doctrine. God needs man for his salvation. In order to create the individual whom he needs, God must incarnate himself, and bestow on a mortal the apartness from nature which belongs in essence to the gods. God thereby endues man with freedom and individuality: the divine spark that shines in every human glance, but never in the eyes of an animal. In the world of mortals, however, freedom is a prelude to love, and therefore to a return to the natural order. Hence it demands the downfall of the gods. The eye which Wotan had sacrificed in order to obtain dominion over the world is now looking at him from Siegfried's head. In other words, the need for Siegfried – for redemption at a mortal's hands – arose at the very moment of seizing power (an Ur-moment lost in the depths of things).

Siegfried's emergence as an individual coincides with the neutralisation of Wotan's will and hence with the spiritual nemesis of the gods. As Siegfried emerges on to those strange heights, having unknowingly robbed the world of force (the giants), and law (the spear), and bearing only the dangerous link (the Ring) which once united them in conflict, the old order of things is at an end. Now there is only the individual, without god, without community (except a community founded on broken oaths and contracts). His alone is the task of personal redemption, through recognition of the other and of himself in the other. This brief moment of individuality, when all that we have received from the gods is transferred downwards (but only at the summit) into human life itself – this final self-recognition of man as the root cause and reason of all that surrounds him – is the last, tragic, uncertain gift of history, the soul's sudden awareness as it falls from the brink. And it is here that the real drama – the drama of the individual – begins.

I shall conclude by summarising what Wagner has achieved at the point when Siegfried and Brünnhilde awaken to each other, so as to begin their rash defiance of the world. Wagner has created a drama in which those forces which constrain our freedom are fully personified. First there is nature and

species-life: that which refreshes us, and which also sets impassable limits to what we can be. Second, there is authority, law and civilisation: forces that exist both around us and within, and which inspire us to transcend mere nature, in search of personality, freedom and love. Third, there is power, intrigue and exploitation: forces which also defy nature, but which set themselves against the order of personality. If we were to look to a philosopher as authority for this three-fold division of the human predicament, it would not be Feuerbach or Hegel or even Schopenhauer, but the thinker who inspired them all, namely Kant. Wagner has found the way to dramatise, through myth and music, the predicament of humankind as modern man receives it and as Kant described it. As persons, we exist apart from nature; we can abuse our apartness by taking the path of instrumentality and power; or we can strive for a kingdom of ends, a world of intrinsic values, each member of which is an end in himself.

Unlike Kant, however, Wagner saw that the critical moment in the development of personality is the erotic: the point at which sympathy for another person is precisely *fed* by nature, so as to translate the great force of species-life into a project in which freedom and personality are fulfilled and also jeopardised. It is in this project that I come face to face with what I am, both for myself and for the other. But the project is fatally qualified by species-life, and also by the temptation to reject love and its uncertainty for the trodden path of power – as Hunding does – or the more insidious path of exchange. Many playwrights have explored the trials and illusions of erotic love. But words confine us to a specific dramatic situation, in which the protagonists are those who are speaking *now*. In *The Ring* Wagner animates his characters with music that has acquired its meaning from sources *outside* them – from the nature and the temptation with which they are simultaneously at war. This musical material – transformed and transcended into a new and wholly personalised idiom – *shows* what cannot be *said*: it displays the individual, in the highest form of love, as fatally ensnared in forces which lie beyond the province of his will. This is our predicament, which compels us to accept what nature and power refuse: death not passively submitted to, but willed.

If we see the cycle in that way, then its culmination in the story of Siegfried and Brünnhilde is entirely logical. Siegfried, for all his mythic and medieval trappings, represents a distinctly modern project. He is born, raised and brought to manhood as an isolated individual. He finds love and self-knowledge only through the encounter with a woman more solitary than himself. Everything that gives sense to our life on earth – custom, community, religion and obedience – has been excised from Siegfried's world. Indeed, he himself has destroyed them. He smashes the spear of Wotan, not knowing its cosmic significance but only its significance for *him*, and so ends the rule of the gods. All those things upon which we unknowingly depend for our personal fulfilment – law, custom and obedience, to name but three – have



vanished. The consequent urgency of erotic love, as our last remaining refuge, is the starting point of Siegfried's drama. But love between mortals cannot sustain itself, outside the laws, treaties and institutions of the world that has vanished. Mortality asserts its sovereign power, which is the power of forgetting. Having shattered Wotan's spear, Siegfried enters a world where all oaths are broken and all promises forgotten; where the moral law has lost its influence, and every attempt at transcendence leads sooner or later to disaster. This is our world – the world since Enlightenment – and it is brilliantly dramatised in *Götterdämmerung*. Just as Siegfried was a series of awakenings, so is *Götterdämmerung* a series of oaths, each one broken in the very act of making it. The oaths take us through all the old comforts of humanity – community, tribal loyalty, household, friendship, marriage – as well as through the dark workings of an implacable revenge. But the real meaning of Siegfried's life is hardly touched by them. Only as he dies, surveying his path to self-discovery, does he remember the moment of personal transcendence which is the meaning of all that he has done both before and since.

The drink of forgetfulness, given by Hagen to Siegfried, stands proxy for something else. In *Götterdämmerung*, as in *Tristan*, magic potions signify our subjection to forces which operate from a region outside our control – forces which enter through the body, and dictate to the soul from an unknowable place beyond it. In an illuminating article,<sup>13</sup> Michael Tanner describes the drink given to Siegfried as a dramatic condensation of a long process of corruption: and this is evidently true. (The journey down the Rhine takes only a few minutes of music: but we must understand those minutes musically, not temporally.) But there is something more, something contained in the very idea of magic as Wagner conceives it. This something more is the fact from which modern tragedy derives (by 'modern' I mean the tragedy which pertains to those who have staked their all on the project of individual existence) – that the most important things, those things in which the spirit has invested everything, those things which really *are* the self, in so far as we understand it: that those very things may disappear, eroded by a force which we neither control nor understand, and yet which operates in us. Hence it is important that a *drink* should cause Siegfried's faithlessness – for drink, the symbol of all intoxication, enters us from outside, and at the same time operates from within, as though it had *become* the spirit in the act of *overcoming* it.

The first effect of the drink is to provide Siegfried with a substitute for his love. Siegfried follows in Alberich's footsteps, along the way of all flesh. But he has not yet fallen to Alberich's level. For he is not aware that he has exchanged his beloved and therefore his identity. Nor does he ever become aware of this. Those who find the character of Siegfried unsatisfactory are

13 'The total work of art', in Peter Burbage and Richard Sutton eds, *The Wagner Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979).

often troubled by the unconsciousness that obliterates such vast areas of his psyche. But the missing consciousness is supplied at another level by the music, which shows a hero realising himself as a free individual, while entirely at the mercy of forces that are hidden from his innocent gaze.

The interpretation that I have proposed suggests a solution to the final puzzle of *The Ring* – the raising of Siegfried's dead hand, so as to withhold the Ring from Hagen. As the miracle occurs, the sword motive sounds in the orchestra – a reference to Siegfried's will, which he put in to the Ring, first in winning it, second in giving it as a love-pledge to Brünnhilde, and finally in wresting it from her by force. Some part of Siegfried's will survives in this ring, unpurged by his extinction – namely the part that committed itself to Brünnhilde with an 'eternal' promise, a promise that reaches beyond death in just the way that we now witness. (This is why Brünnhilde is already 'intimate' with the miracle, and might even seem to be its author.) All else has been extinguished – the winning, the wresting: these were events in time, whose significance has been superseded. Only the bestowing of the Ring in the vow of love lifted it above the order of time and destruction: hence the curse motive did not sound in that passage, and the lovers willingly and exultantly accepted their deaths as they pledged their love, so making clear that *the curse cannot harm them*.

When the dead hand rises, it is to execute the inextinguishable meaning of the vow, and to summon Brünnhilde to death beside her husband. This is the purified remnant of Siegfried's will, from which all the dross of mortality has been purged.

The scene reminds us of the meaning of mortmain in law: the will which survives *in* an object after the conscious life that ordered it has fled. The 'dead hand' survives in our loves, too, but only for the shortest time – which is why Brünnhilde must die before the magic of forgetfulness takes over. The beauty of Siegfried's dead gesture is that it contains everything in him that could have survived as an object of Brünnhilde's love – all that his will had meant by way of giving and renunciation. Siegfried's life-project has been finally accomplished, and the old order – the order that intended Siegfried and was also fulfilled in him – must now come to an end.

# Moral depth and pictorial art

*John Armstrong*

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### I

In the long history of visual art, painters have frequently endowed their pictures with moral content. The art of painting was, for long periods, largely given over to the presentation of individuals, actions and events that were held to be noble or good or worthy of respect and were presented as such.

But it has seemed to some theorists that painting could do more than delineate the objects of moral regard: it could, in the work of a sufficiently accomplished painter, enhance moral understanding. In fact the belief that paintings can make a substantial contribution to ethical understanding is at work in certain historically important conceptions of art and beauty. One influential thesis was this: visible beauty intimates spiritual beauty and spiritual beauty is an aspect of the Good. The painter can create images whose visible beauty surpasses that of any natural object and can, therefore, provide the spectator with a special opportunity for the recognition of spiritual beauty. Such recognition is itself a central feature of moral existence.<sup>1</sup> Another account of the moral vocation of pictorial art was advanced by Ruskin. The proper aim of painting is the faithful recording of visual appearance, specifically those appearances which convey the most important truths about their subject matter. And because of his convictions about the purposes of God, Ruskin took it that such truths were the foundation of moral existence.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 The central figure in this tradition is Plotinus. Plotinus conceived of goodness and evil partly in aesthetic terms: the good soul is beautiful and the evil soul is ugly. See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), I.6, V.8.
- 2 In an extraordinary passage, which I quote at length, Ruskin suggests that the great artist can unfold for us the deepest and rarest truths about the world, truths which are central to any proper scheme of values. In other words, they are ethical truths:

A man is known to his dog by his smell – to his tailor by his coat – to his friend by the smile: each of these know him, but how little or how much depends on the dignity of the intelligence. That which is truly and indeed characteristic of the man is known only to God. One portrait of a man may possess exact accuracy of feature, and no atom of expression; it may be, to use the ordinary terms of admiration bestowed on such portraits by those whom they please, ‘as like as it can stare’. Everybody, down to his

Each of these claims – which I have abbreviated to the point of caricature – relies upon a framework of metaphysical assumptions which most people now find incredible. Neither can be used to support the claim that pictorial art can advance moral understanding; but each is testament to the fact that serious and intelligent lovers of painting have thought that it could.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether the general contention – that paintings can contribute to moral understanding – can be sustained. I examine and contrast two very different works, one by Sassetta and one by Poussin. Both have overt moral content but only the Poussin, I argue, makes a contribution to moral understanding.

Sassetta's panel, now in the National Gallery in London, shows St Francis giving his cloak to a poor soldier.<sup>3</sup> This early fifteenth-century Siennese work depicts a well-known act of charity from the celebrated life of the saint. The moral significance of the act is indicated by various features of the painting. The man giving the cloak is dignified by a halo and the cloak itself is painted with ultramarine blue – a pigment more costly than gold leaf.<sup>4</sup> The recipient

cat, would know this. Another portrait may have neglected or misrepresented the features, but may have given the flash of the eye, and the peculiar radiance of the lip, seen only in his hours of highest mental excitement. None but his friend would know this. Another may have given none of his ordinary expressions, but one which he wore in the most excited instant of his life, when all his secret passions and all his highest powers were brought into play at once. None but those who had then seen him might recognise this as like. But which would be the most truthful portrait of the man? [. . .] The third has caught the trace of all that was most hidden and most mighty, when all hypocrisy and all habit and all petty and passing emotion – the ice and the bank, and the foam of the immortal river – were shivered and broken and swallowed up in the awakening of its inward strength; when the call and claim of some divine motive had brought into visible being those latent forces and feelings which the spirit's own volition could not summon, nor its consciousness comprehend; which God only knew, and God only could awaken: the depth and the mystery of its peculiar and separating attributes. And so it is with external nature: she has a body and a soul like a man; but her soul is the Deity. It is possible to represent the body without the spirit; and this shall be like [seem to be a likeness] to those whose senses are only cognizant of the body. It is possible to represent the spirit in its ordinary and inferior manifestations; and this shall be like to those who have not watched for its moments of power. It is possible to represent the spirit in its secret and high operations; and this shall be like only to those to whose watching they have been revealed. All these are truth; but according to the dignity of the truths he can represent or feel, is the power of the painter, – the justice of the judge.

(John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume I, Part II, Section I, Chapter II, Division 8)

- 3 The panel comes from a series painted around 1440 and would not originally have had a title of its own. Until quite recently it was known as *St Francis and the Poor Gentleman*; it is now called *St Francis Giving his Cloak to a Poor Knight*.
- 4 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 11. Baxandall shows that the commercial value of this pigment was well known and that this knowledge would have coloured the experience of the educated contemporary spectator of Sassetta's work.



Figure 9.1 Sassetta, *Saint Francis Giving Away his Clothes and Saint Francis Dreaming* (c. 1440). Reproduced here by kind permission of the National Gallery, London.

has no shoes – so we know he is poor. In the sky, above the action, floats a small castle. It represents the heavenly city, of which St Francis is said to have had a vision the night before he gave away his rich garments. And in fact we see him sleeping, in a charming bed, located on the lower right of the panel – a fairly common pictorial response, in the period, to the problem of narrative sequence. To any but a completely uninformed spectator of the time the moral content of the picture would be transparent. Charity is a virtue; one which the spectator is enjoined to cultivate in himself and admire in others. Such a picture might well have a salutary effect upon those who contemplate it. The elegantly painted panel is a prestigious and attractive object and this may lend authority to its important message; it may incite reflection on our own charitable actions, or the lack of them. By providing an image of memorable lucidity and grace, it may help keep the idea of charity fresh and present in our minds. Such a picture might, therefore, play an interesting role in an individual's moral existence. Nevertheless there are grounds for doubting that it does so by making a contribution to moral understanding.

There are three features of the moral content of this picture to which I want to draw attention. First, its derivative character; second, its discursive simplicity; and, third, its weak relation to the aesthetic character of the work.

When Sassetta painted this panel it was entirely orthodox to regard charity as a cardinal virtue, as indeed it is today. And St Francis was already regarded as an exemplary man. The painter is not responding to the question: why is St Francis a good man?; or, why is charity a virtue? Those questions are regarded as settled. Rather he is seeking to provide an attractive, even beautiful, image which will illustrate the conclusions: St Francis is a good man; he is doing a good deed.<sup>5</sup>

Over a long period Christianity had developed a sophisticated discourse around the idea of charity. The question why we should be charitable had been approached in various ways – for example, through interpretation of the teaching and example of Christ; through Augustine's psychology of happiness (selfishness, he argued, makes happiness impossible). The question of what makes an action charitable had also been seriously considered. Is an action charitable only if it contributes to the good of another? In which case we need to know what use they will make of our donation. Is charity only a virtue if you miss what you give? As was well known at the time, St Francis soon gave away all his possessions and regarded complete poverty as a blessing. Is this the best kind of charity?<sup>6</sup>

- 5 The derivative status is not tied to the content's being commonplace. A painter with the unusual conviction that St Francis was a very bad man, and who replaced the halo with a set of horns, could still have painted a derivative picture with respect to the moral content. The rationale for the conviction is offstage; we are presented, as it were, with an illustration of a conclusion.
- 6 Central to the Christian view is the parable of 'the widow's mite'. 'And he [Jesus] looked up and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a poor widow

When we consider the picture in relation to this discourse, it is evident that it has nothing to contribute to our understanding of any of these issues. Through the use of the halo and precious pigment the picture simply asserts the commonplace conviction that St Francis performed a good deed in giving away his cloak. The moral content of the picture is thin and insubstantial in comparison with the complexity and subtlety of Christian ethics. Sassetta's picture does not seem to engage with those issues: it does not tell us anything about the nature of charity or about its human worth. It does not enrich our understanding of the morality of the action it illustrates. It is not, morally considered, a deep work. However, it would be a mistake to see this as a failing on the part of the artist. There is no reason to believe that Sassetta sought, but failed, to endow his picture with more complex or subtle moral content.

Sassetta's picture might stimulate moral reflections of the greatest subtlety and insight – but such reflections are the work of the spectator not achievements of the artist. To the sensitive and intelligent individual any object can be the starting point for moral reflection. In making these reflections the spectator is not grasping the content of the work but reflecting upon the content.

Even in cases where an artist has tried to elaborate a more complex content the core problem of simplification remains. *The Last Day in the Old Home* (Tate Gallery, London) painted in 1861 by Robert Braithwaite Martineau shows a youngish man (the head of the family) who has lost his family fortune through gambling on horses. Around him we see the accumulated wealth of generations which is about to be auctioned and dispersed; but the man is unaffected; he lifts a champagne glass and teaches his young son to drink a toast. Propped against the wall is a picture of a race-horse. The content is (by the standards of painting) quite complicated and this picture is famous as an example of pictorial narrative. But in comparison with serious moral discourse the work is simple. Pictures are – in virtue of the limits of the art form – seriously restricted in their capacity to engage with moral understanding. For example, the picture cannot articulate differences in modality: are we to think that the son might imitate his father, or that he will do so – is he exposed to a corrupting force, which he may in time resist, or is he already corrupted? To what extent could the father have behaved

casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all of these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had' (Matthew, 21, 1–4). The cost to the giver is, here, what matters from a moral point of view. For a helpful study of St Augustine's psychological thesis see Hannah Arendt, *Love and St. Augustine* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 18–24. Aquinas argued that the 'natural' purpose of material goods is the alleviation of human needs. 'Whatever a man has in superabundance is owed by natural right to the poor for their sustenance' (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 66, a. 7, c. [*An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), p. 384]).

otherwise – was he himself corrupted before he could develop any independence of character? Such questions which are surely central to the discourse of morality are not addressed by this picture and, perhaps, could not be addressed by any picture.

In comparison with literature, philosophy and ordinary discussion, painting may seem a feeble resource for moral investigation. The best a painter can do, it might seem, is to convey attractively moral values we espouse; the worst is to convey attractively values we reject. What seems to be impossible is that the art of painting should itself be the arena in which moral understanding is generated.

Sassetta was an accomplished artist but the exercise of his artistry was not required in endowing the picture with the moral content it has. The status of St Francis as morally exemplary is indicated by the presence of a halo. And the halo has the symbolic value it does whether or not it is very skilfully drawn. The importance of giving the coat is marked by the kind of pigment used, but it did not require much skill or imagination on the part of the artist to depict the cloak in this way. The picture has considerable aesthetic merit: the outlines of the figures are clean and elegant; both the saint and the poor soldier have a refinement of pose; the little building off to the right, in which the saint is shown asleep, is delicately painted. The floating castle is rather sweet. But we do not need to see these qualities in order to grasp the moral content of the work.

The morally relevant features of the work are not ‘syntactically replete’ – to use Goodman’s phrase.<sup>7</sup> The constitutive aspects of the cloak – constitutive with respect to its moral significance – are expressly and narrowly specified. The particular outline it has, the depiction of the folds, its absolute size on the surface of the panel could all be changed without changing its moral significance. Of course, such changes might be detrimental to the work considered aesthetically.

7 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1962), pp. 229–30. Goodman illustrates his notion of ‘syntactic repleteness’ by way of an example. Consider two visually indistinguishable images – one a momentary electrocardiogram, the other a drawing of Mt Fujiyama by the great Japanese artist Hokusai. In the graph, only the points through which the line passes have significance. (The ‘syntax’ of the line is such that, in principle, between any two points there is a third, different in significance from either of the original pair.) The colour of the line, its thickness, the quality of the paper on which it is printed, its absolute size: these are irrelevant to its meaning. However in the case of the picture of the mountain every one of these features is important; a slight variation in any of them would change the character of the work. The meaning of the graph is sensitive to change only with respect to one visual aspect. The meaning of the picture is sensitive to change with respect to any aspect of its visual appearance: this is what Goodman means by ‘replete’.



**II**

With this sort of case clearly in view we can ask whether it represents the full extent of visual art's capacity for moral content. Is it possible for a work of art to possess a deeper moral content; and – if so – to what extent is its possession of such content bound up with the exercise of artistry on the part of the painter? In what way, if at all, can a specifically artistic and pictorial presentation of moral content matter to the spectator with respect to moral understanding? Is painting, at best, simply an attractive mode of presenting a thought which could, in fact, be more adequately rendered in another way; or do the resources of vision, handled with artistic skill, have some specific and special contribution to make to moral understanding?

*Landscape with the Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion* was painted by Poussin in 1648. For its intended audience, the story – which was famous through Plutarch's telling of it – would have been well known. Unjustly condemned as a traitor, the aged Phocion was forced to drink hemlock. Consequently he was denied the right to have his remains buried on Athenian soil. His body was carried to the nearby city-state of Megara and burned outside the walls and without adequate rites. The following night a loyal serving woman – Poussin, following an inadequate translation, believed it was his widow – came out to Megara and collected his ashes. And it is this scene which the picture illustrates.

It is, at first sight, a strange kind of illustration. The widow occupies only a very small part of the surface of the canvas. We can just make out the features of her face; there are white accents on her dress but much of her figure is obscure. Her compact, crouching form is in the starkest contrast to the majesty and spaciousness of the rest of the picture. This is a striking instance of a fairly well-established pictorial procedure: the subversion of visual order. The title of the work gives prominence to the woman and her action; but the city, mountains, trees and sky are visually much more eminent. It might be argued that the story from Plutarch is just a learned excuse for depicting a pleasant landscape with buildings. The classical reference raises the work from being a mere landscape to the exalted category of history painting. This was certainly true of the work of Poussin's contemporary and friend, Claude Lorraine. It seems clear that in most of Claude's paintings the figures are there for the sake of the landscape. The landscape has nothing to tell us about the figures.

However, there is reason to think that the relationship between the figure of the widow and the rest of the Phocion picture is more complex and interesting than this. Consider the use of the subversion of visual order in a remarkable picture, *Fishmarket with Ecce Homo* by Jan Bueckelaar (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm) dated 1570. In that work the foreground is dominated by a market scene with stalls selling fish and bread; it is only in the far distance that we can just make out the tiny figure of Christ. If we did



Figure 9.2 Nicholas Poussin, *Landscape with the Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion* (1648). Reproduced here by kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

not know the title of the work we might very easily fail to notice the figure of Christ. Thomas Puttfarcken has drawn attention to the way such a device generates moral content:

We are invited to interpret, to assess our own position both to the fish-market in front and to the Ecce Homo behind and actively to re-evaluate the respective importance of each for us. Yet this is primarily a moral and spiritual question, and the material we need to resolve it is present and recognizable partly in us, in our knowledge of spiritual and religious hierarchies, and partly in the display of the pictorial world before us.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the visually eminent scene is not just a chance setting in which the smaller, but morally significant, portion of the picture is lodged. Rather the reversal of expectation is used to make a point. In making sense of the picture we are invited (even required) to consider the foreground scene in the light of the sacred scene background. We see Christ's mission being played out in an everyday setting. We are, perhaps, reminded of how our own priorities in life may display a similar reversal of proportion.

Following this suggestion, recognition of the moral content of Poussin's picture may require that we 'spread our attention over the rest of the picture'.<sup>9</sup> Many elements of the picture seem, at first sight, nothing to do with its moral content. They may easily appear as padding or decoration; they make it visually interesting or attractive but have no direct bearing upon its moral content.

Consider, for example, the depiction of the part of the city which we see in the middle band of the canvas. The buildings accord with Poussin's understanding of what a Greek city of the period might have looked like. This reconstruction gives us a sense of witness – we are with her as she performs her risky but pious task. The imaginative realism of the setting sets the tone of the picture so that we feel that we are seeing the act as it might have happened. There is, in this way, a pitiful contrast between her furtive efforts and the apparent calm and ease of the city: the marble temples, the athletes at their games. Phocion was cast out from just such an attractive architectural world; his widow – in her loyalty to him – is severed from it. The path of dignity is walked alone. In other words, our sense of her isolation is furthered by the attractiveness of the city. This is to see the city as the setting for the action. There are, however, other ways in which we may relate the city to the woman. Ways, that is, in which we may see the visually eminent features of the work as relevant to its moral content.

8 Thomas Puttfarcken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 42.

9 Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 220. Wollheim discusses the Phocion picture but this phrase occurs in his consideration of another Poussin work, the *Landscape with Diogenes*.

Poussin regularly gave the buildings in his pictures a symbolic significance. In *The Exposition of Moses*, of 1654 (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) for example, we see, in the background, the famous form of the Castel St Angelo – originally built in Rome as the tomb of the Emperor Hadrian; it eventually became the papal fortress. Its presence in Egypt many hundreds of years before its construction is not some absurd anachronism or geographical oversight. On the contrary, it alludes to the belief that the Church of Rome is the direct and true descendant of Moses. God's protection of Moses (seen in this picture at the point of maximum vulnerability as he is set upon the waters of the Nile) is presented as a conspicuous moment within a general providential history of the Church. The physical fact of the building is a final material realisation, a completion, of God's care of the Church.

The ordered, beautiful city which rises above Phocion's widow stands in a similar relationship to her action. The perfect city is the realisation of the woman's action. Her loyalty to a good man and her refusal to bow to an unjust proscription, her maintenance of an ideal in the face of persecution, is the moral foundation of the city. By her action she participates in and helps to bring into being the perfect human community; and by our appreciation of the painting we participate too.

Poussin has clearly sought that we should find the scene compellingly attractive. We are required to see this not just as a depiction of a particular city but, in addition, as an image of the perfect city – the built expression of the good society. And, crucially, this is intimated not through convention or by reliance upon abstract learning. The artist has worked to make this vision appealing: he has painted the green lawns before the temple with an eye to the appeal of their cool shade, he has grouped the buildings to feed our yearning for such a habitat. Much of the city is hidden from us, behind the trees and the rocks; we see the tops of towers and domes behind the central, high out-crop of rock. In reality the picture is 178 cm in width and 116 cm in height. This scale allows the spectator to see much of the detail which is inevitably obscured in reproduction. Gazing at the picture we might spend much time looking at the actions of the figures by the water, we might make our imaginative way in between the buildings.

When we attend to the picture in this way the city is seen as a product of the woman's devotion and respect for a dead and noble man. Her action encapsulates, enacts in microcosm, precisely the qualities upon which the good society is founded, and it is those qualities which are themselves embodied in the buildings. It took artistic skill and imagination to endow the painting with this character.

What is it that makes her action seem noble? One of the things is its harmony with a vision of social order and of human life – not the lives we actually do lead but the lives we feel a longing to live. The spectator is invited to an aesthetic response – a response to the beauty and human dignity of the city – which is itself related to the way in which the woman's action

is seen. It takes imagination to see the city not just as a backdrop but additionally as an evocation of certain values which are then also recognised in her conduct.

This is a work which is composed to a very high degree. Within the picture every element is visually and intellectually justified in terms of its role in relation to the rest. But our apprehension of this, in our engagement with the painting is, in turn, relevant to our engagement with its depicted content. The woman is an element within a pictorial scheme which is much larger than her. She does not look up at the sky or the trees or the city. Her attention is wholly given over to a patch of dust, over which she crouches in the archetypal posture of those who lack power and dignity. We are not invited to think of her as aware of the splendour which the artist has created around her. We see what she does not see – the grandeur of her action.

### III

The notion of ‘seeing from’ – where the position from which we see is psychological, rather than spatial – is crucial to an understanding of how certain pictures work. I want to invoke this perceptual process to add one more layer to our understanding of the Poussin picture. But to give some precision to this notion I want first to examine it in relation to another, much simpler, picture where it is exemplified with great clarity.

One of the few portraits by Eugene Delacroix, one which hangs in the National Gallery in London, depicts a young man of twenty-eight, the artist’s friend and fellow painter, Baron Schwitzer. The Baron is shown close up standing on a terrace, and behind and below him runs a quiet garden, with cypress trees in the distance. The mood of the garden, seen at dusk, is sombre but tranquil; it is redolent of quiet and serious self-absorption. And it seems clear that the choice of setting and the mood it conveys is not accidental. It is not meant, as another painter might have meant it, simply to record the particular setting in which the artist happened to see his friend. It displays an aspect of the man: the mood of the garden is the man’s mood. More than that (and this is the point I wish to hold onto) it is designed to frame our contemplation of the man. That is, we must be in touch with such a frame of mind if we are to see him as the painter intends. It is when we see him from within a certain attitude – from within a certain frame of mind – that we are in a position to appreciate his character and qualities.

It is a general truth of our engagement with other people that their virtues and attractive qualities may easily pass us by if we do not find the right point of view from which to see them as individuals. Snobbery, for example, is the tendency to see people exclusively from the point of view of social standing; and from this point of view many aspects of personality are irrelevant and invisible. This is a crude instance of a process which is often much more subtle. We could imagine, for example, that when the Baron walks out of

Delacroix's picture and goes into dinner he might end up with people who will think him dull and unimpressive. Their engagement with him (we might suppose) will be framed by their mood of frivolity and excited vanity. Seen from this point of view the Baron is uninteresting. Delacroix's message to the dinner guests is this: calm down, think of the mood of which the garden is expressive, remember or imagine what it is like to feel drawn to such an atmosphere. Now see what you can make of Baron Schwitzer.

The point can be put more formally in the following way. The portrait, in its landscape element, expresses a mood. To recognise the expressive aspect of the picture is to be in a particular frame of mind.<sup>10</sup> From within that frame of mind the spectator then sees the Baron, the 'subject' of the portrait. Seen from within this frame of mind the Baron appears interesting, attractive and sympathetic.

In Poussin's *Ashes of Phocion* the same relation is at work. The visually eminent portions of the work have a complex expressive aspect. The picture asks us to view the woman's action from within the frame of mind constituted by recognition of that expressive aspect. We see what she does through the atmosphere of the picture. This atmosphere is one of solemnity, repose, and the sober awareness of the difficulties of existence. An emotional and cognitive 'background' is constructed in the picture. It matters for the moral content of the picture that the evening sky glimmers with the last light of afternoon, that pale clouds are streaked with darker bands of colour, that the clumps of trees on each side of the foreground have a monumental and gloomy quality. The massive rocks above the temple have a grand solidity and permanence. It is by these devices that the spectator's sense of solemnity and grandeur is elicited. They help generate the mood within recognition of which we are invited to contemplate the woman's action.

In this picture it is only via aesthetic experience that we can properly grasp the moral content. It is only through appreciation of its composition, of mood and atmosphere, of the visual appeal of the city, of the grandeur of the trees and the rocks, that we can come to recognise the moral content that the work has. It follows from this that changes in these qualities would change the moral content of the picture. If the sky looked very different, or the city

10 It has widely – and correctly – been argued that the criterion of recognising the expression of emotion in a painting cannot be that the work puts the spectator into the state of being in that emotion. There is disagreement about the correct way to specify the state of mind that does constitute recognition of the expressive aspect of the picture. Nevertheless an adequate elucidation of that state of mind will have to accommodate at least the following: that in seeing the expressive aspect, the spectator is richly aware of what it is to be in the emotional condition expressed by the work. Whether this awareness draws upon recollection or projection or on some other imaginative capacity remains in dispute. The point I am concerned with does not require a precise elucidation of the condition of recognition. It relies only on a feature of that state, a feature which more detailed accounts try to explain. Namely that there is some species of intimate awareness of the character of the emotion which the work expresses.

were not so noble and appealing, then the woman's action would not be framed in the same way. The features of this work by which its moral content is constituted are syntactically replete.

The Poussin picture, therefore, stands at the opposite extreme from Sassetta's panel – with respect to the way in which moral content is generated in the picture and to the extent to which the work contributes to moral understanding. Clearly they do not exhaust the possible ways in which pictures can have moral content.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV

One of the central questions which any account of moral content in art has to face is this: what explains our continued return to a picture? Why do we go back again and again to the same work? This is an important feature of our actual relationship with works of art. If we think of the picture as propounding a particular moral content, we will (as soon as we appreciate the work) fully grasp that content. Why should we return to it? And if we return specifically to the moral aspect of the picture this raises questions about the nature of that aspect. What do we return to the picture for?

The notion of state of mind – elicited by recognition of the work's expressive character – from which we regard the depicted action, however, provides a strategy of explanation. We may value a particular frame of mind but find it hard to retain in ordinary life; it might be under threat internally and externally. Think of the artist who strives to make visual objects which express tranquillity and ease but who is – in fact – generally subject to bile and irritation. The power of the work lies not in its presentation of his ordinary state but in its capacity to give a point of refuge and point of return to something which is, precisely, vulnerable and fleeting – yet highly valued. The return, therefore – the draw – is to be understood partly with reference to the frame of mind which the picture encapsulates – at once valuable and vulnerable – making its reappropriation via the painting both intelligible and desirable.

This corresponds to a general feature of moral psychology. Suppose, for example, one has committed some act of folly which might well be deprecated

11 One obvious gap should at least be mentioned: the role of observation and depiction. The Phocion picture does not convey its moral content primarily by depiction of the action with which it is concerned. Of course the widow is depicted but we could gain no moral understanding at all from scrutiny of that portion of the canvas on which her figure is sketched. It is not what the woman looks like which matters, but the point of view from which we contemplate her. The contrast when we consider a painter like Rembrandt is dramatic. Consider the late self-portrait in the Wallace Collection. The picture's moral significance depends almost entirely upon the visual scrutiny to which Rembrandt has subjected his own face, and on the way in which this scrutiny is recorded in the created image. This kind of observation is a natural part of moral experience, not least because the look on another person's face is linked to the experience of love, sympathy, tenderness and remorse.

by others. Acutely aware of one's own blameworthy state one is met by another with ordinary kindness. From within the frame of mind constituted by self-blame that person's ordinary decency seems especially admirable and morally valuable. Some time later, restored to high self-esteem, one might look upon ordinary kindness as unremarkable and uninteresting. In this later state one's recognition of the moral value of ordinary kindness is blunted. However, if one could hold onto the insight gained in that earlier acute state one would benefit from an increased sensitivity to the real moral worth of that kindness. By 'holding on' what is meant is a rich awareness of what it is to be in that earlier state.

## V

So far this chapter has been concerned with describing the way in which moral content can be achieved within a picture – how the possession of a particular content can depend upon the exercise of many pictorial resources. I want now to proceed to consider the ways, if any, in which we could think of such content as 'deep'. This is to move to the question of why, or how, it might matter to us that paintings can articulate moral content in the way I have suggested they can. I don't pretend, in what follows, to give a full analysis of the notion of depth. I only aim to bring out one strand of this highly complex, and rather vague, term.

In discussion of the painting by Sassetta I remarked that the rationale for the moral evaluation (that charity is a virtue) was not itself in any way present in the picture. But what exactly is the 'rationale' for a moral evaluation? One helpful way of expanding upon this idea has been advanced by Charles Taylor, in his account of what it is to understand a moral evaluation.

What is involved in seeing the evaluative point of a given term? What kind of understanding do you need to grasp it? There seem to be two orders of consideration which interlock in most cases to form the background of a term. First one needs an understanding of the kind of social interchange, the common purposes or mutual needs, how things can go well or badly between people in the society where this term is current. And second one needs to grasp what I have been calling the qualitative discriminations that the people concerned make; one needs to get a sense, in other words, of their perception of the good.<sup>12</sup>

The 'rationale' for a moral evaluation places that evaluation within a framework; it paints in 'the background picture which underlies our moral intuitions'.<sup>13</sup> That background is constituted by a set of beliefs, practices,

12 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 54.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 41.



experiences, and concerns. Taken together these make sense of an evaluation – make sense of why a person (living within that framework) might take certain sorts of behaviour to be extremely important and good. The framework may be tacit; it may be so obvious that we do not need to refer to it; it may be that certain individuals (even exemplary ones) are ignorant of, or uninterested in, the articulation of the framework. The individual may simply accept the evaluation or precept without having any curiosity as to its rationale. This is naive goodness. What I am calling the depth of someone's moral convictions is just their grasp of the rationale for those convictions: their awareness of how those convictions are sustained and informed by the framework.

Much that is relevant to the rationale for moral evaluation is either lost upon us or something of which we are only vestigially, or transiently, aware. It is a standard feature of moral phenomenology that we move in and out of appreciation of many aspects of experience and thought which are, overall, relevant to our moral outlook and values. We keep on forgetting things, underplaying what we – for a time – saw to be important, exaggerating, defending, ignoring. The framework is, therefore, often not available to us – even though it is present in a distorted or diminished form. Part of the framework is constituted by certain kinds of experience – by the experience of finding certain sorts of states of affairs desirable or noble or inspiring. We can understand Poussin's picture as articulating this kind of experiential background or framework. Our sense of why it is important (to the woman, or to Poussin) to undertake this action is given a rationale via the presentation of the city, the sky, the trees – and specifically via the mood and atmosphere these convey. It is a crucial step in the discussion to recognise that these elements are not presented as statements but as experiences (the experience of recognising the expressive character of various aspects of the picture). In other words, the specific quality of the rationale would be lost on someone who knew (but did not see) that the trees are lowering, that the sky is heavy and glowing, that the city is beautiful. The rationale is built up as a set of experiences which the picture affords the attentive, sensitive and patient spectator. Such features of the work – features with which only a highly accomplished artist could endow a picture – are crucial to the presentation of a rationale for its central moral commitment.

# Kant and the ideal of beauty

Anthony Savile

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### I

The relation of ethical and aesthetical divides philosophers as much as anyone. Heteronomists, who hold them to be intimately and inextricably intertwined, find Plato, Plotinus, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Schiller on their side. Today's more favoured party, autonomists to a man, see their cause championed by Oscar Wilde, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and standing behind these modern worthies, stoutest of all, they suppose, Immanuel Kant.<sup>1</sup> Here I shall suggest that, received opinion to the contrary, one fundamental strand in the *Critique of Judgement* sets this last figure firmly in the other camp.<sup>2</sup> Curiously, it is a strand that has been generally minimised, perhaps because it has seemed so difficult to make clear sense of, either on its own account or in relation to the body of Kant's late work.

That Kant should be viewed as the autonomist par excellence is entirely understandable. The pure judgement of taste, he insists, is not based on any concept, so not on the concept of the morally good; it reflects our appreciation of forms that harmoniously and fruitfully engage our faculties of imagination and understanding, yet which forms they are cannot be brought under any definite rule. Since from the Kantian perspective morality is so largely a rule-governed matter, here too a radical division between aesthetical and ethical seems mandatory. Then, when he comes to turn his attention to the issue directly, Kant explicitly asserts the beautiful to be merely the symbol of morality, meaning thereby that while our judgements concerning them have distinct subject matters, in their structure they share a certain

- 1 The source of autonomy is sometimes identified as Lord Shaftesbury (most notably by Jerome Stolnitz in his 'On the significance of Lord Shaftesbury in modern aesthetic theory', *Philosophical Quarterly* 11, 1961, 97–113). As my list suggests, my own view is that that is not Shaftesbury's position, and neither is it a consequence of his position. For some elaboration, see my 'Aesthetic experience in Shaftesbury', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 75, 2002, 55–74.
- 2 All references in the text are to this work (*CJ*) unless otherwise indicated. Quotations are from the translation by J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951).

notable analogy. So whereas a neo-Platonist may say that it is the identity, or quasi-identity, of the beautiful and the good that informs his position, the Kantian will reply that identity (or quasi-identity) of structure of judgements about them is being confused with identity of what those judgements are about. Keeping structure and content strictly apart spikes the heteronomist's guns.

## II

So much by way of caricature. The real test of Kant's persuasion, however, lies in none of these familiar points. Rather it is to be found in the detail of his conduct of the deduction of taste, his explanation, that is, of how it is as much as possible for our subjectively based judgements that this or that is beautiful to enjoy objectivity, that is, what he calls universal and necessary validity, or, alternatively, what he sees as their synthetic a priori character. The broad outline of his official procedure here is well enough understood; again it tends to support the autonomous conception of the relation rather than a heteronomous one.

If my judgement that this or that is beautiful is to be more than an affirmation of my own response to the object, it must arise out of a sensibility I share with others (a common sense). Moreover, there has to be more to the idea of a common sense than that our responses to things coincide, for that could just be a sort of large-scale fluke. Our responses must have some basis to them that makes them something akin to lawlike. And just because we cannot appeal here to the self-standing nature of the objects we appreciate to supply what is needed (this was the first point in my caricature), we are bound to look inwards, to ourselves and to our mental processes, and to suppose that we have a common psychological propensity to find those things pleasing which exercise our minds in the same harmonious way (see the second point above).

Of course this is not to say that there does really exist any such natural propensity, only that its existence is a necessary condition for our aesthetic judgements expressing genuine thought, and for them to be potentially conducted in accordance with the norm of correctness and truth (cf. *CJ* §8).<sup>3</sup> However, Kant indubitably supposes that we do indeed have every reason to think that this requirement is met. For when we synthesise the manifold of intuition in a way that yields *cognition*, we have to do so in a way that is common to one another and rooted in our nature – otherwise there would be no non-fortuitous agreement in our judgements about the world we share, and

3 At the end of the section Kant speaks of our being justified in speaking for others as long as our own responses are properly disinterested, failing which, we 'lay down an erroneous judgement of taste'. I take it he supposes that in the favoured cases our judgements are correct, and that the correctness they enjoy is that of truth.

no genuine cognition at all. That there is genuine cognition of the world though is uncontested, so we know there is a shared human propensity to find satisfaction at least in the sort of mental activity (combinations of intuition ('imagination') and understanding) that is cognitively directed. It is this subjective satisfaction that as it were guides the mind in its selection of some ways of synthesising the manifold over others. And, Kant supposes, it is precisely that same sort of mental activity we are engaged on (but with our generally operative cognitive focus disengaged and running in neutral) when we attend to things from the *aesthetic* point of view, and come to find them beautiful.

### III

For all its tortuosity there is nothing in this little sketch to disincline the autonomist from viewing Kant as his man. Nevertheless, there are pressing questions which it provides no way of answering. There are also signs that Kant himself is aware of this, and that he envisages a supplementation to, if not a wholesale replacement of, his official deduction to accommodate them. This is what we are offered most explicitly, though even then in only shadowy fashion, in the seemingly digressive discussion of the ideal of beauty at §17 of the *Critique*, a passage over which commentators have shown little inclination to stay.<sup>4</sup> First though, the awkward questions.

1 The story just outlined accounts for the would-be a priori nature of the judgement of taste by rooting it in a common psychological propensity, something in the nature of a subjective law. Then it is our shared human nature that justifies Jack saying of Jill that when he finds something supremely pleasing so should she, where the 'should' that appears here will express little more than a legitimate expectation that Jack has of Jill's responses to what engages him.<sup>5</sup>

From within the assumptions of the philosophical psychology that emerges in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (especially at A98–104, and alluded to here in §22), it could be said that as long as we synthesise our individual manifolds in the same way as each other there is no question but that what one of us finds pleasing others will too. Indeed, in that picture the prospect of pleasure must play a significant role in making it true that our view of the world comes to be a shared one in the first place. The reason for this is that the image of the world we construct is the stable output of the mind's

4 The most recent is Henry Allison, whose *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) came my way only after this essay was finished. See p. 143 for a somewhat dismissive assessment of §17. I have added a brief postscript at the end of this chapter to record the relation of my reading of Kant to that of Allison.

5 This view is encouraged by Kant's footnote to §38 and at various other places in the text.

synthesising mechanism, and what explains the mechanism's coming to a firm halt at various points can be little else than the satisfaction yielded by its own operations (cf. *CJ* §22). Since the output of our minds is indisputably common in the case of achieved cognition, the pleasures we find in the common syntheses involved there will themselves be shared ones.

However, this just leads to another question, one to which Kant has no immediate answer. Given that we have a shared view of the world anyway, it is perfectly legitimate to ask why, when the cognitive motor is disengaged, the pleasure in the aesthetical working of my mind is of a kind that I may also expect you to adopt and enjoy. There is, after all, absolutely nothing that stands in the way of our synthesising our individual manifolds differently in our quest for pleasure when cognitive and practical interests are in abeyance. And at least since the mid-eighteenth century it has been a philosophical commonplace to observe that there is a great deal in our experience of people's aesthetic responses to suggest that something like that is indeed what actually happens much of the time. No straightforward appeal to the unifying powers of good training and upbringing to overcome that inconvenience, in the way, say, that Hume recommends, is available here to the theorist working entirely from within and focusing strictly on the mind's own inner workings.

This point must count heavily against the plausibility of the unadorned story. At the very least it suggests that some augmentation is called for, and Kant's own emphatic observation that we *exact* agreement from others as a kind of duty rather than simply expect it as the outcome of natural law, suggests a way in which he envisages this might be supplied.<sup>6</sup> If there were something akin to a rational requirement on us to take pleasure in certain sorts of things from an aesthetic and non-cognitive point of view, then it would make sense to suppose that among those who are properly sensitive to reason's demands there should be sufficient community of response to justify the thought that judgements of taste do indeed enjoy (potential) general validity. Moreover, the suggestion in no way relies on the operation of some (fictional) psychological law ('conformity to law without a law' as §22 puts it). What is quite clear, however, is that the need to supply any such rational requirement obliges Kant to look well beyond the resources of the deduction as usually understood.

2 We often want to ask such questions as: Just how beautiful is this? or: Is *a* more beautiful than *b*? The presumption behind such questions is that there is available something like a scale of assessment available by reference to which an answer, even if only a vague one, can be given. Sometimes, of

6 E.g. in §7: 'Hence he says "the *thing* is beautiful"; and he does not count on the agreement of others with this his judgement of satisfaction, because he has found this agreement several times before, but he *demands* it of them. He blames them if they judge otherwise and he denies them taste, which he nevertheless requires from them.' See also §§18–20.

course, comparisons make little sense, but on other occasions it would seem ridiculous to refuse to make them. Within Kant's original scheme, however, it is anything but clear how answers to them might be justified. The thing that naturally occurs to his reader is that scale and comparisons are both related to some internal measure of pleasure (intensity, perhaps, for what else could there be?) that contemplation of the objects in view yields.<sup>7</sup> But if the pleasure in question is assessed like that, and entirely from the inner perspective, the idea seems counter-intuitive to say the least. Surely some of our subtlest aesthetic experiences afford satisfactions that are insignificant on the inner Richter scale (conceived of as yielding a measure that entirely discounts the nature of its object). Alternatively, and in conformity with a suggestion Kant himself makes, we might think of introducing an aesthetic scale in terms of the degree to which a given synthesis of the manifold quickens our cognitive powers, only while this does honour to the letter of the text, it is too far-fetched to carry conviction. The tail of theory would be enthusiastically wagging the dog of experience.

3 As Kant is well aware, we are quite happy to regard some pleasures as more significant than others. That idea is one we draw on when we assess the maturity of someone's taste or set about acquiring the skill possessed by a reliable and experienced critic able to guide those whose taste is not yet fully formed. As with the other two matters, the resources of the standard deduction just do not stretch to explaining how such an idea can have any purchase. Absent any augmentation, all talk of maturity or good taste on Kant's part could be nothing other than bluff.

#### IV

Each of these issues lends itself to more promising discussion once we pay attention to the account we are offered of why there needs to be such a thing as an ideal of beauty at all, and which we are to call on in filling out the deduction as I have outlined it. An *ideal* for Kant is a representation of a kind of generic instance of some concept of an unrealisable maximum. Thus to take examples from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Socratic wise man is an ideal of wisdom (nothing real being capable of realising the idea of perfect wisdom) (A569/B597); God is the (transcendental) ideal of pure reason (A589/B608), and likewise, I suppose, the Devil would be the ideal of evil. That we need to fashion ideals for ourselves, and in the particular case we are here concerned with, an ideal of beauty, is a thesis that emerges

7 Historically, we find some attempt to account for the superiority of the pleasures of the mind over those of the senses in this way at the start of Part II of Shaftesbury's *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, reprinted in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. L. E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 201.

from Kant's general understanding of the nature of judgements that involve concepts like the ones these four figures are formed around.

In the case with which I am concerned here, this need immediately emerges from Kant's dissatisfaction with Hume's attempts to find a standard of taste, which he took to be doomed to failure just because of there being no shared discernible feature that beautiful things all possess. Even the observation that such things tend to have passed the test of time (surely an allusion to Hume's essay on taste here) is, Kant says, 'hardly sufficient for the derivation of a taste even as a probability'. The fundamental mistake that Hume had made was to see aesthetic judgements as *determinant* ('subsuming a particular under a *given* principle') rather than *reflective* ('where the particular is given and the principle remains to be *found*') (*CJ*, Intro. Sec. IV), and in consequence to fail to understand the nature of the conditions under which such judgements can be correctly made.

After his initial polemical remarks, Kant continues the section with a sentence I take to be crucial for this whole discussion: '[T]he highest model, the archetype of taste, is a mere idea, which everyone must produce in himself and according to which he must judge every object of taste, every example of judgement by taste, and even the taste of everyone.' His thought appears to be that in the absence of any storable general criterion (sufficient condition) for the application of some concept, what we have to do is to identify a number of uncontentious exemplars (of wisdom, evil, beauty and so on) and then take those as a basis for the development of a conception of a maximum, which we can then render vivid to ourselves in the form of an imaginary individual – the Socratic wise man, the Devil and whatever it is that operates as the ideal of beauty. Given this notional idea of a maximum, we can then bring that to bear in *assessing, estimating, judging* – let us not forget the *Critique's* very title here – individual cases' claims to approximate to that. So a man is properly called wise, say, if in respect of his judgement he comes discernibly close to the ideal, likewise for wickedness, or beauty and so on. In the case of determinant judgements, we test for truth by applying some algorithmic criterion, as in 'they are British Citizens' (determined by Home Office rules) or 'the clock says 10.15' (determined by the position of the hands); in the case of reflective judgements, by contrast, we ask the vaguer question whether the individual event or thing we are interested in approximates to the ideal – as we should have to do in assessing the correctness of such statements as 'She will offer him a generous tribute' or 'He has an elegant cover drive' or 'Those builders regularly deliver shoddy work.'

## V

Before we enquire further into the case of the last of these ideals we can see already how this conception of our way of assessing the merits of the reflective judgements that we make might be used to allay the various worries I

mentioned above. Kant says that each of us has to ‘produce the highest model in himself’, and that may sound disquietingly ambiguous between (a) producing some model or other for himself (in relation to which particular instances that present themselves in experience can be estimated and judged) and (b) elaborating for himself a model that is common to all who make such judgements. However, for the general purposes of making judgements that are potentially correct and obey the norm of truth, it is plain that the highest model must be one that is common to us all. That was the point about which there was no disagreement in the official deduction. What was in question was whether we have any reason to believe that this necessary condition of aesthetic objectivity is actually met. In the augmentation this becomes the question whether there is anything that obliges us to fashion an ideal that is common.

It would of course be even more hopeless than it was before to look to anything like a natural law governing the formation of our ideals. What is needed rather is some reason to think that, in the aesthetic case, our idea of a maximum (of beauty) is one that we have in common and by reference to which our judgements of particular cases can be settled without too much irresoluble disagreement. There is the prospect of progress, Kant supposes, as long as we can find some a priori consideration that obliges us to fashion a particular sort of ideal, for then there would be pressure on us to fashion the same one. And that is what he proceeds to argue in the passage that follows. Its effect is, as one would wish, to bypass all appeal to natural psychological propensities, and secure the generality that he is looking for directly through considerations that satisfy the kind of normativity Kant talks of in terms of ‘a sort of duty’. That anyway is his strategic aim. For our purposes, perhaps, it doesn’t matter too much whether the generality that is sought is imposed naturally and blindly or under the control of reason, though one can perfectly well allow that once the latter route is taken, the psychology concerning the harmonious working of our mental faculties can fade away, although Kant shows no sign of recognising that. (My talk of Kant’s augmenting his official story is probably fairer to his actual conduct of his argument than to the structure of his thought that he ended up with.)<sup>8</sup>

Second, if we are to test our judgements that something is beautiful, or wise or evil, against an ideal standard we can at least see how comparisons between encountered cases begin to look reasonable.<sup>9</sup> We can say that this one falls far shorter of the ideal mark than that, or that these two, very different though

8 I pass over any suggestion that the official story applies only to pure judgements of taste, and that the ‘augmentation’ is supposed to do the same job for dependent judgements. Both sorts of judgement are reflective after all, and once we see that fact as requiring the introduction of an ideal as a condition of their aptness for truth we are going to have to take the augmentation as applying quite generally.

9 Here is Kant’s formal statement of his position in the *Critique of Pure Reason* at A569/70, B597/8 discussing the ideal of reason:



they are in the way they present themselves to us, are more or less on a par, lying as it were at the same distance from the unrealisable ideal.<sup>10</sup> Comparisons start to look feasible, and perhaps not just between things of a single kind, but (within limits) of different sorts too. Then, according to the wisdom or maturity in accordance with which each of us fashions our personal conception of the shared ideal, so too it becomes understandable how our critical judgements may be thought to display maturity, or ‘good taste’ in the commonly accepted sense of that phrase (or contrariwise, superficiality, crassness and so on). Of course, until we see something more of the detail than is yet on display, these remarks, like the others are more promissory than anything else, but promise there does seem to be. (I shall not pursue these particular issues here though).

## VI

The role Kant assigns to ideals in our thought is quite general and, to his way of thinking, applies wherever we make reflective judgements that admit of correct or incorrect use. What is specific to the aesthetic case is the form that our choice of ideal is bound to take. It can, Kant tells us, only be that of the good man (*homo*, not *vir*, it goes without saying). Before considering the consequences of this identification we need to understand what it is that pushes Kant in such a seemingly extraordinary and uninviting direction. The path he takes to this goal moves in two steps, first through the claim that we cannot but select the ideal from the range of dependent beauties, and then to his actual target in response to a further requirement of the case.

An *ideal* in Kant’s technical usage<sup>11</sup> always implies a notion of maximum

As the idea gives us the *rule*, so the ideal in such a case serves as the *archetype* for the complete determination of the copy; and we have no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine man within us, with which we compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves, although we can never attain to the perfection thereby prescribed. Although we cannot concede to these ideals objective reality (existence), they are not therefore to be regarded as figments of the brain; they supply reason with a standard which is indispensable to it, providing it, as they do, with a kind of concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, and thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete.

(A569)

Comparable claims are made at A315/B372. (Quotations are from Norman Kemp Smith’s translation, London: Macmillan, 1933.)

- 10 One might object that if the ideal were genuinely unrealisable it wouldn’t make much sense to say that one actual case comes closer to it than another, any more than that 200 is nearer to infinity than 2 is. Kant offers no guidance on this point, and neither shall I, other than by observing that we do on occasion find it natural enough to say we have met perfection of a sort.
- 11 Kant’s fullest discussion of ideas is to be found in the section of the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled ‘The Ideas in General’ (A312–20/B368–77).

(*alias* perfection). Something which does not allow of thinking in such terms could not supply an ideal. So nothing that is thought of simply as natural (e.g. a woodland flower) could do so. Once we recognise that, we are bound to select as the *ideal* (a particular imagined instantiation of that maximum) of beauty something whose very purposive function or goal-directed nature is relevant in one way or another to the correctness of our aesthetic judgement. Kant puts this point by saying ‘an ideal of beautiful flowers [. . .] of a beautiful view is inconceivable’, and he adds that the same must also be said of a beautiful piece of furniture, a beautiful dwelling house, a beautiful tree or a beautiful garden, largely because even though (some of) these subtend an end, how we judge the thing in question to be perfect (maximally satisfactory) depends on the way in which we think of the end. So, I presume, a fine piece of furniture – a chest of drawers, say – may be judged better or worse for its ability to store my belongings, but if my belongings happen to be far bulkier than yours what you may judge to be perfect in a chest of drawers won’t satisfy me. Or, if you just want a chest of drawers by reference to its suitability for filling an empty space in the dining room, your view of a perfect buy is likely to be very different from the next man’s. (Perhaps it’s just that the very vagueness doesn’t make for an ideal at all.)

The upshot of this – and this is where we come to the second element in Kant’s procedure – is that the sort of thing that is in question as a candidate for our ideal must be of a kind whose perfection is *determinately* fixed by the sort of thing that it is, and fixed independently of the sorts of passing interests we might have in it and which would lead to different sorts of case being judged perfect in their own various ways. And here we have it:

The only being which has the purpose of its existence in itself is *man*, who can determine his purposes by reason; or, where he must receive them from external perception, yet can compare them with essential and universal purposes and can judge this their accordance aesthetically. This *man* is, then, alone of all objects in the world, susceptible of an ideal of *beauty*, as it is only *humanity* in his person, as an intelligence, that is susceptible of the ideal of *perfection*.

(§17)

For all Kant’s confidence, it would be a mistake to suppose he had yet given a proper explanation of why this ideal human figure should be the ideal of beauty, a mistake, because no reason has been supplied for thinking that our chosen ideal should be a beautiful figure at all. Really all we have been introduced to is Kant’s ideal of humanity – the morally exemplary man – and with that the thought that if we could fashion an ideal of beauty at all, this is the shape it would have to take. That such an ideal figure cannot but be thought of as a beautiful one remains to be made out. For the moment though and *en passant*, let us notice that the selection of an ideal determined by its

‘essential and universal purposes’ serves to block off the possibility of different people selecting different models as the ideal which they fashion in themselves, and in relation to which, alone, their aesthetic judgements can secure the required measure of non-fortuitous community needed for their laying claim to correctness and truth.<sup>12</sup>

So what connection then can we find between such an agreed ideal figure and its liability to display perfect, maximal, beauty, or indeed, its being thought of as beautiful at all? Kant’s answer lies, I think, with his conception of dependent beauty, where something of a purposive sort (e.g. a *house*, a *church* and naturally enough now, a *man*) can be beautiful only if it doesn’t suffer from some imperfection in the way its purposiveness (functionality) makes itself felt in the way the thing in question presents itself to us. So a church can be beautiful only if our experience of it is not informed by some design fault that impedes worship – think here, maybe, of Le Corbusier’s *Notre Dame du Haut* at Ronchamp, or Gaudí’s *Sagrada Família* in Barcelona. Likewise, Kant supposes, in the case of man, beautiful instances will be marred by no apparent gross deficiency in the way a person’s moral excellence is revealed (in deeds, in bearing, in physiognomy, etc.).<sup>13</sup>

That is of course not itself to say that a morally exemplary individual will be a beautiful one. But if we consider the ideal that we ‘fashion in ourselves’ and in whose figure the excellence that we love is to be plainly manifest, it is hard to see how the perfect appearance of what we love should not itself be a source of joy. Suppose to the contrary that such an imagined presentation were not thought of as beautiful, as one to which we are not immediately drawn (i.e. as a source of disinterested aesthetic pleasure), then Kant could well say either that it would hardly be moral perfection that we were thinking of it as fully manifesting or, alternatively, that true moral perfection was something we weren’t properly sensitive to – in which case we should not really have imagined what we set out to. Given that moral excellence is uncontentiously something that we love, how could we fail to be drawn to its recognisable appearance in an ideal case, and in an ideal case how could its appearance be other than one which gives us immediate aesthetic satisfaction?<sup>14,15</sup>

12 The adequacy or inadequacy of our *conceptions* of this shared ideal however is a matter over which we may differ. This is the lever to use in embarking on discussion within the Kantian perspective of the maturity or otherwise of someone’s aesthetic tastes.

13 We do well to remember here the enormous splash made by the publication in 1775 of Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente* just fifteen years before the third *Critique*. On this R. E. Norton’s *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) is instructive (see esp. Chapter 5, ‘The cult of physiognomy: physical beauty as the cipher of moral excellence’).

14 Perhaps the idea was already well established before Kant. Compare Shaftesbury, writing in 1699:

Turning now from the ideal, and attending to matters closer to hand, it should be plain why Kant supposes actual individuals who approximate to the chosen ideal by manifesting their goodness in their bodily form will themselves be beautiful. That must be because the ideal is for the reason just given conceived in terms of an appearance that is itself maximally pleasing, one that brings joy. It would be to miss this point entirely to object that there are many people whom we recognise to be good yet who do not command our aesthetic admiration. From Kant's point of view, such characters are not close enough to the ideal, the image of one in whose outward appearance inner goodness shines forth. 'To shine forth' can only be explained in terms of its attraction for us, and hence in terms of some commanding and disinterested satisfaction. Where the inner goodness does not shine forth, there the judgement of beauty cannot be sustained, no matter how admirable such people may otherwise be. (Often, of course, it will take time for us to come to see that goodness shining forth. Such surely was Socrates' companions' experience of their friend's homely countenance. Only when, in the course of their conversations with him, they came to see his virtue immediately in his appearance, so they came to find him beautiful, to recognise indeed the beauty of that famously ugly face.)<sup>16</sup>

It is [. . .] impossible to conceive that a rational creature [as opposed to one dependent on sense, A. S.], coming first to be tried by rational objects and receiving into his mind the images or representations of justice, generosity, gratitude or other virtue, should have no liking of these, but be found absolutely indifferent towards whatsoever is presented to him of this sort. A soul, indeed, may as well be without sense as without admiration in the things of which it has any knowledge. Coming therefore to a capacity of seeing and admiring in this new way [by means of the images or representations, A. S.], it must needs find a beauty and a deformity as well in actions, minds and tempers as in figures, sounds and colours.

(Klein edn, p. 178)

- 15 After identifying the ideal of the beautiful in terms of the human figure, Kant goes on: 'In this the ideal consists in the expression of the *moral*, without which the object would not please universally and thus positively (and not merely negatively in an accurate presentation).' My last three paragraphs have sought to give some substance to this obscure claim.
- 16 At the end of the section Kant summarises his discussion saying that 'beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object'. In the case of man we know that his 'purposiveness' is moral excellence. It makes good sense to think of the form of that purposiveness not as some abstracted shape, but as the guise in which that excellence appears, to wit, in an experienceable bodily manifestation. Compare Shaftesbury:

We may imagine what we please of a substantial solid past of beauty, but, were the subject to be well criticized, we should find perhaps, that what is most admired, even in the turn of *outward* features, was only a mysterious expression and a kind of shadow of something *inward* in the temper, and that when we were struck with a majestic air, a sprightly look, an Amazon bold grace or a contrary soft and gentle one, it was chiefly the fancy of these characters or qualities which wrought on us.

(Klein edn, p. 63)

[Footnote 16 continues on next page.]

## VII

Kant needs to be able to say that the recognition of some man matching or approximating the human ideal could not but provide supreme *aesthetic* pleasure. Ironically, his contemporary and admiring reader, Schiller, whose artistic ideal it was to capture such an ideal in his own poetry, supposed that success would be moral and not aesthetic. 'This sort of pleasure in nature', he wrote, 'is not aesthetic, but moral; for it is mediated by an idea, and not the immediate effect of contemplation; it is not a matter of the beauty of forms at all. What have an insignificant flower, a source, a mossy stone, the twitter of birds or the buzzing of bees about them that we find so pleasing? What claim have they on our love? It is not the objects that we love, but an idea represented by their means.'<sup>17</sup>

Kant would surely reply that Schiller is misled by having swallowed too eagerly that standard reading of the *Critique* that underpins the autonomous conception of the beautiful. We have seen that he finds that idea-free contemplation and 'the beauty of forms' unable to sustain the objectivity in judgement that is needed, and that when we find the birdsong and the humming of the bees beautiful we do indeed, as Schiller says, think of them in terms of an idea, only one that does not stand in the way of our interest being an aesthetic one. For what we are moved by is the way in which the idea is manifest in the bodily form of these creatures or in their discernible activity. The idea finds an almost perfect realisation in these things, and as our pleasure and love is directed to that appearance, so it is aesthetic in nature and precisely not purely moral or ethical.

To put the point in Kantian terms (see e.g. *CJ* §4), if our pleasure were indeed simply moral pleasure we should find that what pleased us was the very existence of the object (as a good in itself, not as a means of course), and the experience that we have would just be a common route by which we come to be aware that our interest in the thing's existence is satisfied, but nothing more. In the cases under discussion, however, it is my experience of the object that provides me pleasure, though the character of that experience, what it is of, can only be captured by alluding to the idea which enters into the way the object is perceptually given. Schiller obviously regarded object and idea as opposed.<sup>18</sup> It is Kant's insight that in aesthetic experience the two

Also: 'What difficulty to be in any degree knowing! How long before a true taste is gained! How many things shocking, how many offensive at first, which afterwards are known and acknowledged the highest beauties. For it is not instantly we acquire the sense by which these beauties are discoverable' (ibid., p. 320).

17 *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, ed. W. F. Mainland (Blackwell: Oxford, 1957), p. 2 (my translation).

18 In justice to Schiller, we should remember that his poetic programme privileges the 'sentimental idyll', poetry which both 'individualises the ideal and idealises the individual'. As he put it, the fundamental problem for the philosophy of art is whether, and to what extent, any such unification of these antithetical ideas is possible. To the extent that it is realised,

coalesce, and that our love and joy are directed at the way the object is experienced as an individual manifestation of the idea. Were our pleasure simply moral pleasure, it would be liable to survive the extinction of the experience. It does not though; the pleasure lives and dies with the perceptual experience itself (though of course it often ‘lives on’ in memory, as we say).<sup>19</sup>

## VIII

Kant’s thoughts about reflective judgements represent his preferred way of securing the (rather loosely conceived) a priori nature of my claim that this or that is beautiful, the thought that as long as my aesthetic response to it is fully in order, I have a right to expect others to judge as I do. Here the idea must be that since you and I and others who are properly trained (this notion is quite in order here, since in the augmentation of the deduction we are no longer working from the inside) must fashion the very same ideal for ourselves, and that since the approximate distance of a concrete particular from that common ideal is thought of as an objective matter, it follows that if my judgement of taste about something is in place, it will be mirrored in the well-schooled freely made judgements of others. As Kant put it, we shall ‘blame them if they judge otherwise, and [w]e deny them taste, which [w]e nevertheless require from them’ (§7). So on the supposition that I am confident about the nature of my own aesthetic responses to things that I meet, I can do what Kant thinks we are wrongly liable to find puzzling, that is, justifiably exact the same responses from you as those things elicit from me. It was this that the official deduction did not properly secure, but which we should now appreciate appears to lie prospectively within reach. It should hardly need pointing out that the course we have taken to get here however has abandoned all pretence to treat the aesthetic as autonomous and independent of the ethical. Indeed, in many respects Kant reveals himself in these moves as an open-eyed neo-Platonist of a sort, one who resists identifying the morally good and the beautiful, but who, more than most, provides a theoretically driven motivation for asserting a necessary connection between them that goes well beyond any simple record of mere phenomenology.

## IX

A rounded presentation of the heteronomous aspect of Kant’s aesthetic thought must do more than set out how we assess the beauty of man even if

that could hardly fail in his eyes to be an aesthetic success. See here especially the note omitted from the 1800 edition of his essay in his *Kleinere prosaische Schriften* (omitted also by Mainland), but usefully restored in R. Leroux’s bilingual (German and French) edition (Paris: Aubier, 1947), pp. 214–16.

19 Of course the beauty of the object persists when I turn my back on it, but that beauty has to be explained in terms of the object’s liability to provide a pleasure which doesn’t.

that is comprehensibly enough taken as the paradigm. The theory has to be extendible to the arts and to those cases of judgement of taste that Kant himself seems to take as primary, free judgements directed at the natural world. It is plain enough from the text that he expects this to be an achievable task, but he is far from explicit how he conceives of it being carried out at the level of detail. In what follows I shall present as plausible a case as I can within the framework of the theory that we have been examining. If there is success to be had here, and perhaps not before, it would become interesting to look at the general theory of reflective judgement that is guiding the whole. Failure here would make interest in such a further task purely academic.

Puzzlement about the envisaged extension of the case arises from the thought that it looks as if Kant's conception of the ideal of beauty, the good man, will disfigure any other judgements of taste that we make. He himself talks of beautiful trees, beautiful pieces of furniture and beautiful dwelling houses, yet none of these are assessed in terms of how closely they resemble the ideal of beauty, the upstanding man. The very idea scarcely makes any sense, and it cannot seriously be supposed that Kant had any such crude idea in mind.

To avoid that snare, let us take a step back and consider the matter in quite general terms. The broad idea that moves Kant is that objectivity in judgements of taste has to be rooted in attachment to some uncontroversially established (for him, even mandatory) norm, one which can scarcely itself be a purely aesthetic one. Individual cases that we admire display some such value in their bodily form in a way that approximates an estimated maximum, a maximum that we imagine realised in experientiable form (and hence in some way that might be presented in intuition). In this abbreviated form of Kant's idea, it is the thought that our actual examples come near to perfection of a sort that is central, not that our estimate that they do is made by some comparison with an imagined individual instance. Perhaps Kant's stressing the place of the ideal serves well to discourage us from forgetting that the quality that grounds our aesthetic pleasure has to be manifest in an individual thing, but that is something that can be allowed without obliging ourselves to drag in the perfect type (the Devil, God, or the beautiful man or whatever). So in considering a particular figure's claim to be beautiful I might compare that with a perfect model I have fashioned in myself, but I could equally well ask whether the person in question manifests in their bearing qualities that present them as highly admirable from the ethical standpoint, whether I see them as displaying something that is truly humanly admirable in one way or another.

Taking this general thought one step further, and turning now away from our judgements about human beauty, it is utterly in accord with Kantian thought to say that we recognise qualities we admire in men displayed or expressed in things that are not human at all, as for example the dwelling houses, trees and gardens that he mentions as dependent beauties, or flowers,

snowflakes or landscapes, which he would think of as free ones. A house can be welcoming, a tree commanding, a garden design bold; a rose bush may be seen as valiant, snowflakes delicate, landscapes serene and the like. So it is perfectly available to Kant to say of non-human beauties, be they free or dependent, that our aesthetic appreciation of them secures its objectivity through the way in which such things are liable to be experienced as exemplars of qualities that we prize in man. Their beauty depends on the thought that in the given case they display or express something that we estimate as approximating to a maximum of such values, only not in the way in which they are manifest in man, but rather in the way these human values and virtues can be notably displayed in things of the type with which we happen to be occupied.

Just as the Kantian schema runs outside the arts, so too it runs within them, and this is so whether the art in point invites free judgements or dependent ones. Renaissance and Baroque garden designers often made much of water features in their work, as for example in the gardens of the grand villas outside Rome at Frascati and Tivoli. There is certainly something in water's gentle noise and the sight of its movement that we naturally find appealing, but not just any such water-generated play of light and sound is beautiful. Something we might say at some point in one of those gardens is that an artfully constructed waterfall can be seen as generous, spending a rich stream of the scarce liquid without reserve and for our pleasure. Its very generosity is what makes it so pleasing. Seen in the Kantian light, we find the waterfall expressive of a human virtue to which he would say we owe an a priori attachment. And in the case in point we see the artificial fall exemplifying that virtue in a way that we judge approaches a maximum, though without being compared directly to any imagined human figure. If anything, our judgement will measure the example before us against ways in which we might imagine that quality being expressed in other natural or artificial forms, and as we say that the garden architect has made it manifest in his art as finely as can be so, for Kant, we provide the ultimate justification for the claim that the waterfall is an example of dependently beautiful art.

We can extend the same kind of reflection to music that Kant would think of as giving rise to pure judgements of taste. Bach keyboard sarabandes offer a completed expression of courtesy and grace which we do well to pick on in order to account for their appeal. Those two features are examples of human values that Kant will expect his readers to take as uncontroversially compelling. As we find them expressed in the music as finely as can be, so we come to be able to make clear to ourselves and to others why the pieces we love are indeed beautiful ones.<sup>20</sup>

20 Cyril Connolly once wrote: 'One can describe a passion only in terms of passion. Many years ago I noticed that certain works of art brought tears to my eyes. Lines of Horace, Dryden, Rochester, Pope, the last paintings of Watteau, Mozart's *Voi che sapete*, while in



## X

There are loose ends to be tidied up. One is purely textual, one is interpretative and two others are more free-floating. At the end of his discussion of the ideal of beauty, Kant says that ‘a judgement in accordance with such a standard can never be purely aesthetical, and that a judgement of taste in accordance with an ideal of beauty is not a mere judgement of taste’. His observation encourages the suggestion that free beauties are exempt from considerations of the ideal, and that the objectivity of judgements of taste about them is secured in some other way. This is both undesirable and unnecessary. When we appreciate natural objects on account of the human values they manifest, the perfection that moves us and is relevant to our judgement is precisely not one that is introduced by the substance conception under which the object falls. In the case of human beauty, things (for Kant) are otherwise. But once we see how to preserve the core of Kant’s thought while moving away from the human case, the implicit restriction of his reflections to dependent beauties falls away. That is all to the good.<sup>21</sup>

Later on in the *Critique*, at §42, Kant makes the observation that ‘to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature (not merely to have taste in judging it) is always the mark of a good soul’, and as we come upon that remark in thrall to the official deduction, it cannot but seem quite mysterious or simply enthusiastic. If the augmentation I have been propounding as Kant’s is truly his, the mystery dissolves. A man who loves natural beauty does so because he finds it displaying values to which he is deeply and rightly attached. Such a person is indeed ‘a good soul’. On this point Schiller’s articulation of the position could hardly be bettered: ‘Since this interest in nature is grounded in an Idea, it can only manifest itself in minds that are receptive to Ideas, that is, in moral ones.’<sup>22</sup> And Kant could well go on (though in fact he did not) to say that the same will be true of the lover of art, though not perhaps of the connoisseur of the sort he appears rather curiously to have had in mind, one whose chief interest lies less in the beauty of his collection than in its capacity to impress his friends and acquaintances.

the summer of 1938 two small buildings – Palladio’s Roman theatre at Vicenza and the Amalienberg pavilion outside Munich – were added to my list [. . .] What had they in common? Perfection, or the ideal of perfection – a lyrical conception of humanity, a response to all that is transitory and fugaceous, a calligraphy of farewell.’ I have discussed this passage from Connolly’s ‘In quest of rococo’ (reprinted in his *Previous Convictions*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) briefly, and only incidentally in connection with Kant, in ‘The Sirens’ serenade’, in *Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful*, ed. Anthony O’Hear, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

21 It is instructive to think through the section headed ‘The judgement of taste is quite independent of the concept of perfection’ (§15) with these thoughts in mind.

22 Op. cit., Mainland edn, p. 3, Leroux edn, p. 64.

A more free-floating idea is this. We sometimes find ourselves thinking of the aesthetic aspect of life as a welcome addition to a rounded character, but rather as an accessory than a central element. It is supposed that someone might be quite exemplary from the social and ethical standpoint, yet effectively have no aesthetic sense at all. Downstream of Kant's work as it is usually understood, this can seem unproblematic, just because that vaunted harmony of imagination and understanding that was supposed to hold it all in place does not touch the social and ethical parts of our thought at all. But now, perhaps things may seem different. Those of us who are brought up with attachment to some ethical and social goods are liable to recognise them where realised and seek to realise them in the contributions to the world that we make in our lives. It would be very strange indeed for someone who had internalised values that he came to live by, either not recognising them when they are available for recognition or, if recognising them, not being drawn to their manifestation when he does so. So strange indeed, that insensitivity to them in someone's recognitional behaviour does more than a little to call in doubt what it is that such a person has internalised. (It is no coincidence that we take someone who advertises themselves as having no sense of humour to be manifesting the sense of humour that they have.)

Last, at the start I said that Kant might be enrolled in support of a sort of heteronomist, quasi-Platonic aesthetics. I did not mean by that that he would be party to a reduction of the moral to the beautiful (or the other way round) or that he has any interest in some abstract entity that might pass for the Form of the beautiful or even that he endorses a hierarchy of beauties passing from the vulgar to the divine. Rather, what I did have in mind was that he believes that in our aesthetic experience the morally good is presented to us directly in our immediately engaging experience of individual things of many different sorts. Although he never expresses himself in such terms, it would be entirely in line with the position I have been outlining, and perhaps the best way of capturing Kant's prime insight, to say that it is a mistake to think of beauty as some first-level property of things located in any discrete aesthetic domain; rather we would do better to conceive of it as a higher-order property, one possessed by anything that exemplifies in its appearance to the limit some first-order ethical feature to which we are already antecedently properly attached. On any such view, it is no wonder that theorists and philosophers have failed so miserably to find a criterion of beauty that fits all cases. Hunting with finer- and finer-toothed combs through the gamut of supposedly first-order properties could not possibly locate any such thing, not for want of trying hard enough, but simply by searching in the wrong place.

## XI

I have said nothing about the difficulties of the Kantian position I have been developing. Nor shall I do so at any length now. It does no harm though to point out how the pronouncedly moralising effect that is encouraged by this construction of the *Critique* depends on his belief that only our attachment to moral values is requisitely a priori. It is their rational inescapability that he uses to ground the hold on us of things we rightly find to be beautiful and to underpin the objectivity of judgements we make in recording their beauty. Now, as we have proceeded, the initially undifferentiated idea of moral goodness has progressively given way to a finer grained notion, that of an array of ethical goods to which we are variously responsive – witness Kant's own list in §17 expanding our idea of our highest moral purposiveness, namely, 'goodness of heart, purity, strength, peace etc.' – and about those, taken one by one it is not appealing, even by Kant's own lights, to say that we are bound to them by any sort of inescapability. Once that is acknowledged, the advertised a priori character of our judgements of taste is heavily diluted. In its place we have a straightforwardly contingent thought that something yields a widely shareable pleasure rooted in some socially well-established first-order value. Those first-order values may be ethical ones, in the way of some of the examples I have used above, but there is no reason why there should not be equally well-established and socially shared aesthetic ones too. 'He has an elegant cover drive' or 'Those builders deliver shoddy work' supply perfectly good examples. To appreciate this is to realise that whatever else we may have learnt along the way, fruitful discussion of such assertions' potential for objectivity and truth-aptness has scarcely even begun.

## Postscript

In his new study of the *Critique of Judgement* Henry Allison makes the *heteronomy* of judgement, of which Kant speaks in the First Introduction, central to his reading of the deduction. With respect to our cognitive interests judgement legislates to itself in terms of the purposiveness of nature just because this is 'a condition of its satisfying its self-appointed task: the application of logic to nature'. With respect to aesthetic judgements the same is true, except that the purposiveness is subjective, namely, has regard only to the harmonious interplay of the faculties of imagination and understanding. (See Allison, pp. 41, 170 and Chapter 8 *passim*.) The position of Kant's that I have outlined above has been presented as resulting from dissatisfaction with the official deduction, which Allison finds reasonably satisfactory. It is a historical and scholarly question whether Kant was as uneasy with this as I have suggested. If I am wrong here, my insistence on the heteronomy of Kant's understanding of the beautiful is historically inaccurate. The issue of the acceptability of the deduction though is a philosophical question, not

a historical one, and believing Allison's satisfaction with it to be over-generous for the reason expounded above, I have looked for something else in Kant's text with which to augment it. Doing that has the effect of minimising the subjective heautonomy that Allison thinks is so important. It does of course do nothing to impugn the regulative role of natural purposiveness, the objective heautonomy of judgement, in guiding our cognitive approach to the natural world.

## Schopenhauer on tragedy and value

Alex Neill

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Arguably the most ancient and the most sustained form that philosophical reflection on the ethical significance of art has taken is that of reflection on the character and value of our experience of tragedy. When Plato threatened to banish the tragic poets from his republic it was because of what he took to be the (in one way or another) morally damaging effect of the experience of their work on character; and the cornerstone of Aristotle's defence of the ethical seriousness of tragedy has for centuries (rightly or wrongly) been taken to lie in his appeal to the kind of experience that tragedy characteristically makes available to its audience: the *catharsis* of pity and fear, and 'the pleasure which derives from pity and fear by means of *mimesis*'.<sup>1</sup> Following this puzzling if not downright paradoxical characterisation of the experience offered by tragic art (for how can what Aristotle himself describes<sup>2</sup> as 'painful' feelings be a source of pleasure?) philosophical reflection on the ethical significance of this form of art has very largely been bound up with discussion of the place of pleasure in our experience of tragedy. My purpose in what follows is to explore the contribution to that discussion made by Schopenhauer's account of our experience of the art of tragedy, and in particular his conception of the value of this variety of experience.

In order to understand Schopenhauer's account of tragic art, it is necessary to see that and how his philosophy of art is part and parcel of his general philosophical system: 'Metaphysics of nature, metaphysics of morals, and metaphysics of the beautiful mutually presuppose one another', he writes, 'and only when they are connected do they complete the explanation of the true nature of things and of existence generally'.<sup>3</sup> As an Idealist, Schopenhauer holds that 'the true nature of things' is quite different from that which

- 1 Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (London: Duckworth, 1987), p. 46.
- 2 Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 153 and 163.
- 3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume I, trans. E. J. F. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 41. (Hereafter page references to this work, cited as WWR I (for Volume I) or WWR II (for Volume II), will be in the text.)

is presented to us in sense experience. But his take on the nature of reality is highly distinctive: reality, he argues, is Will, a single arational, impersonal force that is constantly 'striving' or in flux. Like the Kantian noumena, Will 'is that of which all representation, all object, is the phenomenon, the visibility [. . .] It is the innermost essence, the kernel, of every particular thing and also of the whole' (WWR I: 110). Unlike the Kantian noumena, however, Will is, if not directly knowable by human beings, to some extent accessible to us, for it 'manifests' or 'objectifies' itself, with varying degrees of clarity, in phenomena: in forces of nature, in organic and inorganic matter, in sentient creatures and most clearly or perfectly of all in human beings.

Schopenhauer's point is not that Will objectifies itself to a greater or less *extent* in different phenomena, in such a way that, for example, there might be more of it in a plant than there is in a stone; as he says, 'the relation of part and whole belongs exclusively to space, and has no longer any meaning' in relation to the noumenal world. What varies in degree is rather the objectification itself: the Will is more 'visible', or more clearly objectified, in the plant than it is in the stone, and more clearly in an animal than in a plant. 'Indeed', Schopenhauer writes, 'the will's passage into visibility, its objectification, has gradations as endless as those between the feeblest twilight and the brightest sunlight, the loudest tone and the softest echo' (WWR I: 128).

It is at this point that the difficult, and by commentators much discussed, notion of Platonic Ideas comes into Schopenhauer's picture. As he writes, 'These different grades of the will's objectification, expressed in innumerable individuals, exist as the unattained patterns of these, or as the eternal forms of things' (WWR I: 129). It is to these patterns that Schopenhauer is referring in his talk of Ideas: modes of objectification of Will that are expressed in particular individuals in space and time. Thus there is a grade of objectification of Will that is expressed in rocks (for example), and there is a pattern of this grade, which is the Idea of rock. Or, to put it slightly differently, individual phenomena are all (various grades of) objectification of Will; the Ideas, as Schopenhauer uses the term, are the abstract prototypes to which different classes of individual phenomena approximate.

With the important exception of music, the point of art, in Schopenhauer's scheme, is to facilitate the contemplation of these Ideas or patterns of objectification of Will, and hence to allow us access, so far as is possible, to reality. To put it very briefly (and here, as in the sketch above, I am clearly guilty of massive over-simplification) Schopenhauer's thought is this: as individual knowing subjects in time and space, our knowledge is limited to 'that which is subject to the principle of sufficient reason' (WWR I: 176), and in particular, to that which is governed by causation. The Ideas, however, (as opposed to the phenomena in which they are expressed) do not exist in time and space, and do 'not enter into that principle'. Thus we can attain knowledge of the Ideas only by somehow ceasing to be individual knowing subjects in time and space, by 'abolishing individuality in the knowing subject' (WWR I: 169)

and contemplating things ‘independently of the principle of sufficient reason’ (WWR I: 185). ‘The nature of *genius*’, Schopenhauer holds, ‘consists precisely in the preeminent ability for such contemplation’. And the art produced by those who possess genius makes such contemplation possible for those of us who lack this ability to a ‘preeminent’ degree. That is, the experience of art – aesthetic experience – makes possible the abolition of individuality, and hence the apprehension of Ideas, in those who do not have the genius to achieve this unaided. In aesthetic experience, a person ‘is no longer an individual, for in such [experience] the individual has lost himself; he is *pure will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge*’ (WWR I: 179).

Schopenhauer’s next move is to argue that the different forms of art (again, with the important exception of music) are suited to the presentation of different Ideas. And just as the Ideas can be ranked, so to speak, according to the grade of objectification of Will of which they are the pattern or prototype, so the various forms of art can be ranked according to the Ideas which it is their particular function to present or express. In short, the higher the grade of objectification of Will represented in an Idea, the more valuable, because the more revelatory of the nature of reality, is the art form which presents and expresses that Idea.

The Idea which is the subject of poetry, that of ‘man in the connected series of his efforts and actions’ (WWR I: 244), is the Idea in which Will is objectified to the highest degree, or manifests itself most clearly: hence of all the representational arts poetry is the most valuable. (The least valuable of the arts, by contrast, is architecture, the artistic purpose of which is to express ‘some of those Ideas that are the lowest grades of the will’s objectivity’, such as those of ‘rigidity’ and ‘hardness’ (WWR I: 214).) In poetry, Schopenhauer writes, ‘characters are placed in those circumstances in which all their characteristics are unfolded, the depths of the human mind are revealed and become visible in extraordinary and significant actions’. And tragedy, he holds, is ‘the summit of poetic art’. For in describing ‘the terrible side of life [. . .] The unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent’, tragedy provides ‘a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence’: ‘the antagonism of the will with itself’ and the fact that ‘chance and error’ are ‘the rulers of the world’ (WWR I: 252–3). ‘Then, shuddering,’ Schopenhauer writes, ‘we feel ourselves already in the midst of hell’ (WWR I: 255).

That, in an all-too-inadequate nutshell, is Schopenhauer’s account of the nature of tragedy, ‘the summit of poetic art’. And at this point a question naturally arises: if *this* is what tragedy has to show us, if this is the intended and characteristic effect of tragic art, why is it that we value the experience of this form of art so highly? This is a question that Michael Tanner has pressed in his book on Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art. Given Schopenhauer’s characterisation of the Ideas, and in particular, we might add, the Ideas that

are the content of tragedy, Tanner suggests that ‘it is wholly puzzling how an intimate relationship with them could prove valuable or pleasurable’.<sup>4</sup> He goes on: ‘since *that* is the truth, the most fundamental truth there is, how could anyone be exhilarated by it? But if no one should be, then the cognitive function of art is once more called into question.’

In Tanner’s view, Schopenhauer is in a familiar position:

the same position as everyone who is confronted by the question of why they enjoy witnessing suffering, listening to the expression of painful emotions, and so forth. But where it has been usual to see a problem there, and everyone since Aristotle has had a go at dealing with it, if they have been concerned with response to the arts at all, Schopenhauer seems to be unaware that he needs to say something.<sup>5</sup>

Now it is certainly true that many have seen a problem here – in fact, even a brief survey of the history of philosophical reflection on tragedy reveals a variety of problems that have been thought to arise from our experience of, and characteristic responses to, tragedy, all of which more or less explicitly address the ethical significance of the art form. Some (and this was the take on the issue which predominated in eighteenth-century Britain) have seen the issue as primarily one concerning human psychology – Edmund Burke, for instance, was concerned with the question why it is (as he saw it) that our responses to suffering as it is depicted in tragedy differ from our responses to suffering in everyday life, in which context it rarely elicits pleasure.<sup>6</sup> And Hume, more famously, was occupied with the fact that in our experience of tragedy pleasure and pain seem somehow to be bound up with each other, in such a way that the more a tragedy hurts, the more we like and value it.<sup>7</sup> By others (including, arguably, Nietzsche) the problem has been seen as primarily one of morals: there would surely be something repugnant about a person or culture who or which commonly took pleasure in watching others suffer; yet isn’t this precisely what we are doing when we enjoy tragic works of art?<sup>8</sup> And by others still the problem has been construed as one of aesthetics (for want of a better way of characterising it): tragedies are among our most highly valued works of art (they represent ‘the summit of poetic art’, as

4 Michael Tanner, *Schopenhauer: Metaphysics and Art* (London: Orion Publishing, 1998), p. 33. Tanner is pressing this point with respect to our engagement with the Platonic Ideas in general, rather than specifically with respect to the Ideas revealed by tragedy.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful, and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 92ff.

7 David Hume, ‘Of tragedy’, in his *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987).

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).



Schopenhauer puts it), and the value that we attach to them lies in the nature of the experiences that they offer us. But if those experiences characteristically involve our taking pleasure in the portrayal of suffering, then the value that we attach to tragedy itself starts to look problematic.

But Schopenhauer's problem, as Tanner sees it, is rather different from any of these. For in all of these formulations, the problem is taken to *start* with the fact that we characteristically (or at least are meant to) take pleasure in tragic art – an assumption that can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. In contrast, Schopenhauer's difficulty, according to Tanner, is precisely that he has made it hard to see how we *can* take pleasure in tragic art, given the awful truth that he claims it is its business to bring to our attention.

In fact, however, I think that there is a common factor underlying the Schopenhauerian problem, as it is construed by Tanner, and the other familiar formulations of the problem in the history of the subject mentioned above. One way of getting at this is by asking how the notion of pleasure has come to be so central in philosophical discussions of this issue in the first place. For surely our response to the depiction of suffering and distress in tragic art does not always involve pleasure. Is witnessing Gloucester's blinding, or Lear's disintegration, really *pleasant*? Is *enjoyment* a proper response to the spectacle of Willy Loman's misery? Surely not. Indeed, what is depicted in a work of tragedy (and for that matter other forms of art) may be so harrowing that we are forced to leave the theatre or to close the book, in a way not so different from that in which we may find reading or watching documentary news reports of famine and war unbearable. And if we do not close the book or leave the theatre, it may be not because we take pleasure in what is depicted or represented therein, but rather because we may feel for one reason or another that we *ought* to endure it, as we may feel that we ought to watch the pictures and listen to the descriptions included in documentary reports of the sort I referred to a moment ago. In short, isn't there something more than a little odd about the common philosophical insistence on characterising the essential character of our experience of tragedy in terms of pleasure?

What explains this insistence, I suggest, is the appeal of tragic art: the fact that we keep going back to tragedy. But if we keep returning to these works – and, it is important to bear in mind, to works which harrow us; a production of *Lear* in which Gloucester's blinding is comically hammed up is not one to which we are likely to return – if we keep going back to these works, surely it *must* be because they give us pleasure. Susan Feagin puts the point like this:

It would not be surprising to find someone claiming that aesthetically developed persons do not feel pleasure or enjoyment from tragedy at all [. . .] If this were true [. . .] then it would be very difficult indeed to understand why tragedies are so revered. People who pursue them would seem

to be morbidly fixated on achieving their own unhappiness, which is more a sign of mental imbalance than aesthetic sophistication.<sup>9</sup>

So, Feagin concludes, tragedy *must* give us pleasure; if it did not, only masochists of one stripe or another would revere and pursue it.

Feagin is not untypical in this. And I suspect that a large part of the explanation of why pleasure has occupied the place it has in philosophical discussions of this issue is to be found in the fact that so many of the contributors to that discussion have held one or another version of what we may call *the hedonic theory of motivation* – the theory which holds that we act in pursuit of pleasure and to avoid pain. (Consider Hume, for example: ‘The chief spring or actuating principle of the human mind is pleasure or pain; and when these sensations are remov’d, both from our thought and feeling, we are, in a great measure, incapable of passion or action, or desire or volition.’<sup>10</sup>) And given that we are motivated partly by what we value, our theory of motivation is almost certainly going to be bound up with our theory of value; that is, if you have a hedonic theory of motivation, then you will have a hedonic theory of value – as did Hume and Burke, for example, and as Feagin’s mention of ‘revering’ and ‘pursuing’ tragedy in one breath suggests that she does. And Tanner’s suggestion that Schopenhauer faces a problem in explaining the value that we attach to our experience of art suggests that he too subscribes to a hedonic theory of value: when he says that it is ‘wholly puzzling’ how acquaintance with the Ideas presented by works of tragic (and other forms of ) art ‘could prove *valuable or pleasurable*’ or ‘exhilarating’, what he means, I think, is that it is ‘wholly puzzling’ how such an experience could be held to be valuable precisely given that it is *not* pleasurable or exhilarating.

But, of course, while hedonic theories of motivation and value may be the most widely-held such theories, they are not the only ones available. It can plausibly be argued that we may value (and hence be motivated to pursue) things for a variety of reasons, of which the fact that they are a source of pleasure is only one. For example, Robert Nozick (among others) has argued, I think persuasively, that one of the things that we value most is knowledge, and particularly knowledge which allows us to control ourselves in the situations in which we find ourselves.<sup>11</sup> Thus someone suffering from a terminal disease may value knowing that his disease is terminal, even though having

9 Susan L. Feagin, ‘The pleasures of tragedy’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 1983, 95–104.

10 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edn revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 574.

11 Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42ff. On the relevance of this to our experience of tragedy, see Flint Schier’s marvellous essay ‘Tragedy and the community of sentiment’, in Peter Lamarque ed., *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics* (2nd edn, <http://cybereditions.com/>: Cybereditions, 2000).

that knowledge makes him desperately unhappy. Of course, examples of this sort will not provide a knock-down argument against the hedonic theory of value; but what they do suggest, I think, is that in order to make any such theory run, the notion of ‘pleasure’ will have to be stretched way beyond a point at which it can be used in any very ordinary or intuitive sense. (Or to put it another way, in order for the concept of pleasure to be of any real use in accounting for human motivation and value, we will need to be considerably more sensitive to a wide range of phenomena, including happiness, enjoyment, delight, satisfaction, fulfilment, to list just a few, than proponents of the hedonic theory of motivation and value have typically been.)<sup>12</sup>

Given this, one way of responding to the kind of critique of Schopenhauer offered by Tanner would be to abandon the hedonic theory of value, and, crucially, to show that Schopenhauer does not hold it; for without that theory lurking in the background, the fact that becoming acquainted with the Ideas presented by tragedy is not pleasurable would in itself be no bar to seeing the experience in question as valuable. However, to take this route now would be premature. For we have yet to consider whether Schopenhauer’s account of our experience of tragedy might not offer sufficient resources to answer Tanner on his own terms – that is, on the terms set by the hedonic theory of value. And in this respect, the account does hold out some promise. As we saw earlier, Schopenhauer understands aesthetic experience as involving ‘the self-consciousness of the knower, not as individual, but as *pure, will-less subject of knowledge*’ (WWR I: 195). And he characterises this variety of experience in terms of ‘pure contemplation, absorption in perception, being lost in the object, forgetting all individuality, abolishing the kind of knowledge which follows the principle of sufficient reason, and comprehends only relations’ (WWR I: 196–7). In this state,

The attention is now no longer directed towards the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them in so far as they are merely representations and not motives.

(WWR I: 196)

It is important to recognise that in Schopenhauer’s view this is a variety of experience with considerable hedonic significance. He goes on, in the passage I have just been quoting from:

Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Susan Feagin for discussion of this point.

us. It is the painless state, prized by Epicurus as the highest good and as the state of the gods; for that moment we are relieved from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.

(WWR I: 196)

The hedonic payoff of aesthetic experience – and it is a payoff of our experience of tragic art as much as it is of our experience of any other sort of art – is thus relief, if only temporarily, from the pain of willing (which is all that pleasure can ever really amount to, in Schopenhauer’s view).

Perhaps Schopenhauer’s answer to Tanner’s question concerning how it is that ‘an intimate relationship’ with the Ideas which it is tragedy’s business to present to its audience ‘could prove [. . .] pleasurable’ is thus to be found in his conception of the nature of the relationship in question: the truths that tragedy reveals are indeed terrible truths from the point of view of individual human beings living out their lives in the phenomenal world, but in apprehending those truths through the art of tragedy we are precisely *not* in the position of individual human beings in the phenomenal world. We are rather in a position, if only momentarily, in which, free from willing, terror cannot touch us. In short, then, Schopenhauer thinks that there *is* pleasure, albeit of this distinctively negative and pared-down sort, to be had in our experience of tragic art.<sup>13</sup> Couldn’t *this* be the source of the value of that experience, for Schopenhauer?

To some extent, I think that the answer to this question must be ‘yes’: part of what makes the experience of tragedy valuable on Schopenhauer’s view is indeed that that experience affords us, if only for a moment, freedom from the pain of ‘the penal servitude of willing’. However, this cannot be the whole story for Schopenhauer. The problem here is not, as some have argued,<sup>14</sup> that the pleasurable relief from suffering provided by aesthetic experience is such a fleeting thing, a very temporary relief; fleeting or not, the experience is clearly regarded as hugely valuable by Schopenhauer: as he says, for most of us, the moments in which, in our experience of a work of

13 Indeed, given Schopenhauer’s view of the hedonic character of aesthetic experience, it may appear that the question he faces is not so much the one that has occupied so many concerning how pleasure in the experience of tragedy is possible, but rather that of how *pain* in this context is possible. The answer to this question, which I do not have the space to spell out in this essay, lies in the fact that in Schopenhauer’s view our experience of tragedy is a variety of experience of the *sublime* rather than the beautiful, and in his account of the character of the former, which is given in WWR I, Section 39.

14 For example, Sandra Shapshay, in ‘Feeling as knowledge: Schopenhauer on aesthetic experience and the ethics of compassion’, a paper delivered at the 58th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Reno, Nevada, October 2000. I should note that Shapshay goes on to challenge the view that the value of art is explained by Schopenhauer in terms of its capacity to provide pleasure, in terms with which I am entirely sympathetic.

art, we are ‘delivered from the fierce pressure of the will [. . .] are the most blissful that we experience’ (WWR I: 390). The problem is rather that the pleasure in question is not *distinctive* of our experience of tragedy; it is one that comes with aesthetic experience in general, and hence is derivable from our engagement with a wide range of artworks – and indeed with all sorts of other phenomena, for on Schopenhauer’s view *anything* may be experienced aesthetically. (As he puts it, ‘everything is [. . .] beautiful’ (WWR I: 210).) Contemplation of the Ideas presented in a painting of a bowl of fruit may be easier for most of us than contemplation of those Ideas as we consider an actual bowl of fruit, but the latter is perfectly possible – indeed, that is what makes art possible – and when it is achieved the experience will have the same hedonic character as will the experience of the painting. (I am oversimplifying here in ignoring the fact that in Schopenhauer’s view our experience of tragedy is a variety of experience of the sublime rather than of the beautiful; the point stands, however, since the sublime is a category that extends beyond tragedy in art, and, like the beautiful, beyond art into the rest of the phenomenal world.)

Assuming then that the value of tragedy is a distinctive value – a value that it, but not hydraulic art or sculpture or even lyric poetry, say, has – it looks as though the source of that value is not, or at any rate is not wholly, to be found, in Schopenhauer’s theory, in the hedonic aspect of our experience of tragedy. And of course, for Schopenhauer tragedy *does* have a distinctive value, as indeed do all of the arts – this is precisely what his hierarchy of the arts, with architecture at the bottom and tragedy at the top (again, music is a special case) is supposed to reflect. It might be thought, I suppose, that the positions that the various artforms occupy on the Schopenhauerian scale reflect varying amounts of pleasure or tranquillity that the experience of them offers, but this would be a mistake: freedom from the penal servitude of the will does not come in degrees for Schopenhauer.

However, this does not exhaust the possibility of cashing out the value of our experience of tragedy for Schopenhauer in hedonic terms. For thus far we have concentrated only on one aspect of his account of aesthetic experience: that which emphasises the subjective character of the experience: ‘the self-consciousness of the knower, not as individual, but *as pure, will-less subject of knowledge*’. But as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, there is also what Schopenhauer calls the ‘objective side’ of the experience, ‘namely, knowledge of the object not as individual thing, but as Platonic *Idea*, in other words, as persistent form of this whole species of things’ (WWR I: 195). And in the early part of his discussion of art and aesthetic experience in Book III of WWR I, Schopenhauer suggests that the latter aspect of aesthetic experience also has hedonic significance: ‘the *pleasure* produced by contemplation of the beautiful [and, with a ‘special modification’, of the sublime] arises from those two constituent parts, sometimes more from the one than from the other, according to what the object of aesthetic

contemplation may be' (WWR I: 196). He is at his most explicit about this in the following passage:

The source of aesthetic enjoyment will lie sometimes rather in the apprehension of the known Idea, sometimes rather in the bliss and peace of mind of pure knowledge free from all willing . . . And in fact, this predominance of the one or the other constituent element of aesthetic enjoyment will depend on whether the intuitively grasped Idea is a higher or lower grade of the will's objectivity. Thus with aesthetic contemplation (in real life or through the medium of art) of natural beauty in the inorganic and vegetable kingdoms and of the works of architecture, the enjoyment of pure, will-less knowing will predominate, because the Ideas here apprehended are only low grades of the will's objectivity, and therefore are not phenomena of deep significance and suggestive content. On the other hand, if animals and human beings are the object of aesthetic contemplation or presentation, the enjoyment will consist rather in the objective apprehension of these Ideas that are the most distinct revelations of the will. For these exhibit the greatest variety of forms, a wealth and deep significance of phenomena; they reveal to us most completely the essence of the will.

(WWR I: 212–13)

This looks promising, for given that the pleasure that derives from the objective side of aesthetic experience is directly linked to our apprehension of the Ideas, which are so to speak artform-specific, so the pleasure itself will be artform-specific. That is, Schopenhauer appears here to be offering the possibility of a hedonic basis for the value of tragedy that will be distinctive of our experience of that form of art; and indeed to be offering a basis for a hedonically-based account of the value of art that is consistent with his hierarchy of the arts – the more significant the Idea, the greater the artform-specific pleasure, and hence the greater the value of the form of art in question.

However, in the event the promise is not kept. At the beginning of his discussion of the individual arts, in talking about architecture, Schopenhauer mentions almost in passing that it is in 'the aesthetic enjoyment' of drama (by which he means tragedy), 'which brings to knowledge the most significant of all the Ideas', that 'the objective side is predominant throughout' (WWR I: 216). And the balance of pleasure derived from the subjective and objective aspects of aesthetic experience continues to be a theme of the following discussion of 'artistic horticulture', landscape painting, and paintings and sculptures of animals (WWR I, Sections 43–5). However, by the point at which he turns to consider the first of the forms of art the business of which is to present 'the Idea in which the will reaches the highest degree of its objectification' (WWR I: 220), namely 'historical' painting and

sculpture, the theme has all but disappeared: the last explicit mention of it is in his comment that ‘however much the objective side of the beautiful appears here, the subjective always remains its constant companion’ (WWR I: 221).<sup>15</sup> And when he turns his attention directly to tragedy, the notion that the apprehension of the Ideas is a source of pleasure is not mentioned at all.

In the end, then, Schopenhauer makes very little of the hedonic character of the objective aspect of aesthetic experience. And this is probably fortunate, since had he done more with it, the problem raised by Tanner – the problem of why acquaintance with these Ideas should be a source of pleasure – would have been inescapable. There is an ancient answer to this problem, of course, the answer that Aristotle provides in *Poetics* 4, where he writes:

We take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain – such as the appearance of the basest animals, or of corpses. Here too the explanation lies in the fact that great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding [. . .] It is for this reason that men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element.<sup>16</sup>

But it is hard to see how Schopenhauer could have availed himself of this answer, or anything very like it. For given his hierarchy of the arts, which is in effect a ranking of the value of the different artforms, in order to give a hedonic basis to that value and to take an Aristotelian line on the nature of the pleasure in question, Schopenhauer would have had to be prepared to make some quite fine-grained claims about the differences in the extent to which the various Ideas which it is the business of the arts to present tax the understanding, and indeed about the different degrees of pleasure involved in various degrees and forms of the exercise of understanding, claims which it is hard to imagine being made with any plausibility.

Whether or not for this reason, Schopenhauer makes very little of the pleasure which may derive from the apprehension of the Platonic Ideas in aesthetic experience, and it is difficult to see how he could have made more of it in such a way as to provide a plausible hedonic basis for the value that we attach to tragedy. It looks then as if the attempt to explain the value of tragic art as Schopenhauer sees it in terms of hedonic value is doomed to failure. But does this leave him stranded, as Tanner in effect suggests, unable to provide an account of the value of tragic art?

15 A remark which, incidentally, threatens to undercut any attempt to maintain the consistency of Schopenhauer’s hierarchy of the various art with a hedonically-based account of the value of art founded in his remarks about the pleasure which derives from the objective side of aesthetic experience.

16 Op. cit., p. 34.

I do not believe that it does. The reason that Schopenhauer makes so little of the thought that the apprehension of the Ideas has a hedonic dimension distinct from that which derives from the subjective aspect of aesthetic experience, I suggest, is that for all his talk of aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment, he did not in the end hold a hedonic account of the *value* of tragedy or indeed of any of the other forms of art. And the reason for this is that Schopenhauer, unlike so many of his predecessors and successors in the philosophical debate concerning the nature and value of tragedy, did not hold a hedonic theory of motivation or value. This is apparent, I think, when one considers his ethics: true moral worth, according to Schopenhauer, lies in compassion, which requires both the overcoming of egoism and the identification with others which that overcoming makes possible. It is of course true that in his metaphysics Schopenhauer characterises slavery to the will, which must be overcome if we are to achieve this compassionate stance, in terms of suffering. And it is true that complete denial of the will, saintly ‘resignation’ or ‘holiness’, brings with it ‘deliverance from [. . .] suffering’. But what produces this, or makes it possible, is not a desire to avoid suffering, and far less a desire to achieve pleasure or happiness, but rather the *insight* that suffering makes available to us: ‘that quieter of the will [which is] complete *knowledge* of its inner conflict and its essential vanity’ (WWR I: 397; my emphasis). If desire is operative here at all, it is not so much a desire to avoid suffering as to break free of the *delusion* that suffering depends on. In the end, pleasure and pain cannot be the source of ethical or any other sort of value, for Schopenhauer, since they are merely aspects of the phenomenal world; whereas ‘the ethical significance of human conduct is metaphysical, in other words [. . .] it reaches beyond this phenomenal existence and touches eternity’.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, however, we do not need to venture into Schopenhauer’s ethics to see that he could not have held a hedonic theory of value. For that fact is apparent in his philosophy of art, and indeed has been hinted at in much of what has been said above. My point here is that no one who attempts a ranking of the arts in terms of their value in the way that Schopenhauer does, and who writes (albeit within certain definite constraints) so perceptively about the arts and about individual artists, could possibly be in thrall to a hedonic conception of value. Is Poussin really to be rated lower than Calderón – or for that matter than Shakespeare – in terms of the *pleasure* – *however* you construe that notion – that their works offer? The idea is little short of absurd. As we have seen, what Schopenhauer’s ranking of the arts reflects is his ranking of the Ideas – patterns of degrees of objectification of Will – and as I have argued, this cannot plausibly be translated into a ranking of different levels of pleasure made available by the experience which makes possible the

17 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. J. F. Payne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 54. I owe the reference to Shapshay.



apprehension of those Ideas. In short, the idea that in Schopenhauer's view the place occupied by each of the art forms in his hierarchy is explained by their being a greater source of pleasure than those lower down the scale but a lesser one than those higher up, involves attributing to him a view so patently implausible that charity, if nothing else, demands that it be resisted unless there is no saner alternative.

And there is an alternative for Schopenhauer: namely, that the value of tragedy is primarily value of a cognitive sort. I say 'primarily' because I do not want to deny that the pleasure of tranquillity, of freedom from willing, which is a part of all aesthetic experience in Schopenhauer's account, is in his view part of what makes our imaginative experience of tragic art valuable. But the value that is distinctive of, or peculiar to, our engagement with tragedy lies in the cognitive payoff of that engagement – in what, by presenting the Idea in which Will is presented 'at the highest grade of its objectivity' tragedy is able to reveal to us about 'the nature of the world and of existence'.

But again, and as Tanner asks, given the horror of what is revealed by tragedy, why is it that we value the experience it provides? This question clearly remains to be addressed – although without the hedonic theory of value lurking in the background, the threat of paradox or contradiction that it otherwise implies, and which has exercised so many, is no longer there. I see Schopenhauer as having two replies to the question. The first is that learning what tragedy has to show us does not make things any worse: as he sees things, after all, it is not as if ignorance is bliss. Ignorance consists rather of enslavement to the Will, a pointless, degrading and painful cycle of willing and frustration. Coming to see this for what it is, which is what our experience of the art of tragedy makes possible, does not make things worse, but is rather a step towards emancipation. And this is Schopenhauer's second reply to the question that Tanner presses: tragedy's value lies not merely in the importance of what it reveals to us concerning the nature of reality, but also in the fact that through our engagement with tragedy we may come to recognise the only appropriate response to the terrible truth it presents. This is to adopt an attitude of 'resignation': as Schopenhauer puts it, 'The horrors on the stage hold up to [the spectator] the bitterness and worthlessness of life, and so the vanity of all its efforts and endeavours. The effect of this impression must be that he becomes aware [. . .] that it is better to tear his heart away from life, to turn his willing away from it, not to love the world and life' (WWR II: 435). Again, 'the knowledge of the real nature of the world [that tragic art may afford us], acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself' (WWR I: 253). And in that, for Schopenhauer, lies salvation.

To return, finally, to Tanner's question: how is that 'an intimate relationship with' the Ideas that it is the business of tragedy to reveal to us 'could prove valuable or pleasurable'? Schopenhauer's answer, I have argued, is that

that relationship is pleasurable in as much as it takes place in a context – that of aesthetic experience – in which, if only temporarily, we escape the phenomenal world, and are ‘delivered from the fierce pressure of the will’ (WWR I: 390). And if one takes Schopenhauer’s account of aesthetic experience on its own terms, it is clear that this pleasurable release from the pressure of the will is not such as to be compromised by the awful truth that tragedy reveals. I have argued, however, that the distinctive value of tragedy does not derive from the hedonic character of the subjective aspect of our experience of it; rather, that value derives from the cognitive significance that this form of art has, in Schopenhauer’s scheme, and in particular from the role that it may play in showing us how to respond to the truth that it reveals. In the end, then, the value of tragedy and of our experience of it is, for Schopenhauer, essentially ethical value: tragedy is a form of art that demonstrates, and in demonstrating encourages, the possibility of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

18 Thanks to José Bermúdez, Susan Feagin, Sebastian Gardner and Aaron Ridley for very helpful comments. Early versions of this essay were presented in talks at Macalester College, the University of Sussex, the ‘Art and Imagination’ conference in Leeds, July 2001, and the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics at Asilomar, California, March 2002; I’m grateful to the audiences on those occasions for thought-provoking and productive discussion.

# Tragedy, morality and metaphysics

Sebastian Gardner

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Thought about the relation between tragedy and morality may be divided into two schools. The one, which dominates writing on tragedy, assumes a fundamental compatibility between tragedy and morality. The connection allows of various formulations. It may be held that the experience of tragedy is constituted by moral appraisal, that the telos of tragedy converges with moral ends, or simply that there is at least nothing in the experience of tragedy which disturbs the outlook of morality. The other line of thought, which again comes in different formulations, is that there is on the contrary a dissociation or discrepancy, or in stronger terms, a mutual antagonism, between tragedy and morality. My aim in this chapter is to explore one form of the latter view.

The association of tragedy with morality has a long and highly distinguished history. Among theoretical writings favouring tragedy's moral significance we find, after Aristotle's oblique account of the relation, a long and unified tradition stretching from Horace, up over the hiatus of medieval culture, to the eighteenth century. Attempts to extract from Aristotle's *Poetics* an explicit account of the moral significance of tragedy abound in Renaissance humanism.<sup>1</sup> The Horatian view of tragedy as pleasing moral instruction<sup>2</sup> is taken up in Sir Phillip Sidney's theory of tragedy as effecting the highest species of morally purposeful imitation,<sup>3</sup> and echoed in Thomas

- 1 See, for example, the extracts from Giambattista Giraldi and Lorenzo Giacomini in Michael J. Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vol. 1, *Plato to Congreve*, pp. 123–4, 125, 173–4; and from Bernardino Daniello and Antonio Sebastiano (Minturno) in Barrett H. Clark ed., *European Theories of the Drama* (New York: Crown, 1965), pp. 40–5. This moral-Aristotelian tradition extends as far as the eighteenth century: see the extracts from Pietro Metastasio in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *Voltaire to Hugo*, pp. 32–4.
- 2 See *Ars Poetica*, in *Horace on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Edward Henry Blakeney (London: Scholartis, 1928), 309sq., 333sq., 390sq.
- 3 'Therefore poetry is an art of imitation [. . .] with this end, to teach and delight [. . .] the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls [. . .] can be capable of' (*An Apology for Poetry* (1595), ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), pp. 101–2). Tragedy is 'so excellent a representation of whatsoever is most worthy to be learned' (op. cit., p. 118).

Rymer's influential writings, where the claim is famously made that tragedy delivers properly clear moral lessons through the representation of 'poetical Justice'.<sup>4</sup> Forthright statements of the moral view are again found in numerous later neoclassical figures, including John Milton, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson and Joseph Addison;<sup>5</sup> even David Hume, philosophically well positioned to take a light view of the moral service of art, makes it a condition on the proper functioning of tragedy that it should not strain our moral dispositions.<sup>6</sup> The same outlook, in an even more pronounced form, characterises French and German neoclassical criticism. François Hédelin (Abbé D'Aubignac) declares that the overriding aim of the dramatist is verisimilitude, comprehending moral conditions and purposes;<sup>7</sup> Pierre Corneille conceives tragedy as enforcing the sovereignty of reason and hence of morality over the passions;<sup>8</sup> Jean Racine interprets tragic pity and terror as tempering and refining our passions in order to set them in conformity with morality and reason.<sup>9</sup> J. Chr. Gottsched pleads for the inclusion of tragedians

4 *Tragedies of the Last Age*, in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt Zimansky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 27. See G. B. Dutton, 'The French Aristotelian formalists and Thomas Rymer', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 29, 1914, 152–88, pp. 158ff.

5 Milton describes tragedy as 'the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems', while also noting 'the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day', in the preface to *Samson Agonistes* (1671), 'Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy', in *Poetical Works*, ed. Rev. H. C. Beeching (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1919). Dryden defines drama in general as 'A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind' ('An essay of dramatic poesy' (1688), in D. J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera eds, *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), p. 55).

6 'Of tragedy' (1741), in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (London: Grant Richards, 1903), p. 229.

7 See the extracts from *La pratique du théâtre* (1657), in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 220–33: 'Drama does not show things as they are, but as they ought to have been' (p. 224), for which reason the crimes of monarchs may not be represented; drama imitates human actions in order to teach, and in the case of 'maxims pertaining to moral conduct', 'this must be done indirectly, and by means of actions': 'if the dramatic action is clear and well-constructed, it will show the power of virtue shining out [. . .] [even when overcome, it] always remains admirable', while vice 'even when it triumphs by violence, never ceases to be abominable. Hence the spectators draw their own conclusion, quite naturally, that it is better to embrace virtue at the risk of suffering injustice' (p. 232).

8 *Discours I (de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique)* and II (*de la tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblance ou le nécessaire*) (1660), in *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. H. T. Barnwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), I, pp. 3–7, II, pp. 29, 32, 34. 'Horace nous apprend que nous ne saurions plaire à tout le monde, si nous n'y mêlons l'utile [. . .] quoique l'utile n'y entre que sous la forme du délectable, il ne laisse pas d'y être nécessaire' (pp. 3–4). Corneille modifies Aristotle: he rejects purgation through joint pity and fear as improbable, holding instead that either pity or fear will suffice to deter us from the relevant vicious passion.

9 *Principes de la tragédie en marge de la poétique d'Aristote*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (Paris: Nizet, 1959), p. 12.

in a well-ordered society on the grounds that tragedy provides, through its palpable exemplification of vice and virtue, one of the most powerful stimuli to morality, on a par with the exhortations of the clergy;<sup>10</sup> Gotthold Lessing claims that tragedy induces pity and fear in such a way as to transform these passions into virtues.<sup>11</sup> Moses Mendelssohn advances a theory of the pleasure in tragedy as due to awareness of the moral character of one's own responses: again, tragedy fosters the perfections of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

With romanticism, discussion of tragedy changes tone and direction, as new issues, such as the genius of Shakespeare and the organic, rule-defiant character of art, come into focus;<sup>13</sup> but the moral view continues to be upheld, albeit in forms that are, compared with neoclassical formulations, relatively complex. Thus we find in Friedrich Schiller an account of tragedy as hinging on moral choice in the face of suffering, and in G. W. F. Hegel a non-Aristotelian conception of tragedy as concerned with the self-rationalisation of the ethical. The critical writings of the major romantic figures typically presume an undivided Good which comprehends morality and to which tragedy contributes.<sup>14</sup> If the moral view of tragedy becomes thereafter less prominent, it is chiefly because of the accelerating modernist impulse to grant art its autonomy; Bertolt Brecht stands out as an exception.<sup>15</sup> This does not however prevent the moral view from pervading modern thought about tragedy; the assumption that tragedy serves to enhance moral sensibility is visible in much humanist literary criticism.

In some of these cases the moral significance of tragedy is held to derive simply from a supposed general consonance of art with morality, while in

10 Gottsched, 'Die Schauspiele und besonders die Tragödien sind aus einer wohlbestellten Republik nicht zu verbannen', in *Schriften zur Literatur* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1972).

11 See *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767–8), in vol. 6 of *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Paul Rilla (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1968), Stück 78. The role of the dramatist is 'to enlighten and improve' (Stück 1, p. 15); theatre is to provide a 'school of the moral world' (Stück 2, p. 16). This is achieved by presenting objects in their true moral light, so as to shape appropriately our desires and dispositions (Stück 34, p. 177), and by the transformation of pity and fear into virtues (Stück 78, p. 399).

12 'Rhapsody or additions to the letters on sentiments' (1761), in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

13 See Jonathan Bate ed., *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Criticism of Shakespeare: A Selection*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Athlone, 1989).

14 See e.g. Coleridge, op. cit., pp. 57–8, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A defence of poetry' (1840 [1821]), in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Signet, 1966) (discussed below).

15 See *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 29–31, 36–7, 69ff. Brecht regards the concept of tragedy as a historical relic (p. 66), but his pedagogic conception of 'major' drama and his preparedness to utilise emotional responses to representations of suffering (pp. 71, 186) puts him firmly in a line of descent from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Horatians: right action is to be fostered by knowledge of how the world works, of Providence or (for Brecht) of social processes.

others, of greater interest, the connection is attributed to the specific features which differentiate tragedy from other forms of art, and no general position on the art/morality relation is strictly presupposed, though in most cases it is present. The moral view does not, it should be stressed, presuppose a didactic conception of tragedy, i.e. the view that tragedy is either intentionally designed or justified only as a means of moral instruction: all it need assert is the teleological harmony of tragedy with morality.

Representing the opposite view, that of the minority, is above all Friedrich Nietzsche (though I shall suggest that it is implicit, if no more, in some other tragic theorists too). The original immoralisation of tragedy belongs, of course, to Plato, but just as the affirmation of tragedy's moral value is less interesting when asserted merely on the basis that tragedy is an instance of (representational) art in general, so Plato's attack on tragedy's moral standing, which rests on no distinction between tragedy and other emotion-arousing artistic representations, is not of primary interest in the present context.

At first glance, measuring the unequal historical balance of the two sides, and taking note of the widely different starting points of the writers who suppose tragedy to agree with morality, it can seem that all plausible roads lead surely and firmly to the conclusion that tragedy has a moral dimension, and that one will come to think otherwise only if one holds some eccentric general position on the nature of value or of art, as Plato and Nietzsche, in their different ways, may be thought to have done. What I will attempt to argue, however, is that the notion of an antagonism between tragedy and morality is highly plausible, for reasons that are in the spirit of Nietzsche and entirely consistent with our experience of tragedy.

An exhaustive treatment of the myriad different ways in which the connection of tragedy with morality has been conceived is out of the question. Consequently I will instead, in the first part of this chapter, after some preliminary criticism of the moral view of tragedy, try to give positive reason for thinking that the perspectives of tragedy and morality conflict. This argument is intended to stand on its own, but it receives additional support from the metaphysical account of tragedy which I sketch in the second part of the chapter.

## I

The fact that tragedy is no peripheral or transient artistic phenomenon, but has an abiding place in Western culture, central to which is an explicit concern for morality, may be thought to provide an initial and obvious reason for supposing that there must be some sort of agreement of tragedy with morality.

Further reasons of a plain type for presuming the agreement of tragedy and morality may be advanced. The creation and appreciation of tragedy cannot itself be regarded with any plausibility as a moral wrong. No interpretation

of tragedy which assigned it the same immoral or morally dubious status as gladiatorial combat or pornography would be remotely tenable. Tragic works do not represent vicious acts as desirable or as proper objects of delight. When we take pleasure in tragedy, we do so with a good conscience; we know, as far as we ever can, that our pleasure is not sadistic. Furthermore, the focus of tragedy, like that of morality, is on the most important human concerns, moral characterisation of which can scarcely be avoided in tragic representation. And since the import of tragedy, whatever it may be exactly, is that the human good is liable to destruction, it may consequently be supposed that, since tragedy both heightens our awareness of this good, and makes us fear for its destruction, the dispositions engendered by tragedy will be precisely moral ones.

These points help to circumscribe the territory on which the conflict of tragedy with morality, if there is one, might be found. The quickest and easiest way to set up a conflict, of a minimal sort, between tragedy and morality, would be to claim simply that the end of tragedy is independent of and capable of conflicting contingently with some moral end. A theory which says that the purpose of tragedy is either pleasure or aesthetic value, formalistically conceived, will do this. Hedonistic or aestheticist theories of tragedy are, however, highly improbable: of all the species of art, tragedy has the least straightforward connection with pleasure, and tragic works are the hardest to reduce to self-subsistent aesthetic objects.<sup>16</sup> The notion that tragedy conflicts with morality is worth exploring, it would seem, only if the point of tragedy is identified with something other than either pleasure or formalistic aesthetic value. We should accordingly proceed on the assumption that the purpose of tragedy lies in what it says about human life, and that this is what leads it into conflict with morality.

It is not necessary, in order for tragedy to do this, that it should directly contradict moral evaluations. Tragedy may conflict with morality without inculcating immoralism, answering to vicious dispositions, or giving reason for immoral action. The conflict may lie instead, more subtly, in the view of the world and our place in it which is formed in the course of appreciating tragedy: this view may be inconsistent with that which we maintain qua moral agents; the tragic conception of value may be inconsistent with the moral good. Thus even if there is no difference between the actions to which tragedy leaves us disposed and those which we approve morally, it does not follow that tragedy generates or consolidates moral dispositions: it is entirely possible for conflicting values to enjoin the same actions, and in any case it is quite possible that tragedy delineates values without forming any dispositions to action at all.

16 A hedonistic account of the value of tragedy is given in Ludovico Castelvetro's commentary on Aristotle; see the extracts in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, pp. 132, 134–5, 141–2, 143.

Nor can the agreement of tragedy with morality be inferred from the cultural esteem accorded to tragedy. Human culture is not a rigidly integrated system of ends, and cultural practices may co-exist without sharing a common subjective ground. Nor can anything be inferred safely from the absence of any perceived incompatibility of tragedy and morality on the part of the spectator: both because we may be unaware, pre-theoretically, of the deeper implications of the understanding we form in tragedy, and because there may be contextual reasons why the conflict is veiled from us. And again, the moral subject-matter of tragedy is no guarantee of tragedy's moral purposiveness: the fact that tragedy employs moral characterisations of persons and actions does not mean that tragedy is concerned with promoting the value of those characterisations. It is quite possible that, although morality is employed in the construction of tragic representations, the features of those representations which make them tragic are not moral ones, so that, to the extent that tragedy does take us inside moral issues, this is simply part and parcel of its construction of a fictional world of a kind which allows tragedy to make its own, non-moral point. In short, the representation of moral depth in tragedy may be a means to, or concomitant of, an end which conflicts with morality. The property of representing things which have a moral nature is distinct from that of advancing moral ends.

Examination of the more obvious reasons for supposing the agreement of tragedy and morality yields, therefore, only a very thin sense in which this must be so: namely, enjoyment of tragedy is not inherently immoral and tragedy does not promote any practical ends which set it at variance with morality. It remains an open question whether the perspective or world-view expressed in tragedy – the 'look' that it gives to the world – coheres with that of moral agency, and whether tragic and moral value are compatible.

Turning to the philosophical and historical literature, we find that, while the moral conception of tragedy is frequently stated, detailed support for it is not abundant. As observed earlier, the moral significance of tragedy is often supposed to derive from a presumed general link of art with morality. This is inconclusive, however, due to the possibility that tragedy, as an exceptional form of art, is an exception to the rule: it needs to be shown that the features of art which in general link it to morality are present, and not overridden, in tragedy. The bulk of writings on tragedy in each age tend to devote space to other, more pressing issues: the question of compatibility with Christian doctrine, the relation of modern to ancient dramatic poetry, the relative merits of English and French tragedy, questions of craft and technique such as the importance of the unities, the integrity of tragi-comedy, the relation of plot to character, and so forth.<sup>17</sup> Of the writers referred to above, only Aristotle,

17 See Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), ch. 1. In analytic philosophy, it may be added, the alleged hedonic paradox of tragedy – attractive as a philosophical topic because of its continuity with other conceptual puzzles in the philosophy



Schiller and Hegel offer anything extensive on the link of tragedy with morality, and in all three cases there are limitations to the scope of their discussions, Aristotle's deriving from the notorious obscurity of *katharsis*. Problems with Schiller and Hegel will be discussed later.

Two historically common lines of argument for the moral view of tragedy, particularly salient in neoclassical criticism, may nevertheless be singled out. One is that tragedy represents for our edification the morally proper consequences of virtue and vice (poetical Justice). The other is that tragedy's arousal of emotion is morally beneficent. Rymer writes: 'besides the *purging* of the *passions*; something must stick by observing that constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain, whereby the causes and the effects, the virtues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and link'd together; how deep and dark soever are laid the Springs, and however intricate and involv'd are their operations'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Dryden asserts that in tragedy, as compared with comedy, 'the laws of justice are more strictly to be observed; and examples of punishment to be made to deter mankind from the pursuit of vice [. . .] Thus tragedy fulfils one great part of its institution: which is, by example, to instruct'.<sup>19</sup> And Johnson: 'the design of tragedy is to instruct by moving the passions'.<sup>20</sup> Tragedy, Joseph Addison writes, is 'one of the most delightful and most improving Entertainments': tragic dramas 'cherish and cultivate that Humanity which is the Ornament of our Nature. They soften Insolence, sooth Affliction, and subdue the Mind to the Dispensations of Providence.'<sup>21</sup>

Without entering into the detail, it is not hard to see the limitations of these accounts. The claim that tragedy represents the world as exhibiting a moral order in the specific sense of a causal power to reward virtue and punish vice, or as being at least not indifferent in this respect, is perhaps the least defensible version of the moral view. A. C. Bradley disposes of it with respect to Shakespearean tragedy by showing that, if we gauge the world of Shakespearean tragedy in such terms, then we do discover it to be intolerant of evil, but to a degree that is pathological and, paradoxically, immoral – any

of mind (akrasia, belief/emotion anomalies such as those implied by affective response to fictional objects, etc.) – seems to have played this role.

18 *Tragedies of the Last Age*, p. 75; Rymer complains of *Othello* that its force is to 'envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence', *A Short View of Tragedy* (1692), p. 161.

19 'Preface to *An Evening's Love*' (1671), in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, vol. 1, ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1962), pp. 151–2.

20 *The Rambler*, no. 156, in *Selected Essays from the Rambler, Adventurer, and Idler*, ed. W. J. Bate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 196.

21 *The Spectator* (with Richard Steele and others), ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), no. 39 (1711). Addison, however, departs from orthodoxy by rejecting the rule of poetic justice, arguing that it provides virtue with a sense of security that defeats the point of tragedy (op. cit., no. 40, 1711).

slight disturbance of the moral equilibrium produces convulsions which in turn destroy virtue and innocence.<sup>22</sup>

The second line of thought, that arousing pity and fear purges or neutralises morally harmful passions, or, in a sentimentalist version, that tragedy induces morally purposeful sympathetic feeling,<sup>23</sup> fails to secure a firm relation to morality. Even if the relevant lines of psychological causation are granted to be reliable, an essential attunement of tragedy with morality follows only if a reductive, psychologistic view of both tragedy and morality is assumed. If anything other than states of feeling enters the process – if the upshot of pity and fear is mediated by reflection, or if morality requires not just the occurrence of sympathy but also its interpretation – then a moral end will not necessarily be achieved.

Whereas the first argument takes an unsustainable view of the objective content of tragedy, the second argument attends only to its subjective effects and takes too narrow a view of these.

The first modern philosophical age to have been well positioned to address directly the question of tragedy's relation to morality – on account of its heritage of Hellenism unmediated by Christianity, its preoccupation with the questions of the foundation of morality and the significance of aesthetic experience, and its ambition to construct a comprehensive philosophical system – is German idealism, and it is significant for my account that the German idealist tradition of reflection on tragedy, though committed to integrating tragedy with morality, should culminate historically in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. The non-agreement of tragedy with morality is not the central thesis in this early work of Nietzsche's – it becomes fully clear only in his later writings – but it is one of its important themes: the conflict results from the opposition of pessimistic, Dionysiac-incorporating tragedy, to the optimistic, rationalistic, Socratic consciousness with which Nietzsche here already associates Christian and modern morality.<sup>24</sup> Instead of examining

22 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 23–9. Roughly the same point is made by Clifford Leech: even if tragedy reveals some moral order in the world, it is too little for the tragic affirmation to be understood as an affirmation of morality in the sense of an expression of moral confidence, confidence in the power of the moral Good ('The implications of tragedy', in Laurence Lerner ed., *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 288–9).

23 See William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1964), pp. 291–7. The sentimentalist view may be found in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), ed. James Boulton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pt. 1, sects. 12–13: tragedy exercises sympathy, a passion which serves ends in 'the great chain of society'. In one variant it is an element in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*: 'The great instrument of the moral good is the imagination [. . .] Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man' (pp. 424–5).

24 See *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), §22, opposing the aesthetic-Dionysiac to the moral-Aristotelian interpretation of tragedy; and Robert Pippin, 'Truth and lies in the early Nietzsche', in

directly the argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is long and convoluted, I will try to articulate, with reference to earlier developments in German philosophy, a line of thought which provides a partial reconstruction of Nietzsche's reasons for thinking of tragedy and morality as opposed.

One of the several variables complicating the issue of tragedy's relation to morality is, as noted at the outset, the strength of the association or conflict with morality envisaged. Another is the strength of the conception of morality employed by the moral view of tragedy: the less demanding the conception, the easier it will be to show its agreement and the harder its conflict with tragedy, though at the same time, the less philosophically interesting the association is likely to be.<sup>25</sup> In order for the argument to get started, something about the content of morality needs to be presupposed. I will consequently begin by sketching a conception which is sufficiently strong to make the moral view of tragedy worth defending, but not so inflated as to provide the Nietzschean view with a straw man.

Considered as nothing more than a set of normative principles or states of character for effecting states of affairs in the world, morality could only be contradicted by tragedy if the latter did what, it was conceded above, it does not do, namely, promote actions (or pleasures) contrary to those enjoined by

*Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 315–16, 327–8. In Nietzsche's later writings the antithesis of morality and tragedy is drawn more sharply: see *Human, All Too Human* (1878), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), §212; *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), §78, §172, §240; *The Gay Science* (1882), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §107, §135; *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), §229; *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969), Second Essay, sect. 7; *Ecce Homo* (1888), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); 'The Birth of Tragedy'; *Twilight of the Idols: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (1889), trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 'Expeditions of an untimely man', §24; 'What I owe to the ancients', §5; the 'Attempt at a self-criticism' prefaced in 1886 to *The Birth of Tragedy*, §§4–5; and *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §§851–3. *The Birth of Tragedy* raises up tragedy against a cultural and spiritual condition of which (Christian) morality is a central component, but tragedy clashes with morality only in so far as (Christian) morality is a part of the general modern condition which tragic consciousness opposes. Later, when morality has become for Nietzsche the root cause of the modern life-deficiency, he no longer regards tragedy as an adequate alternative to morality. Thus Nietzsche valorises tragedy at an early point, when he does not see morality as a special, fundamental problem; and at the later point when he does see morality as such a problem, his estimate of the curative power of tragedy has declined.

25 Yet another is the assumed scope of the genre – whether it is historically circumscribed, whether any historical age or ages should be regarded as paradigms of tragedy, and which if any non-dramatic (or even non-representational) arts may include tragic works. My discussion aims to bypass these issues as far as is possible.

morality. Morality considered in this way is, however, morality considered without reference to either its ground, that which gives it normative force, or what may be called its world-characterisation, that is, the general character which it assigns to the world qua background to, and context of, moral action. It is unnecessary for either to figure as part of the content of first-order moral principles or of virtuous sentiment and reflection, but each is nevertheless an essential element of morality, the world-characterisation being a component, explicit or implicit, of the broader, metaphysical picture deployed in the justification of morality. Evidently, it is with respect to the world-characterisation of morality that its conflict with tragedy may be thought in the first instance to arise.

The assumption that morality is committed to a world-characterisation, it should be noted, is important for the moral view of tragedy, if this view is to be formulated convincingly. Once it has been recognised that the contribution of tragedy to morality cannot be held to consist in the portrayal of poetical Justice, nor in the activation of sympathy, the options are rather narrow. It would not be plausible to hold that the purpose of tragedy is to represent morally right things as desirable and morally wrong things as undesirable: the bulk of tragic works can scarcely be read as having it as their primary aim to extol the value of moral values. In order for the moral view of tragedy to be formulated plausibly, the consonance of tragedy with morality needs to be subtler, and so it is natural to suppose that it must occur by way of their respective world-characterisations.

If morality characterises the world, what character does it then give it? Underlying all of the various world-characterisations provided by different moral systems from Aristotle to G. W. Leibniz and the Earl of Shaftesbury, there is arguably a constant, universal assumption concerning the character of the world which moral consciousness needs to make, and which derives from the basic consideration that morality is the property of finite agents, who need to think of the world in morally congenial, morally purposive, terms. As Immanuel Kant expresses it:

Consider the case of a righteous man (one like Spinoza) who is firmly persuaded that there is no God and (the consequence being the same as far as the object of morality is concerned) that there is also no future life: What view will he take of his own inner purpose, determined as it is by the moral law which he actively reveres? He does not require that compliance with the law should carry any advantage for him, either in this or in another world; selflessly, he wants only to promote the good to which that holy law directs all his powers. But his efforts encounter limits; and all he can expect from nature is that it will now and again contribute contingently to the purpose that he feels himself obligated and drawn to achieve, never that it will harmonize with it in a way governed by laws and constant rules (as his inner maxims are and must be) [. . . A]nd the

other righteous people that he encounters, no matter how worthy of happiness they may be, will be subjected indifferently by nature to all of the evils of deprivation, disease and untimely death, like all the other animals of the earth, and they will remain subject to these evils until one wide grave swallows them up (whatever their degree of rectitude) and throws them – they who managed to believe themselves to be the ultimate purpose of creation – back into the abyss of purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn. This well-meaning person would quite certainly have to renounce as impossible the purpose that the moral law placed before his eyes.<sup>26</sup>

‘Alternatively’, Kant continues, the righteous man may ‘form a concept of the possibility’ of achieving his moral purpose by postulating a moral ground of nature, and ‘from a practical point of view’, this conception ‘must’ be formed.<sup>27</sup> Thus, on Kant’s account, the necessity of a (theological) world-characterisation is due to the need, not to determine which actions are morally required, but to supply the necessary teleological framework for a will governed by pure practical reason in a being which is finite, has constitutively an empirical aspect, and for whom purposiveness is a condition of action.<sup>28</sup>

The notion that morality generates a world-view is formulated explicitly by Hegel in the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where he gives a critical exposition of Kant’s (and J. G. Fichte’s) moral theory. Here Hegel describes a different, more abstract route to the conclusion that moral consciousness constrains how the world is conceived. The contrast between what *is* the case, and what *ought to be* the case, which is fundamental to moral consciousness – and which Kant–Fichte enshrine as an absolute in the form of the principle of duty – gives rise to the problem of coordinating the two spheres, of saying how *Is* and *Ought* are to be conceived together. This, according to Hegel, is the true problem which leads Kant from morality to theology: duty on the one hand, and Nature on the other, present themselves as independent and mutually indifferent, and each as absolute; a contradiction that Kant tries to resolve by postulating a moral author of the world.<sup>29</sup> Hegel does not, of course, himself endorse the Kantian–Fichtean ‘Moral world-view’, indeed his aim is to show that it fails to overcome the contradiction;

26 *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgement)* (1790), in vol. 5 of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: 1900–), §87, 452.

27 *Op. cit.*, §87, 452. The view is expressed even more forcibly in J. G. Fichte, ‘On the basis of our belief in a divine governance of the world’ (1798), in Daniel Brezeale ed., *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797–1800)* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), esp. p. 152.

28 As I have argued in ‘Value and idealism’, in Anthony O’Hear ed., *Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

29 *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), §§599–600.

but he both accepts that his predecessors' philosophy articulates correctly the aspect of moral consciousness which is expressed (in isolation, whence its deficiency) in what Hegel calls *Moralität*, and he is himself committed to pursuing the same task of showing, with respect to his own conception of morality, how it expands legitimately into a world-characterisation. The point to be retained from Hegel's discussion is therefore that moral consciousness, operating under its own steam, is bound to generate the Kantian characterisation of the world as capable of providing compensation for the moral indifference of nature, a representation which rests in turn on the deeper characterisation of the world as a unity of *ought* and *is*, a single reality in which moral value (or whatever provides its ground: God, perfect being, Reason, Nature, etc.) is contained.<sup>30</sup>

The notion, which these brief references to Kant and Hegel are intended only to illustrate, but which may be considered independently plausible, is that there is an inherent tendency for moral consciousness, by virtue of its internal rationality rather than as a merely psychological matter, to conceive the world in terms that secure the objective purposiveness and well-foundedness of moral action, and that at the extreme, moral consciousness will conceive the world as having morality as its essence, and nature as having the facilitation of the moral will as its ultimate purpose. The moral view of tragedy which flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has therefore a firm root in moral consciousness: if art is conceived as imitation, and its object, Nature, is conceived within the perspective of morality, i.e. as comprehending *Ought* as well as *Is*, then the neoclassical view of tragedy as the imitation of an action in which justice is shown to be done, or in which moral truth is in some more oblique manner represented, follows directly.

Now assuming it to be the case that moral consciousness tends inherently in the direction of the world-characterisation just described, the conflict of morality with tragedy can be seen directly. Fundamental to tragedy is the sense of an opposition between human beings and the world at large, this 'other' of humanity assuming various determinate forms (the gods, Necessity, Fate or Fortune, Nature etc.), but in all cases presenting itself as antagonistic to humanity: the world is regarded not as furthering but rather as negating,

30 It is of course also a central thesis of Nietzsche's, that Christian-modern moral consciousness makes itself possible only on the basis of a world-characterisation, the destruction of which renders it unsustainable. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche traces back the co-development of morality and its world-characterisation to the necessity of inventing a meaning for suffering (op. cit., Essay Three, §28). Up to a point this echoes Kant's notion of compensation for the moral meaninglessness of nature, but Nietzsche's view of the relation of morality to its supporting world-view is importantly different from that of Kant, and Hegel, in the following, obvious respect: whereas for Kant–Hegel, the moral world-view evolves out of moral consciousness through rational necessity, in a single logical move, for Nietzsche the process involves numerous non-rational, psychological vicissitudes.

and as lacking any inner accord with, the attempts of human beings to realise value.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that the standard pattern in tragedy is a simple conflict of the hero with his world,<sup>32</sup> but that, to the extent that the hero makes a contribution to his own destruction, it will be experienced by him, and by us, as reflecting the quality of the world – the destruction which follows from his tragic fault will seem to have been engineered by the world, or at least to reflect its complicity.<sup>33</sup> Of course, it remains possible to reconcile the vision of tragedy with the moral world-characterisation simply by declaring the tragic apprehension of our situation to be incomplete, a partial expression of our experience unrefined by reflection. But in so far as we remain within the perspective of tragedy – in so far as tragic representations are accepted as total, and the experience of tragedy is treated as a sufficient datum from which to extrapolate a metaphysics<sup>34</sup> – the contradiction exists.

The discrepancy of tragedy with the moral world-characterisation can be brought out by considering what would be required for a representation of the same sort of material as is treated of in tragedy to conform to moral consciousness: in other words, what a ‘tragedy’ reflecting the world-characterisation of morality would look like. This need not be left to the imagination, for there is in Schiller a detailed and rigorous application of Kant’s philosophical system to tragedy, which serves precisely this purpose.

31 See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 164–5:

Greek tragedy refuses precisely to present human beings who are ideally in harmony with their world, and has no room for a world that, if it were understood well enough, could instruct us how to be in harmony with it. There is a gap between what the tragic character is, concretely and contingently, and the ways in which the world acts upon him. In some cases, that gap is comprehensible, in terms of conflicting human purposes. In other cases, it is not fully comprehensible and not under control.

32 As A. C. Bradley notes, ‘the idea of the tragic hero being destroyed simply and solely by forces is quite alien’ to Shakespearean tragedy (*Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (1904) (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 14–15).

33 As Bradley puts it, ‘character itself contributes to these feelings of fatality [. . .] a man’s virtues help to destroy him’ (op. cit., p. 21). Bradley agrees that, because ‘the tragic fact’ ‘remains to us something piteous, fearful and mysterious’, ‘the ultimate power in the tragic world is not adequately described as a law or order which we can see to be just and benevolent – as, in that sense, a “moral order”’: for in that case the spectacle of suffering and waste could not seem to us so fearful and mysterious as it does’ (op. cit., p. 18). In this connection see also – indicating how the antagonism to humanity represented in tragedy brings it into conflict with forms of consciousness other than the moral – Erich Heller’s account of Goethe’s inability to reconcile tragedy with his quasi-pantheistic sensibility, in ‘Goethe and the avoidance of tragedy’, in *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1975).

34 Michael Tanner proposes this transcendental mode of argument as a way of understanding *The Birth of Tragedy*, suggesting that Nietzsche is concerned with the conditions of possibility of tragic experience, in *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 10.

Tragedy is, according to Schiller, ‘the particular art that establishes the pleasure of sympathy as its purpose’,<sup>35</sup> and we take pleasure in tragedy ‘by virtue of the relation to morality’, the pleasure being ‘greater in minds that are moral’.<sup>36</sup> Specifically, it is the opposition of morality to sensuous life – inclination, desire – which ‘is the condition for igniting that power of mind, whose activity produces the pleasure that we take in sympathetic suffering’.<sup>37</sup> This ignition occurs as follows: in every tragic emotion some contrapurposiveness [*Zweckwidrigkeit*] is represented, but pleasure ensues nonetheless whenever a higher purposiveness, which is necessarily that of morality, is represented by us as subsuming it.<sup>38</sup> Tragedy supplies this higher representation. By this means our eyes are opened to the following vision of the world:

dissatisfaction with fate falls to the wayside, losing itself in the presentiment or rather in a distinct consciousness of a teleological connection among things, a sublime order, a benevolent will. Then, allied with our pleasure in moral harmony there is the invigorating image of the most perfect moral purposiveness in the entire expanse of nature. Its apparent violation, which in a single case caused pain, becomes simply a goad to our reason to search out general laws for a justification of this particular case and to resolve the isolated dissonance within the grand harmony.<sup>39</sup>

As Schiller develops his position, its difficulties become clear. First, since tragedy for Schiller pertains exclusively to the confrontation of our moral with our natural being, no place remains for anything outside the perspective of finite rational agency. Thus Schiller is forced to claim that even ‘the most splendid pieces of the Greek stage leave something to be desired’, because they appeal to necessity in place of reason.<sup>40</sup> Properly, according to Schiller, tragedy takes the form of a drama where practical reason, not external necessity, is what alone leads to loss and suffering: tragedies where

35 ‘On the art of tragedy’ (1792), in *Essays*, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 6. The position which Schiller adopts here, under the influence of Kant, differs from the more conventional eighteenth-century view of the moral effect of tragedy taken in Schiller’s earlier essays (in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, pp. 155, 156–60, 165).

36 ‘On the art of tragedy’, p. 4.

37 Op. cit., p. 5.

38 Op. cit., p. 7.

39 Op. cit., p. 9. Note how virtually the same conception is expressed in the quotation from Rymer on page 224. The difference between Schiller and neoclassical ‘poetical Justice’ theory is that the latter conceives the providential vision as directly represented within the tragic work, while Schiller regards it as supplied and, as it were, read into the work, by the ‘morally formed’ spectator.

40 Op. cit., p. 9.



‘the misfortune springs, not from immoral sources, but rather from external things that have neither a will nor are subject to one’<sup>41</sup> comprise an inferior form of the genre.

Second, even if we accept that the canon should undergo this revision, Schiller’s account seems to demand an even more radical alteration to our conception of what constitutes a proper subject for tragedy. If it is moral purposiveness that provides the source of our pleasure in tragedy,<sup>42</sup> why are the paradigms of tragedy not simply representations of agents engaged in willing the moral good against the odds? Since the quintessence of tragedy, Schiller’s theory implies, lies in representations of moral striving having nothing to do with fate, or with suffering deriving from causes other than the protagonist’s choice of the moral good,<sup>43</sup> it is unexplained why tragic works are not exclusively ones in which we witness either virtue remaining intact under pressure or moral self-sacrifice.

Third, Schiller’s account makes tragic experience indistinguishable in essence from experience of the sublime as construed by Kant (non-accidentally, since it is Kant’s moral account of the sublime, as Schiller makes clear, which provides the model for his analysis of tragedy). On the face of it, this reduces tragedy to an indirect path to the same configuration of thought and feeling as the contemplation of a raging storm might induce in us: awe at the power of nature combined with a judgement of our own absolute metaphysical invulnerability. It may then be asked how, on this view, tragedy can be thought to add anything to the experience of the sublime. In particular, why should suffering be the special focus of tragedy? Suffering functions in Schiller merely as the analogue in art of a raging storm in nature. This view implies that suffering has its place in tragedy in so far as it sharpens our apprehension of the boundary between freedom and nature, providing moral freedom with its ‘other’, and this reduction of suffering to a *point d’appui* for moral striving appears to reflect a misconception of the point of tragedy.

It should be said that Schiller does try to provide an essential role for suffering in tragedy and an account of how tragedy does more than recapitulate the sublime,<sup>44</sup> by claiming that tragic suffering provides the acutest possible occasion for self-affirmation – affirmation of oneself as transcending suffering through one’s moral identity. But this is not convincing. Tragic protagonists do not characteristically terminate their course of experience in a vision of their own sublimity, as Schiller’s account implies *prima facie* that

41 Op. cit., p. 8.

42 Op. cit., p. 8.

43 Schiller recognises that his theory implies criticism of Shakespeare as well as of the Greeks: for example, he criticises Iago and Lady Macbeth as regrettable elements in Shakespeare’s tragic constructions (op. cit., p. 8).

44 In ‘On the sublime (toward the further development of some Kantian ideas)’ (1793) and ‘On the pathetic’ (1793), in *Essays*, ed. Hinderer and Dahlstrom.

they should. The reason for this, Schiller suggests, is that the effect of tragedy presupposes the thought of ‘what *should* and *can* happen’, the thought that ‘one should disregard the [tragic] loss and that a duty exists to allow it no influence’ on oneself.<sup>45</sup> It can hardly be claimed, however, that this thought is standardly represented, even implicitly, within tragic works. If it is to come from anywhere, it must be supplied by the spectator. And this seems to reduce tragedy to a mere occasion for reflection: tragedy no longer provides an integrated experience, but a provocation, a cue for the spectator to reassure herself by entertaining thoughts that contradict those expressed within the work.

This brief look at Schiller’s Kantianised conception of tragedy allows us to grasp in more concrete terms the respect in which the world-characterisations of tragedy and morality conflict. The key lies in Nietzsche’s recurrent theme of our attitude to suffering. What is most striking about Schiller’s account is the way that it runs counter to what is surely the primary and weightiest element in tragedy, its representation of loss and suffering as ultimate realities, as facts with metaphysical depth. Even if we grant that some species of affirmation is an essential moment in tragedy, the moral self-affirmation and sublime transcendence of suffering that Schiller wishes to discover in tragedy does not accord with either the experience of the tragic protagonist or the spectator’s response. Schiller’s account entails the justifiability, in some sense, of tragic suffering: Schillerian tragedy enacts a kind of moral theodicy.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, Schiller’s view does not entail the grotesquery that tragic loss and suffering are themselves good – that what happens in tragedy is what ought to happen – or that they are nevertheless justified as means to moral ends: but it does entail that the point of tragedy lies in the final realisation that tragic loss and suffering are, in comparison with moral evil, of no true, ultimate import, and in that sense it affirms a total redemption. From the moral point of view, the ground that is lost by the tragic protagonist is, or can be, made up: to the extent that moral goodness enters, tragic loss is offset. The Schillerian spectator is consequently invited to *correct* the tragic victim who believes that he has lost everything:<sup>47</sup> this belief

45 ‘On the sublime’, p. 43.

46 Schiller asserts that nature’s contrapurposefulness counts for nothing in relation to moral purposefulness: sacrifice of life with moral intent is purposive to the highest degree (‘Ueber den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen’ (1792), in *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe*, vol. 20, *Philosophische Schriften*, Teil 1, ed. Lieselotte Blumenthal and Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1962), p. 138). That Schiller should take this view is less surprising when it is recalled that the moral theory which he applies to tragedy, namely Kant’s, incorporates, via its moral theology, a theodicy. It is relevant to note J. B. Schneewind’s suggestion that Kant’s conception of the moral will developed from his attempt to construct a theodicy: see *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 492ff.

47 Schiller assigns this corrective role to the chorus, to which he attributes a reflective standpoint disjoint from the perspective of the tragic agent, in ‘On the use of the chorus in tragedy’

is, on Schiller's account, absolutely mistaken, because to the extent that the tragic victim has avoided moral evil, he has in reality lost nothing.<sup>48</sup> So while it is true that the moral point of view need not be, in any ordinary sense, callous – it need not deny that loss and suffering of tragic proportion is truly unbearable, deeply regrettable and so forth – its appreciation of tragic loss and suffering is limited to according it only psychological reality: it does not stretch to allowing a sense in which tragic loss and suffering *matter more* than moral wrong, and when comparison is made of the two kinds of evil – moral evil and tragic loss – the moral point of view regards the former alone as metaphysically deep. The moral point of view cannot, consequently, allow that tragedy is cognitive in the way that, on the Nietzschean view, we experience it as being: it cannot allow that tragedy expresses insight into the inner nature of the world in the sense that led Nietzsche to identify the Dionysiac at the heart of tragedy, and Arthur Schopenhauer to claim that tragedy shows 'the antagonism of the will with itself'.<sup>49</sup>

(1803), in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2: 'the chorus *purifies* the tragic poem by separating reflection from the action [. . .] the chorus restores our freedom, which would otherwise be lost in the storm of emotion' (pp. 168–9).

- 48 Martha Nussbaum makes a similar point (*The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 386), but regards it as showing only the non-agreement of tragedy with a certain (Kantian) misconception of morality. Nussbaum argues (op. cit., pp. 380–91) for the view, which she attributes to Aristotle, that 'the value of tragic action is practical value' (p. 380): tragedy expresses the denial in Aristotle's ethics of the Platonic conception of the individual as enjoying 'rational self-sufficiency' with respect to the Good (p. 381); tragedy asserts the existence of a 'gap' between 'our goodness and our good living' (p. 382), i.e. the vulnerability of good character to luck. Historical questions aside, and whether or not such a conception of morality can (now) be regarded as coherent, Nussbaum's account seems not to make sense of tragic affirmation, and to make the negative moment in tragedy a shallower thing than it is experienced as being: the import of tragedy is reduced to the knowledge that the world can fail to be positively instrumental in relation to our aim of flourishing.
- 49 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819, 1844), 2 vols, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. I, pp. 252–4. There is more to be said against the moral view. First, it is a further consequence of Schiller's view that it alters our focus on tragic suffering, which it requires that we apprehend, not as an immediately given object, a pure brute fact, but under a description which reduces it to a mere exemplification – of our non-rational, 'sensible life'. This mediation seems contrary to experience. Second, it may be wondered if a moral-theodicean interpretation of tragedy does not entail either the ultimate inferiority of tragedy to comedy – a claim made by Schiller in 'On naive and sentimental poetry' (1800), in *Essays*, ed. Hinderer and Dahlstrom, p. 209 – or the blurring of the boundary between them – a feature of Hegel's view, noted by Stephen Houlgate ('Hegel and Nietzsche on tragedy', in *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 203–4) – and if this does not comprise an objection to the interpretation. Third, it is to be noted how tragedy naturally provokes thoughts which employ moral concepts in a way which, from the perspective of morality, makes no sense – thoughts of the wrongness, unfairness, etc. of the world. Nietzsche, of course, would have us dispose of such judgements altogether, but that does not undermine the present point, which is that there are thoughts which we form inside the perspective of

The problem with the moral view, it should be stressed, is not that it moderates or mitigates, or that it reduces the impact of, tragic loss and suffering; the non-moral view too can hold that tempering mediation is necessary (Nietzsche holds that Dionysiac insight requires Apolline mediation). Still less is the problem that the moral view insists on an affirmative moment, a counterweight. Again, Nietzsche, Yeats and others envisage a ‘tragic joy’ no less intense than tragic suffering. The problem lies instead with how, on the moral view, the mediation is achieved, and how the affirmation is related to the loss and suffering. The moral view reduces the impact of tragic loss and suffering by denying their significance, and installs affirmation *in the place of* tragic loss. Comparison with the non-moral view brings this out. For Nietzsche it is precisely the Apolline *mediator*, not the Dionysiac suffering, which is illusionistic, unreal. And tragic joy, unlike Schiller’s moral self-affirmation, depends for its very existence on tragic loss and suffering: any denial of reality to the latter would entail a corresponding devaluation of tragic joy. The moral view, as it were, refuses to go into the loss and suffering in order to come out the other side: instead it retreats. This is not to say that tragic joy is genuinely possible: it is only to say that, *if* the loss and suffering is to be mitigated, and if this mitigation is to be achieved on terms set by the experience of tragedy, then it cannot take the form implied by the moral view.

Now it may be wondered if Schiller is a fair representative of the moral view of tragedy: only if the moral view entails the attitude towards tragic suffering expressed in Schiller’s analysis of tragedy does this criticism of Schiller count against the moral view as such. The reason why it may be considered fair, is that, on any conception of morality intelligible to us, moral value is regarded as supreme (absolute, unconditional). Consequently morality must represent itself as able to *make up for* tragic loss and suffering. What sort of value would moral value be, if it could not do this? We conceive moral value as the form of objective value which has the closest possible relation to our essential selves. So we cannot say, in the perspective of morality, that a morally good man who has suffered tragic loss has truly lost everything – we must say, that he has at least not lost his moral integrity, and this we cannot regard as anything less than ultimate victory. For this reason loss and suffering cannot be acknowledged from the moral point of view to have the kind of unconditional and hence uncompensatable reality which they are represented as having in tragedy. Whence the *optimism* which Nietzsche repeatedly insists inheres in morality.

It should be noted that Kant himself, as may be seen from the earlier quotation, does *not* think that Schiller’s view is viable: since Kant does not think that the ‘evils’ of nature can be weighed so lightly that they will not, without

tragedy which the perspective of morality does not allow us to express. I will return to this in the second part of the chapter.

theological remedy, paralyse moral action. More clear-sightedly than Schiller, Kant regards the world's evils as redeemable *only* on the conditions of a benevolent God and an afterlife. Thus it would be Kant's view that tragedy cannot be appropriated by the moral world-view in the way attempted by Schiller, and that tragedy's claim to say something true about the world should be denied. In other words, Kant would not recognise a category of tragic evil – loss and suffering as grasped in the perspective of tragedy – distinct from either moral or natural evil.<sup>50</sup>

The conflict with morality consists, therefore, in the opposition between the necessary tendency of morality to reshape the world in a manner that consolidates the reality of morality, and the implication of tragedy that such a moral theodicy is impossible.<sup>51</sup> This conflict emerges from the 'negative' moment of tragedy – its representation of loss and suffering as the deepest facts about the world. Now I will argue that, if one agrees that there is affirmation too in tragedy, then its conflict with morality appears on a second front.

It is of course extremely hard to determine what tragic affirmation consists in.<sup>52</sup> It is even denied by some that affirmation is a genuine element in tragedy

50 This is how Kant's extended struggle with the optimism question is eventually resolved. In the late essay 'On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy' (1791) in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Kant takes the position that the question of optimism or pessimism – in Nietzsche's terms, of the quality we assign to life – is resolved into a question of moral will. Adoption of the perspective of tragedy would block this solution.

51 Note that it does not follow from what I have said that response to tragedy cannot legitimately take the moral form described by Schiller (or any other version of the moral view of tragedy): it can and should do so *if* the relevant moral convictions are allowed to determine responses to tragic works. Whether the convictions *should* do so – the normative status of this condition – is not a matter for a theory of tragedy to decide. My claim is only that the experience of tragedy does not, as the moral view claims, provide them with a warrant.

52 This question, note, is distinct from the question of why we take pleasure in tragedy, with which it is often and unfortunately confused. There are sound methodological reasons for giving low priority to the question of pleasure in consideration of tragedy: it encourages us to look for and to measure accounts of tragedy in terms of general puzzles in the philosophy of mind, the specificity of tragedy, and distracting us from the non-psychological question of the meaning of tragic affirmation (see Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* (London: Allen Lane, 1995), pp. 118–19, on the 'No Pleasure' theory). Though the broadly empiricist methodology of analytic aesthetics has allowed it to respect up to a point the distinctiveness of tragedy, its preoccupation with the hedonic problem has led it to conceive tragedy in Humean, naturalistic, psychological terms; see for example Flint Schier, 'The claims of tragedy: an essay in moral psychology and aesthetic theory', *Philosophical Papers* 18, 1989, 7–26, and 'Tragedy and the community of sentiment', in Peter Lamarque ed., *Philosophy and Fiction* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983). Hegel excoriates the consideration of tragedy from 'the point of view of pleasant and unpleasant sensations' in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1840), vol. 3, *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 404–5.

at all.<sup>53</sup> This consideration ought, indeed, to be regarded as setting a constraint on any account of its nature, and as putting under suspicion any theory that implies that we ought to be able to articulate readily what it is about tragedy that elicits affirmation. The mark of tragic affirmation is precisely its diffuseness and lack of a clear propositional object, short of one identifying the tragic work as a whole. We are unable to give a fine-grained account of what the affirmation is grounded on, to say what it supervenes on, except, again, the work as a whole, or more particularly its negative moment. Hence, significantly, the characteristic employment of ‘mood’ words – joy, exultation, the sense of sublimity: states whose object, if any, is, approximately, ‘the world at large’ – to capture the tragic effect, in place of emotion words introducing ‘that’ clauses, employment of which would commit us to ‘why?’ questions which in the context of tragedy cannot receive clear answers. To say, as one commentator has done, that we ‘must be and we are glad that Juliet dies and glad that Lear is turned out into the storm’,<sup>54</sup> may serve to convey the state of tragic exultation, but it is not literally true; the only objective happening that we may be straightforwardly glad of is that we as spectators have been exposed to the work.

The observation that tragic affirmation surrounds the tragic work in a form somewhat akin to that of a mood already counts against those versions of the moral view which imply that our affirmation is directed towards moral acts and dispositions represented in the work. Aside from the fact that many tragic works offer no such appropriate objects, the diffuseness of tragic affirmation makes it fundamentally different from any complex of moral judgements.<sup>55</sup>

53 George Steiner, in ‘Tragedy, pure and simple’, in Peter Stern ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), denies the existence of tragic affirmation: his position is that, though tragedy ‘implies positive values’, they derive merely from the existence of the work of art, and that, in so far as tragedy carries positive implications, it ‘cheats’ (p. 544). In Steiner’s earlier *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber, 1961), ch. 1, by contrast, affirmation is regarded as essential to tragedy.

54 Joseph Wood Krutch, ‘The tragic fallacy’, in *The Modern Temper* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), p. 125. (Yeats is equally provocative: ‘In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies’, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), p. xxxiv.) Krutch rightly emphasises the autonomy of tragic affirmation, but his interpretation of it as presupposing a belief in human greatness, his comparison of the tragic spirit with a religious faith, and his consequent claim that we now are incapable of tragedy, are disputable. A different version of the thesis that tragedy belongs to the pre-modern world, based on different grounds, is expounded in Steiner, *op. cit.* For more balanced descriptions of tragic affirmation, see Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 269–74, and George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (1896) (New York: Dover, 1955), §§59–60.

55 This point is made by Goethe: tragedy induces ‘a vague, uncertain mood’, and ‘cannot affect morality’ (‘On interpreting Aristotle’s *Poetics*’, in Sidnell ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, pp. 151–2).

What, then, *are* we affirming? What may be said in relative safety is that tragic affirmation is directed towards the course of experience and sequence of actions composing the narrative which defines the tragic protagonist, and that this object – the hero, his ‘fate’ – forms an undecomposable whole. In contrast with the way in which, in real life moral assessment, we separate out for purposes of judgement the different actions performed by a person and aspects of their character, our thought about the tragic victim is rather that their existence, their course of action and experience as a whole, the mere fact of their projection of themselves into the world, somehow constitutes a good – it amounts to ‘something’, a phenomenon which is somehow, to put it at its weakest, worthwhile, to-be-willed, better than nothing.

Now in the present context the striking fact about this thought is that it is available for protagonists who are morally evil – for Macbeth as much as for the sweet prince. And this implies – what ought to be evident anyway – that the value expressed in tragic affirmation is not morally conditional. We accord tragic value irrespective of moral failure or achievement: the phenomenon exhibited in tragedy is valued with indifference to moral goodness; moral goodness does not increase it, and moral evil does not diminish it. This is why, in the moment of *anagnorisis*, the tragic protagonist who is morally self-destroyed can nevertheless find a consolatory source of self-affirmation: he discovers himself to be beyond morality, to possess a kind of value from which morality cannot alienate him. Macbeth discovers that he is not ‘annulled’ by his evil: there is in him a dimension of value which is immune to moral criticism, which morality cannot subtract from. Tragic value thus eclipses or overshadows moral value, rendering the negative and affirmative moments of tragedy symmetrical: tragic value, like tragic loss and suffering, represents itself as possessing greater depth than moral value.

Upholders of the moral view of tragedy who have confronted the challenge posed by Macbeth have suggested that the object of tragic affirmation is moral potentiality – the power of free choice which constitutes the capacity for morality (in Kantian terms, *Willkür*, the capacity for *Wille*), or the virtues of resilience and determination which could have been put in the service of moral ends and which would then have delivered extraordinary results.<sup>56</sup>

56 Schiller, ‘On the pathetic’, pp. 61, 68. Bradley says that the presence of evil characters in modern tragedy is explained by the independence of the interest in their characterisation from their serving as Hegelian emblems for aspects of ethical substance: they are allowed ‘some peculiar charm or some commanding superiority’ (‘Hegel’s theory of tragedy’, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909), p. 78). Whether or not this interest explains the greater individualisation of characters in modern tragedy, it does not explain their characterisation as specifically evil. Consider Bradley’s account of *Macbeth*, which he rightly identifies as apparently ‘a most unfavourable instance’ for his account of tragedy (p. 87). Bradley locates the tragedy in the loss of what there is in the tragic hero which is admirable, his virtues of extreme courage and determination, ‘forces [of personality] on which you place a spiritual value’ (p. 88): these are ‘in themselves, good, and gloriously

But this proposal does not provide convincing support for the moral view of tragedy. In the first place it seems clear that tragic affirmation is unaccompanied by any thought of what Macbeth might have done – its full object is contained in his actual narrative. Second, while it is coherent to suppose that the bearer of tragic value must be something that has moral potential, and so not an animal, infant or somnambulist, it does not appear coherent to suppose that the object of tragic affirmation is valued in the same respect both intrinsically and by virtue of its potential for moral actualisation; not, at any rate, when its moral and non-moral actualisations are in fact valued equally by us.

This point is recognised, in inverted form, in Johnson's famous censure of Shakespeare: 'He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose [. . .] he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care.'<sup>57</sup> The phrase – 'carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong' – captures exactly the non-moral dynamic which is the key to tragic affirmation.

Tragic value is, evidently, mysterious, and perhaps there is no more to be done with it philosophically than to give it an appropriately suggestive name – the 'Dyonisiac'. In the second part of the chapter I will try to say more about it, but the important point is that tragic value should be recognised for what it is, and not falsely assimilated to some other, more familiar and rational species of value, such as the moral.<sup>58</sup>

It should be pointed out that it does not follow from what has just been said – though talk of a conflict of values may seem to suggest it – that the conflict between tragic and moral value can assume a practical form. If tragic consciousness were the consciousness of an 'ought' with the same categorical force as the moral ought, but pointing in a different direction, then we would be faced with the choice, Tragedy or morality? But just as tragic affirmation is inherently indeterminate, so there is no determinate practical upshot of tragedy. There could be a practical choice between moral and tragic value only if it were possible to translate the experience of tragedy into

good'. But if this were all, then our thought would be simply of the shame that Macbeth's qualities were not harnessed to moral ends; our attitude would be merely ambivalent, a compound of approbation and disapprobation; from which would issue regret, but not the affirmation that we make with respect to Macbeth.

57 'Preface to Shakespeare' (1765), in Enright and de Chickera eds, *English Critical Texts*, p. 140.

58 A further issue to be noted is whether the form of tragedy as such dictates anything about the relative weights of its negative and affirmative moments – whether tragic value is necessarily proportional to or even, as Nietzsche presumably contends, outweighs the loss and suffering. It is however hard to see why the proportion should be fixed.



practical terms. Nietzsche may have thought this possible, though even for him it would seem to require the mediation of an entire culture.<sup>59</sup> There is, however, no ground for thinking that reasons for action can be extracted from the experience of tragedy. The perspective of tragedy is of course necessarily connected with the practical perspective – tragedy is the contemplation of a doing, the object of practical consciousness – but it does not apprehend its object in a practical mode. Like aesthetic consciousness in general, tragedy provides a point of view apart from theoretical and practical consciousness: we arrive at the perspective of tragedy by, as it were, adopting the practical perspective and then exporting its object, namely, life presented as a domain for practical reason, to a contemplative context.<sup>60</sup> So though tragedy may allow us, as spectators, to ‘see’ beyond morality, it does not take us, as *agents*, beyond morality. This is part of the reason why we need to repeat the experience: the perspective opened up by tragedy is one that we, as beings with lives to lead, cannot occupy; tragic knowledge of what is valuable about life cannot be preserved intact within life itself. This is not to say that it is impossible to support an ethic by an appeal to tragic experience – only that there is no direct transposition of the experience of tragedy into a conception of a way of living; the experience of tragedy does not itself provide sufficient grounds for an ethic of, for example, personal heroism.<sup>61</sup>

It should be observed that the kind of conflict of tragedy and morality which I have described fits exactly the bill drawn up earlier, for it does not imply that tragedy valorises immorality. The conflict of tragedy with morality which I have described is nothing like the familiar conflict of the proponent of morality with the egoist, amoralist or moral skeptic. It is much subtler, and the subtlety of the conflict is also the reason why it tends to elude us. In the first place, because the world-characterisation which moral consciousness projects and which tragedy contradicts, is related only obliquely to the moral thinking of agents engaged in the worldly task of practical judgement – it is a necessary accompaniment which reveals itself when morality is allowed to fill out philosophical space, a kind of transcendental presupposition rather than an element with a direct role in practical reasoning – it is no puzzle that this aspect of the conflict of tragedy with morality should remain unperceived

59 To the extent that Nietzsche believes in a line of progression running from the experience of tragic art to a tragic form of life – and perhaps to values of heroism and nobility – this is a strand in his thought which belongs alongside his famously puzzling and problematic notion of ‘aesthetic justification’; see Volker Gerhardt, ‘*Artisten-Metaphysik*’, in *Pathos und Distanz* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1988).

60 This, I think, is how Schiller’s claim that ‘the writer of tragedies always treats his subject matter practically, while the writer of comedies always treats his theoretically’ should be understood (‘On naive and sentimental poetry’, p. 208).

61 Schelling warns against turning tragic art into a ‘system of action’: see *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794–1796)*, trans. Fritz Marti (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1980), p. 194.

by the spectator; at most it is sensed indistinctly, without being explicitly formulated. Second, we are subject to a kind of trick of perspectives. When we are directly exposed to the insight expressed in tragedy – because we then occupy an aesthetic perspective that suspends our practical orientation – we do not become reflectively aware of how we have moved away the perspective of morality. And when we reflect on tragedy at a remove from the original experience, restored to the perspective of morality, we then reinterpret our experience – as morality requires us to do – in morally congenial terms, thereby arriving at a moral interpretation of tragic suffering and affirmation. If the insight gained in tragedy could survive outside the original aesthetic context, then this moral appropriation of tragedy would be blocked; but this is impossible, because, as said earlier, a state of insight that concerns life as a totality cannot be maintained within the conditioned, partial perspective of life itself. For this reason, what we experience in tragedy remains partially incommunicable to ourselves.

At this point in the discussion it is appropriate to say something brief about Hegel's theory of tragedy. Earlier it was argued that the conflict of tragedy with morality cannot be eliminated simply by shifting to a different conception of morality, due to the way in which the significance of morality refuses to allow itself to be shrunk. One might, however, expect this difficulty to be overcome in Hegel, who, after all, both attached exceptional philosophical significance to Greek tragedy and developed a critique of Kantian moral theory, all the while recognising that the modern discovery of individual moral autonomy cannot be undone.<sup>62</sup>

At one level, this is so: Hegel succeeds with brilliance in fashioning a super-conception in which tragedy becomes an essential moment of morality itself. The cost, however, on the side of tragedy, is something not far from that which it bears on Schiller's Kantian theory.

In a limited sense, Hegel agrees, with Nietzsche, that tragedy is trans-moral: Hegel accepts that the relation of morality to tragedy is too oblique to be captured in the formulas of neoclassicism, that there is a kind of conflict with morality in tragedy, and that tragic consciousness cannot be identified with any particular ethical point of view; any moral standpoint (short of the universal standpoint of Hegel's own *Philosophy of Right*) can be examined in the light of, and overthrown by tragic consciousness. Nevertheless, on Hegel's view there is an ultimate (moreover, contentful, not merely formal or transcendent) attunement and coincidence of moral and tragic consciousness. Tragedy, on Hegel's account, has its source ultimately in objective, not subjective spirit, in ethical substance rather than individual psychology. It represents in the final analysis not the bearing of the ethical on the individual, but conflictual relations between the largest forms of the ethical, as it

62 This is disputed; see, however, Pippin, 'Hegel's moral rationalism', in *Idealism as Modernism*.

particularises itself in human life.<sup>63</sup> Tragedy thus transcends the moral perspective of the individual, but not the moral as such: it is constituted by oppositions between ethical conceptions, not by an opposition of the moral to some other species of value.

Though some tragic works appear to conform to Hegel's pattern, many do not. Modern, 'subjective' tragedy, where individual motivation is of central interest, is regarded by Hegel as inferior to 'objective', classical tragedy. This is a major limitation. Even if Hegel were right about the objective ethical meaning of ancient tragedy, and its distinctness from a modern interest in individual subjectivity, it is not an option for us to follow Hegel in regarding this interest as a distraction, an inessential deviation.<sup>64</sup> The deeper objection to Hegel has to do, therefore, not with the exegetical fit and scope of his theory, but with his account of the central focus of our interest in tragedy. It might be true that all tragic protagonists exemplify conflicting aspects of ethical substance, but it would not follow that this is what tragedy revolves around, and unless what was said earlier about an antagonism with the world being at the heart of tragedy is mistaken, it cannot be: if Hegel were correct, then opposition of human being to its non-human Other would be either absent from or peripheral to tragedy; the line between self and world would be dissolved in favour of lines of distinction between different ethical entities or intersubjective configurations. It might be suggested that, on Hegel's interpretation, the 'world' to which in tragedy human beings are represented as opposed just *is* ethical substance. But even then, what interests us in tragedy is the manner in which the individual confronts this semi-alien power, not the question of its internal rationality. The point stands that tragedy is constituted by an experience modelled on the traditional, unmediated opposition of subject and object, not by an experience of internal relations within the (ethical) world.

63 See Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), 2 vols, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), vol. 2, pp. 1192–1237.

64 Bradley, 'Hegel's theory of tragedy', provides an excellent critique. While praising Hegel's theory of tragedy, Bradley asserts the need to go beyond Hegel, and on pp. 86–7 Bradley proposes an emendation to Hegel's theory which, he claims, would overcome its limitation to ancient tragedy. Its implication, however, is to loosen the relation of tragedy to morality in a way that Hegel would be bound to reject. Bradley uses the notion of 'spiritual waste' – 'self-division and self-waste of spirit' – as the key to tragedy. He asks why the conflict of anything that has 'sufficient value' should not 'affect us tragically', and answers that it does. Thus, he concludes, 'any spiritual conflict involving spiritual waste is tragic'. But if we allow that tragedy is concerned with 'spirit' – Bradley's comprehensive term for human value – and that spirit extends further than morality, then we must also allow that the sphere of tragedy is broader than that of the ethical, and that tragic value is not identical with moral value. Hegel was, therefore, right to hold the theory of tragedy at the level of ethical conflict, in the sense that such a restriction is necessary *if* tragedy is to be kept essentially aligned with morality. Bradley's treatment thus provides confirmation of the conclusion regarding Hegel that I go on to argue for.

For the same reason, Hegel does not demonstrate the attunement of tragic and moral consciousness, if this is supposed to belong to the experience of tragedy, and not to be the result of subsequent, extraneous reflection on the experience. In order to know that, as Hegel's account implies, tragic loss and suffering is not in vain and can be recuperated, we need to refer to Hegel's speculative metaphysics; but the monism of Reason, whether or not it can be teased dialectically out of ordinary natural consciousness, is not explicit in it, and in any case, according to Hegel himself, the speculative standpoint cannot be presented within a work of art.

Thus in the context of tragedy, if in no other, there appears to be reason for thinking that natural consciousness resists the upward movement towards the standpoint of speculative philosophy: all that Hegel may justifiably claim, therefore, is that his account describes the revisionary interpretation of tragedy which the speculative standpoint demands. If these criticisms, though brief, are accurate, then the case of Hegel serves to reconfirm the Nietzschean conclusion: the reconciliation of tragedy and morality that Hegel seeks is blocked by his commitment to preserving the rationalistic, Kantian aspect of morality.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, I wish to return to the question of reconciling tragedy and morality. I claimed earlier that logically this could be achieved, but only by stepping outside the experience of tragic art so as to view the perspective of tragedy as merely partial, to do which, I suggested, is to break faith with the experience of tragedy, to fail to give it its due.<sup>66</sup>

65 Houlgate, in *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, ch. 8, makes fierce criticisms of Nietzsche and shows Hegel's view to be more nuanced and defensible than is generally thought (even by Bradley). His argument, however, tends to presuppose the Hegelian theses that Nietzsche's outlook may be relegated to a historically earlier, 'heroic' shape of consciousness, and that transcendence of tragic suffering is genuinely possible. My criticism of Hegel is corroborated by the omission in Houlgate's account of Hegel's view of any account of an opposition of man and world, in favour of an emphasis on intersubjective relations. There are also doubts to be entertained regarding the coherence of the attributions of responsibility which Houlgate shows to be required by Hegel's theory (Nietzsche's account, by contrast, makes questions of responsibility ultimately inessential to tragedy). Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), ch. 10, provides a rich and complex account of the theme of tragedy in Hegel. Williams denies that Hegel's philosophy excludes tragedy – the view that 'Hegel comes to interpret tragedy from comic premises, i.e. from the presupposition of a reconciliation which lies *beyond* tragedy' – but concedes that in order for it to be held to incorporate tragedy, it 'must be conceded that tragic conflict for Hegel is not absolutely irreconcilable' (pp. 235–6).

66 As a kind of partial confirmation of this thesis, it may be considered how philosophers, other than Nietzsche, who have articulated unmistakably tragic visions of the human condition have either exhibited a seeming indifference to ethical theory (Heidegger), or encountered special difficulty in moving from metaphysics to morality (Sartre), or constructed a moral theory with an exceptionally problematic foundation (Schopenhauer).

This last point is, however, in need of refinement. The need of philosophy to achieve a ‘super-perspective’ which comprehends and reconciles the conflicting perspectives of morality and tragedy is, of course, recognised by Schiller and Hegel: it is exactly what their accounts of tragedy aim at. The problem with their accounts, it should now be said, is not that they aim at tragedy’s reconciliation with morality, but that they do so on terms set by morality: it is tragedy which is required to surrender its claim to be a total representation. And to the extent that this ‘reconciliation’ is in truth a victory for morality, it is appropriate, I have suggested, to revert to the Nietzschean view that tragedy and morality conflict.

But suppose we continue to think it important to defuse the conflict of tragedy with morality. If we harbour suspicions about morality, such as those of Nietzsche post-*Birth of Tragedy*, then we could resolve the conflict by showing that moral value is illusory. But if we do not share Nietzsche’s view of the desirability of releasing ourselves from morality’s practical sovereignty,<sup>67</sup> then what remains conceivable is a ‘super’-perspective that goes the other way round from Schiller and Hegel, i.e. that comprehends morality on terms set by tragedy. What would this amount to? It would involve claiming that in reality, though not in our apprehension, the object of tragic affirmation supplies the ground of moral value, while denying that the value of tragic experience lies in its moral purposiveness, and relinquishing the claim that moral value is metaphysically supreme. But it would not, for all that, undermine the rationality of morality: moral requirements would remain categorical and our reasons for action would be left unaffected.<sup>68</sup> To that extent it would amount to a genuine reconciliation. At the same time, a genuine metaphysical demotion of morality would be involved, as can be seen by comparing the place of moral value in the tragic vision, with its place in the Judaeo-Christian theistic vision, where moral value is what takes us closest to the infinite being which constitutes absolute reality.<sup>69</sup>

Nietzsche would reject this reconciliation, not only because of his interest in pitting tragedy against morality by giving it practical force, but also on the grounds that it requires an other-worldly commitment. But this is, again, another matter. All that should be concluded here is that the existence of a

67 Nietzsche’s antagonism towards morality, whatever stimulus it may have received from his estimate of the experience of tragedy, has of course other sources.

68 Indeed, since awareness of a trans-moral form of value and the consequent limitation on morality in no way implies moral nihilism, it is wholly compatible with tragic affirmation that there should be some sense in which, as A. D. Nuttall puts it, ‘The words “good” and “evil” mean not less but more to one who has just watched *King Lear*’ (*Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 105).

69 Since not all religions bind divinity with morality in the manner of Judaeo-Christian theism, religion as such is not in conflict with tragedy – as *The Birth of Tragedy* emphasises. Religious systems such as Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism contain elements which cohere with the perspective of tragedy.

conflict of tragedy and morality at the first level of reflection, which is all that I have been trying to show, does not entail the impossibility of their reconciliation at a higher, speculative philosophical level.

The route from tragedy to morality hypothesised earlier – namely, that tragedy wakens us to morality's demands by sharpening our sense of the fragility of goodness – is therefore superficial and misleading. Though tragedy may, as a matter of psychological fact, often or always shock us into abiding by the moral law, at a deeper level the lesson of tragedy is not the importance of morality. Tragedy offers a total perspective on the world which does not accord with the way in which moral reflection conceives it: moral consciousness regards human subjectivity as at home in the world in a way that tragedy says it is not, and it cancels the human antagonism with the world which tragedy presupposes. Furthermore, tragedy contests the supremacy of morality by intimating a more fundamental kind of value which is indifferent to moral concerns and which cannot be brought into coherent relation with moral value without ascending to a speculative philosophical level. Next I will offer an account of the nature of tragedy which, if acceptable, makes these conclusions more plausible.

## II

There are some uses that we make of the concept of life which show us to have in mind a notion which is at once highly indeterminate and extremely important. We speak of a life as fulfilled or unfulfilled, devoted to such-and-such, wasted, sacrificed, bearable or unbearable, and so forth – of life not as a state or process but as a kind of unique, singular object towards which we are each intentionally related.<sup>70</sup> Clearly the thought here is not of an extent of time defined by any sort of natural process, as in the life-cycle of an organism. Nor is it strictly identical with the idea of a personal narrative: one's life is the object which is defined by one's biography, in the way that a substance is related to a mode. Nor, again, is a person's life, to which she is related possessively, identical with the person herself. Life in the relevant sense is essentially personal, temporal, and linked with, as having or lacking, value. But the concept is neither moral nor psychological. We might, therefore, think of it as a transcendental concept: it has no empirical referent, specifies a form which awaits empirical content, and it makes its object possible (only a being that can think of itself as having a life can have a life, and any being that has the concept of having a life has a life).<sup>71</sup>

70 Gerhardt, 'Nietzsches ästhetische Revolution', in *Pathos und Distanz*, p. 21.

71 Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenaeum fragments', in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 285: 'A transcendental perspective on this life still awaits us. Only then will it become really meaningful for us.'

Now we might think of tragedy as the form of art which provides us with the most direct and pure experience of this form which is available to us. That is to say: the object that we apprehend in tragedy is essentially, when abstraction is made of the specific content through which tragic representation allows us to become acquainted with it, the form of human life in general.<sup>72</sup>

The hypothesis is metaphysical, in the sense that it attributes a meaning to tragedy that is not psychological and that goes beyond anything that is directly warranted by the manifest, directly observable features of tragic works.<sup>73</sup> With appropriate elaboration, it can be rendered plausible and attractive. It has the initial virtue of doing justice to the pre-eminence accorded tragedy as a form of art and to our sense that the concept of tragedy cuts in an especially deep way across the distinction of art from life. The form of human life, we may suppose, is apprehended intuitively, not discursively, in tragedy.<sup>74</sup> Other forms of art and other (historical, biographical, autobiographical) narrative representations of human experience do not provide us with this intuition, because they do not rise to the same unconditional, all-comprehending level. Tragedy achieves this by representing an action in which everything – the totality of what is at issue and matters for a human being – is at stake, and all of the content with which a human life may be filled – the substantive goods with which a person may identify – is stripped away.<sup>75</sup> This totalisation and reduction both figures in the perspective of the

72 This idea derives loosely from Georg Lukács, ‘The metaphysics of tragedy’, in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin, 1974). The concept of the form of human life is, note, not the same as that of mere temporal or narrative form, nor of the typical character of human life. To say that tragedy presents the form of human life is also distinct from, though it is closer to, Schopenhauer’s claim that ‘The life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy’ (*The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, p. 322).

73 For a clear example of an interpretation of tragedy that follows an opposite, empiricist methodology, seeking to explain the value of tragedy only by reference to manifest features of tragic works, see Budd, *Values of Art*, pp. 119–22. Budd identifies the central value of tragedy with the ‘insight’ it provides. The question raised – which indicates the general difficulty for empiricist approaches to tragedy – is how the content of this insight is to be conceived. The tendency of empiricist approaches is however to put in doubt the supposition that a theory of tragedy, in the strong, explanatory rather than descriptive sense, is needed: see Budd, *ibid.* (‘tragedy lacks a precise essence’), and C. S. Lewis, ‘Tragic ends’, *Encounter* 18, 1962, 97–101 (‘tragedy, taken as a common essence of which all “tragedies” are instances, is a phantom concept’, p. 98). Empiricist doubts about the existence of an ‘essence’ of tragedy should be distinguished from the overtaking of the category of tragedy found in Croce and Collingwood’s aesthetics (see n. 96 on p. 252).

74 The idea of an intuition of human life is found in Martin Heidegger’s book on Kant (*Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), 4th edn, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), §22); *Being and Time* (Division Two) may be regarded as an attempt to articulate discursively the intuition.

75 As Schelling puts it: ‘The tragic hero must, in whatever respect, possess an absoluteness of character such that external elements are merely *material* for him’ (*The Philosophy of Art* (1804–5), ed. and trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), p. 252).

protagonist (tragedy cannot be suffered unwittingly; Aristotle's requirement of *anagnorisis*) and marks the manner in which the hero's experience is presented to us by the work. For example, through elevated social status and greatness of spirit: the concerns and goods of a king, and of one whose grasp of life and other endowments are exceptional, being the greatest possible for a human being. Other, non-tragic narrative representations of human experience do not press the same claim on us: however comprehensive they may be at the level of content, they do not pretend to capture a metaphysical whole, and so do not make the transition from content to pure form.

Though tragedy represents human life as a totality, it also represents it as finite. Also included therefore in the tragic intuition is the indeterminately conceived extra-human world in general, as that to which human life is opposed. If then we attempt to express the intuition by means of a visual analogy – in Kantian terms, if we search for an 'aesthetic idea' to render in sensible terms the intuition of a human life, to symbolise it – it may be compared with the appearance of a human figure against a featureless ground, or more exactly, with the temporal process of the differentiation of the figure from its ground. What effects this differentiation within a tragic representation is precisely the loss and suffering, and the striving, of the protagonist. Because the intuition of form is delivered through this medium, we do not think of its object, human life, as detachable from this dimension of (intensified and interfused) passivity and activity. Human life as experienced in tragedy is consequently a phenomenon to which suffering and loss are essential. The affirmation in tragedy may be thought of, similarly, as integral to the intuition, such that in tragic experience our awareness of the object, the form of human life, and our apprehension of it as having value, are experientially indistinguishable.

The implications of this account are such as would explain the distinctive features of tragic experience noted earlier. It explains the spontaneity, and the reasonless, mood-like character of tragic affirmation – the way in which it is part of the thought of tragic affirmation that there is no question of its being supplied with any reason. The intuitive character of our apprehension explains why there can be no question of a discursive proof (defence, explanation) of tragic value (any more than there can of our existence, or its temporal character). Also explained is why tragic value can attach to evil characters: our consciousness of Macbeth's evil, his moral nothingness, brings into focus another, non-moral dimension of him; as he is morally stripped, something else shines through his moral negativity. Furthermore, the notion which is found in many versions of the moral view of tragedy, that tragedy gives us an intensified, affirmative experience of certain, 'virtuous' qualities of mind or character – resoluteness, perseverance, determination, the capacity to rise above adversity, etc. – can be divorced from the moral view.<sup>76</sup> To the extent

76 See n. 56 above, and Budd, *Values of Art*, p. 122.



that these qualities contribute to a specifically *tragic* experience, they are valued not qua moral virtues but qua clear and distinct manifestations of the form of human life. This is intuitively correct: qualities of this energetic sort affect us without any thought of their moral connection (which is in any case tenuous), simply on account of their elemental active character, the manner in which they evoke a sense of human personality as pure dynamism, self-projection. To this extent there is, then, an element of ‘rightness’, of purposiveness fulfilled, in the tragic development; but it is not what the moral view of tragedy takes it to be, namely a matter of things going according to moral plan.

Just as the account implies that these features, of apodicticity and openness to evil, are necessarily present in the experience of tragedy, so it also implies that certain other matters are, appropriately, left open. It leaves undecided whether the negative moment in tragedy, the stripping away of content from life, is merely a condition for us to *apprehend* its form and its value, or whether it is a condition of the form’s *having* value: in other words, it leaves undecided whether any soterial character can be attributed to suffering itself. It also leaves undetermined how tragic value is to be conceived in subsequent reflection. On the one hand, there is pressure, deriving from the structural opposition in tragedy of human being to the extra-human world, to think of tragic value as emanating directly from human existence, as if it were its own source. Pursuing this idealistic, humanistic line, tragic affirmation might be identified with a primordial, spontaneous act of conferring value on oneself. This will be the natural way of conceiving tragic value if human being itself is conceived idealistically (if the human figure is conceived as differentiating itself spontaneously from its background). But the experience of tragedy does not force on us this conception of autonomous value-creation. All that tragedy represents, strictly, is the human figure’s possession of value irrespective of its relation to any life-content; the tragic work is silent on the score of where the value stems from. We are therefore left free to take a realistic view of tragic value, i.e. to think that tragic value is not simply self-bestowed. Nothing in the bare experience of tragedy determines us either way. The one possibility that the hypothesis does rule out is that tragic value is *moral* value: if the form of human life as such has value, then it cannot be for a moral reason.

The hypothesis that the experience of tragedy consists in an intuition of form does not therefore, though initially its abstractness may seem to count against it, contradict anything in our pre-theoretical conception of tragedy: all of the features of content that are held to characterise tragedy – unity and seriousness of action, social distinction of the protagonist, loss and suffering due to causes in which activity and passivity are entwined, self-recognition and death of the hero, affirmation – are intelligibly related to the hypothesised apprehension of form. In addition, the hypothesis provides an account of the essence of tragedy which accords it the right degree of indeterminacy.

Indeterminacy is needed in two respects: as an internal feature of the experience of tragedy itself, as indicated earlier, and in order to account for the plasticity of tragedy, its ability to assume an endless variety of novel artistic forms and to lend itself to a multitude of different philosophical interpretations.

In pursuit of this last point, I now want to indicate how the account of tragedy given here can be seen to be reflected in selected writings on tragedy other than *The Birth of Tragedy*.

First, returning to Schiller, it is significant that in an essay written slightly later than the one drawn on previously, Schiller states his view in a way that loosens the connection of tragedy with morality.<sup>77</sup> Schiller is here provoked by the fact that our affective responses to figures in tragedy do not follow obvious moral contours. In an attempt to reharmonise apparently morally deviant responses to tragedy with moral interest, Schiller employs two distinctions: between aesthetic and moral judgement, and between moral capability and actual moral conduct. This allows him to claim that positive affective responses to figures whose actual conduct is not moral may be interpreted as issuing from aesthetic judgement the object of which is moral capability. This leads Schiller to say that 'in aesthetic judgements we are interested, not in morality itself, but simply in freedom', that the focus of tragic interest is 'a principle *transcending the senses* in a human being' rather than morality as such, and that what matters for tragedy is that the individual should manifest only the 'vocation' for morality, not an actual moral will.<sup>78</sup> Our response to tragedy Schiller here describes as a 'lofty feeling of freedom'.<sup>79</sup>

The effect of this shift, however, is on the face of it to make tragedy autonomous from morality. Since the 'aesthetic' modality of tragic response is remote from any formalism, tragic response having been accorded its own complex, non-sensory judgemental target, namely, freedom or supranatural being, and since tragic response sustains itself independently of, and on many occasions goes against the grain of, moral response, the onus of showing that the 'freedom' valorised in tragedy is essentially moral now lies once again with Schiller. He may try to meet the challenge by appeal to the Kantian argument for the identity of a free will with a moral will.<sup>80</sup> But he will nevertheless

77 'On the pathetic'.

78 Op. cit., pp. 68, 53, 61.

79 Op. cit., p. 58. See also 'On naive and sentimental poetry', p. 208: 'the aim of tragedy is to help restore freedom of mind by aesthetic means'.

80 Schiller rejects the dissociation of freedom from morality as a 'false idealism' ('On naive and sentimental poetry', pp. 259–60), and charges that the 'visionary' who locates his freedom in being released from moral constraints must 'end in complete annihilation'. The Nietzschean retort would be, of course, that this merely reflects the limit of the moral perspective – what Schiller perceives as 'complete annihilation' is the point of tragic affirmation. In any case, by acknowledging the possibility of 'false idealism', Schiller concedes

have made admission that, at the first level of reflection on the experience of tragedy, the link with morality is absent. Schiller's experience of the sublime, freed from its Kantian interpretation, is only a hair's breadth from Nietzsche's experience of the Dionysiac and the Apolline in fusion.

A closely parallel case is that of Shelley. *A Defence of Poetry*, though it presents itself as propounding a solidly moral conception of art, is far from unambiguous on this score. Shelley considers the objection to epic and dramatic poetry that its characters are frequently 'remote from moral perfection', and responds by saying: 'a poet considers the vices of his contemporaries as a temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty'.<sup>81</sup> Whether this answers the charge and implies a moral view of tragedy, depends however on whether the inner beauty that Shelley refers to is moral. By implication, Shelley must presume it to be, but as in the case of Schiller, it is open to doubt whether he has grounds for the moral characterisation: certainly they are not provided by his neo-Platonist borrowings,<sup>82</sup> and Shelley's forthright repudiation of didacticism makes the question especially pertinent.<sup>83</sup>

Shelley's choice of terms, and other of his claims, suggest instead a more Nietzschean view. Epic and dramatic poetry shows, he says, 'beauty of the internal nature', 'naked truth and splendour', while moral attributes are reduced to outward shape and 'costume';<sup>84</sup> Athenian tragedy represents 'that ideal perfection and energy which everyone feels to be the internal type of all that he loves, admires, and would become'.<sup>85</sup> And, Shelley continues, strikingly: 'even crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion' in tragedy; 'error is thus divested of its willfulness; men can no longer cherish it as the creation of their choice'. It is hard not to regard Shelley as manifesting here a clear awareness of how tragic affirmation is basically distinct

that freedom can at least *appear* distinct from morality, and the systematic expansion in German idealism of the concept of freedom beyond its Kantian moral meaning shows that, if this appearance is mistaken, the mistake is at least not a shallow one.

81 *A Defence of Poetry*, pp. 423–4.

82 On which, see M. H. Abrams' comments in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 127ff. What further renders Shelley's claim to have achieved a moral defence of poetry insecure is his conception of the content of poetry as accessible only from inside poetic experience; this, as astutely noted by Wimsatt and Brooks (*Literary Criticism*, pp. 422–3), is what deeply distances his defence from Sidney's, which it otherwise echoes.

83 See op. cit., p. 428, regarding tragedy reduced to 'a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths'. See also William Blake, 'On Homer's poetry' (c. 1818): 'Aristotle says Characters are either Good or Bad: now Goodness or Badness has nothing to do with Character [. . .] Unity & Morality are secondary considerations, & belong to Philosophy & not to Poetry' (*Poems and Prophecies*, ed. Max Plowman (Dent: Everyman, 1976), p. 285).

84 *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 424.

85 Op. cit., p. 428.

from, and experienced as superseding, the moral perspective; behind his intended distinction of universal from merely local morality appears to lie a contrast of non-moral with moral value.

Here again, then, it is as if a different understanding of tragedy has broken through. The moral casing is in fact frailer in Shelley than in Schiller: Shelley's famous judgement that 'Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God'<sup>86</sup> really means, one is tempted to say: Milton's Devil is as a *tragic* being far superior to his God, a merely *moral* being.<sup>87</sup> This is not, of course, to say that either Schiller or Shelley are really Nietzscheans, but simply to indicate the pre-history, and to that extent the non-eccentricity, of the view expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

As well as revealing the non-moral aspect of the romantic-idealist understanding of tragedy, Schiller and Shelley also exemplify its tendency to reach for a metaphysical formulation of tragic experience. The notion that the experience of tragedy is fundamentally metaphysical is spread throughout the writings of German idealism and romanticism.<sup>88</sup> In Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, the metaphysical content is conceived of as including a monistic and trans-individual element. Hegel's theory of the content of tragedy, though up to a point employing only moral-cultural materials, depends ultimately, as argued earlier, on speculative metaphysics. In Schiller's conception the metaphysical content of tragedy is located in the individualised subject: tragedy displays through its stripping away of sensuous being a non-empirical essence, 'a principle that is incomparably great and infinite'.<sup>89</sup> Similarly in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,<sup>90</sup> A. W. Schlegel,<sup>91</sup> Samuel Taylor

86 Op. cit., p. 437.

87 Though Schiller too, it may be noted, acknowledges that Milton's Lucifer 'fills us with a feeling of amazement' ('On the pathetic', p. 60).

88 There is evidently a close relation between tragic insight, under the Nietzschean interpretation, and the ethos of romanticism (to the extent that such a unitary thing can be supposed to exist). The relation of the tragic outlook to romanticism is however complex, as can be seen from the following two quotations: 'Romanticism always consciously refused to recognize tragedy as a form of life (though not, of course, as a form of literary creation). The highest aspiration of Romanticism was to make tragedy disappear completely from the world, to resolve tragic situations in an untragic way' (Lukács, 'On the romantic philosophy of life', in *Soul and Form*, p. 51); 'The distinguishing feature of the metaphysical theory which underlies romanticism is that it rejects the inevitable victory or inherence of these [Christian, moral] ideals without rejecting the ideals themselves [. . .] Romanticism, the belief in the human conflict against the Universe and against power, seems to me to be the driving force of all art [. . .] The ethical content of romanticism has always been the same. The romantic bases his ethic upon his belief in the hostility or the neutrality of the Universe' (Alex Comfort, 'The ideology of romanticism', in Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe eds, *Romanticism: Points of View*, 2nd edn (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 169–70). Neither of the two assessments, which partly agree and partly disagree, is beyond dispute, but each has a good claim to capture one aspect of romanticism.

89 'On the pathetic', p. 65n.

90 See the extract from 'Shakespeare and no end', in Bate ed., *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, pp. 71–5.

Coleridge,<sup>92</sup> and twentieth-century legatees of German idealism such as Georg Lukács.<sup>93</sup>

It is, however, Friedrich Hölderlin who represents perhaps the purest case of a metaphysical theory of tragedy. Hölderlin's theoretical writings on poetry,<sup>94</sup> though extremely fragmented, contain sufficient indications of the broad kind of account of tragedy he wishes to give. The recurrent themes that occupy Hölderlin are 'inwardness', 'life in general', apotheosised in 'pure poetic life', 'divinity' and 'destiny'.<sup>95</sup> His aim is to identify tragedy with a 'mood' or 'image', a state of soul or a vision;<sup>96</sup> he considers that,

91 *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809–11), vol. 1, trans. John Black (London: Baldwin, 1815), Lecture II, pp. 40–2: the fact that reason necessitates our referring ourselves to an ever-higher goal generates a demand for the infinite, in the light of which our finite, dependent, mortal existence seems transitory and null – this being the 'tragic tone'. Lecture III, pp. 72–4: pleasure in tragedy derives from our concern with human dignity, a higher order and a spiritual invisible power; the instructive aim of tragedy is to 'establish the claims of the mind to a divine origin': 'tragical poetry wished wholly to separate the image of humanity [. . .] from the ground of nature to which man is in reality chained [. . .] the Greeks achieved an elevation more than human [. . .] the feeling of dignity elevates man [. . .] absolves him from the guardianship of nature'. On pp. 75–6 Schlegel rejects the moral view of tragedy. See also Schlegel's 'Vorlesungen über philosophische Kunstlehre. Jena 1798', in *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, vol. 1, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I* [1798–1803], ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1989), §§212–18, emphasising the opposition of freedom and extranatural necessity in tragedy; in §212 (p. 84) Schlegel denies that a moral aim pertains to the essence of tragedy.

92 See *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Dent, 1975), p. 192 n.1, and *Criticism of Shakespeare*, pp. 43–4.

93 'The metaphysics of tragedy'.

94 *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. and ed. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). On Hölderlin, see Françoise Dastur, 'Tragedy and speculation', in Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks eds, *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 2000), and Dieter Henrich, *The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin*, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 117–18, 133–6.

95 See *Essays and Letters*, pp. 51–7, 67, 107, 113–14.

96 The tendency of Hölderlin's aesthetic is thus to erode the distinction between tragedy and lyric poetry and, indeed, between poetry and art in general. It reaches its conclusion in some late descendants of the German idealist tradition in aesthetics, where we find opposition to any doctrine of artistic differentiation and an accompanying denial that tragedy constitutes a genuine aesthetic or artistic kind: see Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (1902), trans. Colin Lyas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 12, and R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (1937) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 51–2, 115–16. This is not, however, Hölderlin's position. One, extremely important, advantage of identifying tragedy at Hölderlin's supra-narrative level is that it makes it intelligible that tragedy can be expressed in literary forms that are virtually without narrative (Samuel Beckett) and in other, non-representational forms of art (music, non-figurative painting, e.g. Rothko); in other words, it unifies tragedy as a genre with works that express tragic feeling. Modern critical practice in some places follows this view; see, for example, Wilson G. Knight's 'spatial' interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy in *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1961).

though tragedy can be rendered artistically in narrative representational form, it is not essentially an empirical sequence, for which reason Hölderlin speaks of ‘tragic time’ in contrast with ‘human time’.<sup>97</sup> The mood or image in question concerns a metaphysical object, more precisely, a transcendental movement. Hölderlin conceives tragedy as symbolising or in some fashion enacting the overcoming of the division of subject and object: the tragic is, he says, ‘the metaphor of an intellectual intuition’,<sup>98</sup> the intuition of a primordial living unity prior to the separation of subject and object, which yet results in suffering because the feeling of the whole requires itself to be felt in each of its parts, thereby ‘transcend[ing] the boundary’ of the parts.<sup>99</sup> The tragic affirmation consists in a return to this original unity, or a new form of it.<sup>100</sup> The form of human life, the concept of destiny, and the metaphysical division of subject and object, are thus for Hölderlin aligned in tragedy: the tragic rests on ‘boundless union purifying itself through boundless separation’;<sup>101</sup> tragic suffering effects a reduction to the form of human life in general,<sup>102</sup> tragic protagonists ‘are all more or less attempts to solve the problem of destiny’, ‘cancelled to the extent that they are not universally valid’.<sup>103</sup> Though it is too undeveloped for one to be sure, Hölderlin’s theory appears to come close to providing the ‘super’-perspective described earlier, one that reconciles tragedy with morality on terms dictated by the former.

The two final theories that I wish to review, Schopenhauer’s and F. W. J. Schelling’s, are again metaphysical, but distinguished from those already discussed by the distinctive manner in which they handle the relation of tragedy to morality.

On Schopenhauer’s account,<sup>104</sup> tragedy is privileged metaphysically as an artistic genre, in the way that music is privileged as a form of art. Indeed, the ultimate representational content of tragedy – its exhibition of the human world-as-representation as a self-manifestation of will – corresponds closely to the metaphysical truth – the intuition of the blind will that comprises the world’s underlying reality – which on Schopenhauer’s theory is provided by music; and the conative-affective state which Schopenhauer designates as the proper effect of music, the placidity of pure will-less contemplation,

97 *Essays and Letters*, p. 114. The same or a parallel notion is in Lukács, ‘The metaphysics of tragedy’, pp. 158–9.

98 *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

99 *Op. cit.*, pp. 84–6.

100 *Op. cit.*: ‘at this birth of the highest hostility the highest reconciliation appears to be the case’ (p. 54); ‘the separation proceeds until the parts are in their most extreme tension, where they resist one another most strongly. From this conflict, it returns into itself [. . .] a new unity originates’ (p. 86).

101 *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

102 ‘In the utmost form of suffering, namely, there exists nothing but the conditions of time and space’, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

103 *Op. cit.*, p. 57.

104 *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, pp. 252–5, 322, 331, 393, and vol. 2, pp. 240, 433–7, 630.

corresponds to the state of resignation which Schopenhauer regards as the proper response to tragedy and with which he identifies tragedy's affirmative moment. The prima facie implications of such an account are, very clearly, that tragedy is indifferent to morality, and this is reflected in Schopenhauer's firm rejection of the principle of poetic justice.<sup>105</sup>

More precisely, Schopenhauer's account of the metaphysical truth expressed in tragedy would appear to carry nihilistic implications: to the extent that all states of persons are regarded as just so many perturbations of will, the very idea of a reason for action seems to disappear, and with it the idea that morality has any special claim. This marks a difference from Schiller and Shelley: the conflict of tragedy with morality is here located in the negative, rather than the affirmative moment of tragedy, and in a global cancellation of the notion of rational action, as opposed to awareness of a special, elevated species of value.

Schopenhauer's philosophy contains, however, two further elements which serve to block the nihilistic prima facie implications of his account of tragedy, and which ultimately re-attune tragedy with morality: an ethics of compassion, and a quasi-Augustinian doctrine that human existence is itself sin. According to Schopenhauer, the motive to morality reposes on the metaphysical insight that personal individuation is an illusion, and since this insight is broadly the same as that which is expressed in tragedy, the morality-paralysing implications of tragedy are neutralised: the reasons for action which the tragic vision eliminates are in fact not, according to Schopenhauer, presupposed by morality; on the contrary, tragic vision may be expected to bolster moral motivation.

Second, Schopenhauer holds that the experience of tragedy, after initially displaying the world as the scene of will's self-antagonism, leads us ultimately to a judgement of 'eternal justice': we are brought to recognise that a fault is involved in the very individuated existence of the self, and consequently that there is a rightness to its tragic destruction.<sup>106</sup> Schopenhauer's theory, after seeming to set tragedy at a clear distance from morality, thus remoralises it at the last hurdle.

Though the coherence of Schopenhauer's ethics is not a question for the theory of tragedy, the second part of his account can certainly be challenged by appeal to the experience of tragedy. It is in the first place doubtful that the affirmative moment of tragedy can be understood on the basis of a switch to resignation, as Schopenhauer proposes, since resignation appears to contain no affirmation; as Schopenhauer appears to recognise, for he introduces the distinct and further idea that tragedy 'demands an existence of a different kind, a different world',<sup>107</sup> in order to supply an object of affirmation. This

105 Op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 253–4.

106 Op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 254, 331; see also §63.

107 Op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 433, 435. See M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 329–31.

solution is unsatisfactory, however, in so far as nothing is actually provided within tragedy to suggest the reality of this, merely demanded, different form of existence. In any case, the notion that we can regard the tragic process as a whole which is 'just' or has a justification, in a sense positively related to that in which the moral justice of an action provides it with a justification, seems to demand, exactly as does Hegel's theory, the occupation of a point of view directly contrary to that individual, restrictedly human standpoint which is constitutive of the experience of tragedy. Philosophical reflection may well be able to take up the standpoint of the will, justifiably destroying individuality in order to return to itself; but it is a different matter, and implausible, to suppose that the bridge to this standpoint is presented within the experience of tragedy.

Schelling's theory of tragedy distinguishes itself as the most subtle and sensitive attempt in German idealism to square tragedy with morality.<sup>108</sup> The idealist-romantic theories examined so far proceed by identifying different aspects of human personality corresponding to the negative and affirmative moments in tragedy: tragedy is viewed as an ablative process in which one part of the self is destroyed and the other, higher part preserved. Schelling, by contrast, with a stronger sense of the unity of tragic experience, attempts to conceive the two sides of the tragic process – the negative moment in which the world afflicts the subject with loss and suffering, and the contrary moment where the subject is affirmed in the teeth of the world – as identical. Schelling describes the tragic opposition of human subject and world as an opposition of freedom and necessity, and tragedy as portraying:

necessity genuinely caught in a struggle with freedom, yet such that a balance obtains between the two [. . .] *both*, necessity and freedom, emerge from this struggle simultaneously as victorious *and* vanquished, and accordingly *equal* in every respect. But precisely this is doubtlessly the highest manifestation of art, namely, that freedom elevate itself to a position of equity with necessity, and that necessity appear as the equal of freedom without the latter losing in significance in the process [. . .] The essence of tragedy is thus an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished.<sup>109</sup>

108 *Philosophical Letters*, pp. 192–4, *The Philosophy of Art*, pp. 247–80. On Schelling, see Peter Szondi, 'The notion of the tragic in Schelling, Hölderlin and Hegel', in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

109 *The Philosophy of Art*, pp. 249, 251.



Schelling, like Schiller, philosophises within Kant's framework, and regards the opposition of freedom and nature as philosophically fundamental. But there is a deep difference in approach. Schiller views the Kantian structure of freedom and nature primarily from the practical standpoint, from which it is grasped as setting the parameters and defining the task of practical reason. From this stems Schiller's pronouncedly moral view of tragedy. Schelling, by contrast, aims to step beyond the practical perspective which, on his account, permits only a partial grasp of the relation of freedom and necessity, in order to achieve an objective and comprehensive view of their relation. The philosophical task of articulating this relation is, moreover, subordinate to and dependent on the intuition of their relation which art alone can provide.<sup>110</sup> This is what allows Schelling to provide an account of tragedy which is more accurate than Schiller's, and which, though also constructed out of Kantian materials, makes the interest of tragedy independent of morality.<sup>111</sup>

However, though no reference to morality occurs in Schelling's basic theory of tragedy, a moral characterisation is later introduced, and it produces the same straining of moral concepts as seen in Schopenhauer's notion that tragic loss atones for the 'guilt' of existence. The tragic protagonist, Schelling supposes, falls into misfortune as a result of error, and yet 'is necessarily guilty of transgression': 'This is the highest possible misfortune: by fate to become guilty without genuine guilt.'<sup>112</sup> The guilt is contracted through fate, the absolute, non-empirical necessity that lies in the world and stands opposed to the subject's freedom: 'fate itself makes the guilty person into a transgressor', the protagonist choosing to 'atone voluntarily' for the 'guilt imposed by fate itself'.<sup>113</sup>

Schelling speaks as if this formula simply follows from his conception of tragedy as an identity of freedom and necessity, but it does not, and it is not similarly intelligible. What makes it reasonable, from within the perspective of tragedy, to regard tragedy as an identity of freedom and necessity, is the fact that we do, in fact, experience the negative and affirmative moments of tragedy as enjoying a strangely intimate relation. There is, however, nothing analogous in the experience of tragedy which allows us to make sense of the

110 *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pt. VI, and *The Philosophy of Art*, pt. I.

111 See Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche's Theory of Tragedy*, p. 312: 'more than any other modern theorist it is Schelling, with his emphasis on the existential problems of *das Tragische* (as against the dramatic problems of tragedy), who anticipates Nietzsche's views [. . .] a close kinship exists between Schelling's antinomian attribution of value to the single man in his "tragic" predicament and Nietzsche's Dionysiac amorality'.

112 *The Philosophy of Art*, p. 252.

113 Op. cit., pp. 253–4. (In a much later writing, in *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (c. 1833–4), trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 128, Schelling reverts even further to neoclassical orthodoxy, saying that tragedy exhibits a 'wise Providence'.)

idea that innocence can be converted into guilt through a sheer act of choice – as opposed to the more plausible idea that the hero experiences himself as transported beyond questions of guilt and responsibility. Whatever intelligibility Schelling's notion may have, it must derive from other parts of his philosophy. Again it may be said – as in the case of Hegel's and Schopenhauer's speculative unifications of tragedy with morality – that the moral element in Schelling's account of tragedy may be justifiable, but it cannot be extracted from, and it is not directly supported by, the experience of tragedy itself.

What distinguishes the theories of Schopenhauer and Schelling, then, is the way that they seem initially to dissociate tragedy from morality, but then ultimately return to a moral view of tragedy. The common difficulty which they face in discovering a moral meaning in tragedy confirms the view that tragedy and morality comprise incompatible perspectives. When we try to superimpose the perspectives of morality and tragedy, to occupy both at the same time, the result is confusion – as manifest in the doctrine that the existence of the self is a sin and its destruction is just, or that I can elect to be responsible for that which I am not responsible. Not only do these ideas fail to illuminate the experience of tragedy, moral reflection cannot make sense of them either. We should instead regard tragedy and morality as defining different worlds: in the tragic perspective we apprehend morality simply as part of the complex of forces which move human agents and shape human existence, while from the moral perspective all that can be seen in tragedy is a set of evils susceptible to and requiring moral compensation.<sup>114</sup>

It should be clear how all of the metaphysical theories referred to map onto the conception of tragedy as a formal intuition of human life. In terms of the schema suggested earlier, Nietzsche's Dyonisiac corresponds to the background against which the form of human life appears, and his Apolline principle to the human figure's distinction from its ground. Schopenhauer's self-antagonistic will, and Hölderlin's drama of subject-object differentiation, correspond to the movement whereby the figure differentiates itself from the ground; in Schiller, and Shelley, the sense-transcendent self-affirmation corresponds to the figure's experience of self-differentiation. Schelling's identity of freedom and necessity characterises the relation of figure to ground as simultaneously one of distinctness and inclusion.

In addition, a pattern reveals itself with respect to these idealist-romantic theories of tragedy. In each case it is possible to isolate an element in the theory which corresponds to the hypothesis that tragedy expresses an indeterminate intuition of the form of human life, and to separate this element from

114 We can now see that the naive, neoclassical interpretation of tragedy as representing the execution of poetical Justice, though untenable, is well-conceived in the sense that, in contrast with the sophisticated versions of the moral view found in German idealism, it grasps accurately what would be required for tragedy to conform to moral consciousness.

the further interpretation which the theory puts on the intuition and which renders the meaning of tragedy philosophically determinate. With respect to the latter, what I wish to maintain is not that the attempt to fix determinately the meaning of tragedy is itself in error, but that, first, the determinate meanings which the theories assign to tragedy cannot be extrapolated directly from the tragic experience itself, and so must owe whatever authority they possess to the philosophical systems from which they are drawn, and second, that the attempt to render the meaning of tragedy determinate goes awry when it pushes tragedy in the direction of a moral meaning. There is, therefore, a line of continuity in German idealist and romantic reflections on tragedy, which veers towards Nietzsche's view of relation of tragedy and morality, and which can be explained on the assumption that the fundamental content of tragedy is an intuition of the indeterminate form of human life, that comes to be determined in different ways on the various theories of tragedy. These two strands are, furthermore, connected: although there can be metaphysical theories of tragedy which affirm the moral view, such as Hegel's, the deepest and most accurate insights into the metaphysical content of tragedy are ones which pull it apart from morality, vindicating Nietzsche's view of their relationship. In historical terms, though it would be false to claim that romanticism broke with the moral view of tragedy, its major shifts of emphasis in the understanding of tragedy are what opened the door to the development of the non-moral, Nietzschean view.

Bradley observes that 'it is extremely hard to make out exactly what this experience [of tragedy] is, because, in the very effort to make it out, our reflecting mind, full of everyday ideas, is always tending to transform it by the application of these ideas, and so elicit a result which, instead of representing the fact, conventionalises it'.<sup>115</sup> Countering this tendency, Bradley insists that tragedy presents us with a 'mystery', an 'inexplicable fact'.<sup>116</sup>

I have tried to show that the moral view of tragedy is an instance of the conventionalisation described by Bradley. Whether he is right to regard tragedy as essentially incomprehensible is, however, a further question. If Bradley is right, then any theory which seeks to explain tragedy is misguided. The moral view, as found in Schiller for example, is then wrong twice over:

115 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 17.

116 Op. cit., p. 29. See also Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 284–5: 'tragedy shows itself to be primarily a vision of the supremacy of the event or *mythos*. The response to tragedy is "this must be", or, perhaps more accurately, "this does happen": the event is primary, the explanation of it secondary and variable.' See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1975), 2nd and revised edn (1989), trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Shed & Ward: London, 1993), pp. 129–34, agreeing that tragedy pertains to 'a metaphysical order of being which is true for all' (p. 132) and which has nothing to do with a 'moral world order' (p. 131). (Gadamer's positive account of what specifically distinguishes and is affirmed in tragedy – as opposed to his account of the general conditions for art – is hard to locate, however.)

by virtue of the particular kind of explanation that it offers, and by virtue of its attempting a complete explanation of tragedy at all. The idea that tragedy is incomprehensible sits uneasily, however, with the claim that tragedy is deeply important: an experience which refused all insight would be consigned to a category of psychological aberrations. Consequently it seems better to express Bradley's idea by saying that the only acceptable kind of 'explanation' of tragedy is one that falls short of completeness, i.e. that merely defers to an appropriate point the ultimate inexplicability of tragedy – an explanation that, as Kant says of his theory of human freedom, merely renders comprehensible its incomprehensibility. The account I have suggested does this, by postulating, without pretending to explain, an object the intuition of which is inseparable from its affirmation. With this or some other appropriate metaphysical notion, I have argued, some light may be thrown on the 'inexplicable fact' presented in our experience of tragedy.<sup>117</sup>

117 I am grateful to Neil Vickers for help in writing this paper, and wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Department of Philosophy of University College London, who facilitated the research leave during which this paper was completed.

# Nietzsche's artistic revaluation

Christopher Janaway

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Under what conditions did man invent those value judgements good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? [...] we need a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question.*<sup>1</sup>

## I Nietzsche as artist and psychologist

If one were setting out to pose fundamental evaluative questions about the system of moral attitudes prevalent in contemporary culture, would it help to adopt an artistic approach? Probably there could never be a general answer to this question, even if it were perfectly clear what is meant by 'artistic'. It would be a bold theorist who ventured that such a revaluative project, a project falling within ethics in the broadest sense, necessitated writing in the form of poem, drama or opera, or at least borrowing elements of style or rhetoric from some such art. It would be almost as bold – though, one suspects, more common among philosophers – to hold that in such a critique of moral values any artistic endeavour must always be an inessential embellishment, an attractive but discardable clothing, a mere means of presentation for what could be stated without artistic devices. Must philosophy be such that fictional representation, dramatic dialogue, unexplicated metaphor, and sheer delight in word-play are eliminable from it without loss of anything essential? Much of Plato's work would not stand this test. Yet his writing is paradigmatically philosophical and offers a critique of the values of many of his contemporaries.

The writer with whom I shall be concerned, however, is the Nietzsche of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, who in the Preface to that work poses the

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality (GM)*, Preface, 3, 6. I shall use the translation by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), unless otherwise stated. Because of Nietzsche's frequent use of '...' as a stylistic device, I mark my omissions from his texts using square brackets, thus: [...]. All references to Nietzsche's works are to section numbers.

question and voices the challenge that stand at the top of this article. Nietzsche's mature writings, and the *Genealogy* in particular, aim to release the reader from the 'illness' allegedly manifest in adhering to moral evaluations of a Christian or post-Christian nature. The first part of the therapeutic process is to diagnose the functions such evaluations (concepts, beliefs, desires, emotional attachments and aversions) fulfil for those who make them. In describing these functions Nietzsche typically uses the terminology of drives and affects whose activity is furthered by the adoption of evaluative attitudes. The second part of the therapeutic process is to overcome the need to hold the evaluative attitudes one has inherited, and to create new evaluations which are expressive of one's own strength, unity of character, or affirmation of life. I shall argue that a consequence of some of Nietzsche's descriptive hypotheses – would-be truths – about the mind and the way our evaluations are formed, is that an affective reorientation is required in order for his therapeutic, revaluative project to work; and that Nietzsche's way of writing is well directed to the task of such an affective reorientation. I shall use the specific example of the *Genealogy's* First Essay to explore this contention.

I shall not offer an argument that Nietzsche's mature prose works are art – though, for all I know, a good case could be made for saying just this – only that they are essentially artistic in some of their methods. A prima facie case for regarding Nietzsche's later writings as artistic is fairly easy to make in view of certain pervasive features which even the casual reader will identify: the wide range of grammatical devices he uses, including exclamation, incomplete sentences, and the insertion of direct speech to shift the centre of gravity away from the single authorial voice; the combination of meticulous care and playfulness in the use of language, that makes the linguistic texture of his writing call attention to itself as much as to its contents (we might say that Nietzsche thematises his medium of representation). To this we may add the kind of irony that deliberately misleads the reader, and the use of a multiplicity of rhetorical devices for provoking the affects of the reader. It is the latter feature on which I shall concentrate most attention here. It is not far-fetched to say that Nietzsche sets out to embarrass, amuse, tempt, shame, and revolt the reader – to test our attractions and aversions. My claim will be that provoking such responses is an integral part of Nietzsche's revaluative procedure. If his reader has arrived at and adheres to his or her values in the manner hypothesised by Nietzsche's moral psychology, then Nietzsche's chosen way of writing is well calculated to begin the process of detaching him or her from those values, and enabling the revaluation he announces in the Preface to the *Genealogy*.

In 1888, the year after the *Genealogy* appeared, Nietzsche composed his supposed autobiography, *Ecce Homo*. Although in general this work is approached with some degree of caution by many writers on Nietzsche, it is worth risking the thought that the single page of description entitled '*Genealogy of Morals. A Polemic*' can be taken, at least provisionally, at face

value. It purports to be a résumé of the intentions informing the rhetoric of the *Genealogy's* three essays, and an assessment of their achievement. And, taken as such, I think it provides a cogent summary analysis. Leaving out what pertains only to the Second and Third Essays, here is what Nietzsche says:

Regarding expression, intention, and the art of surprise, the three inquiries which constitute this *Genealogy* are perhaps uncannier than anything else written so far. Dionysus is, as is known, also the god of darkness.

Every time a beginning that is calculated to mislead: cool, scientific [*wissenschaftlich*], even ironic, deliberately foreground, deliberately holding off. Gradually more unrest; sporadic lightning; very disagreeable truths are heard grumbling in the distance – until eventually a *tempo feroce* is attained in which everything rushes ahead in a tremendous tension. In the end, in the midst of perfectly gruesome detonations, a *new* truth becomes visible every time among thick clouds.

The truth of the *first* inquiry is the birth of Christianity: the birth of Christianity out of the spirit of *ressentiment*, not, as people may believe, out of the ‘spirit’ – a countermovement by its very nature, the great rebellion against the dominion of *noble* values. [. . .]

I have been understood. Three decisive preliminary studies by a psychologist for a revaluation of all values. – This book contains the first psychology of the priest.<sup>2</sup>

Three times here Nietzsche tells us that the First Essay contains or reveals some truth. Specifically, it makes visible the truth that Christianity’s origin is in the spirit of *ressentiment* against the dominion of noble values. Other parts of the passage make it clear that this is a psychological truth. What is now of interest is *how* this truth is to be revealed by the Essay. What is deliberately misleading about the beginning of the Essay? What is its uncanny surprise? Where is the unrest? What gruesome detonations occur? Why is the new truth among thick clouds?

I shall sketch my answer first, and attempt to support at least part of it in what follows. The misleading beginning is the discussion of philological and historical origins of words such as ‘good’. This makes it appear that we are in a scientific, objective study of the past, a sort of history or anthropology, cool and *wissenschaftlich*, as Nietzsche says. But, as I shall argue, what will really be transacted is a calling into consciousness of the reader’s affects. The uncanny surprise is that what initially seem opposites – the noble mode of evaluation and the slavish morality of *ressentiment* – will provoke in

2 *Ecce Homo*, ‘Genealogy of Morals’, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, with *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

the reader a similar mixture of disquiet and admiration. Hence the growing unrest. The reader will find his or her own attachment to Christian or post-Christian moral values hard to stomach. Gruesome detonations occur in that the reader can be expected to suffer under the violence of this reversal in his or her affects. The new truth is among thick clouds because these freshly aroused feelings are at first hard to integrate with the rest of the reader's attitudes.

In this self-reflective passage Nietzsche mentions features of his writing that are self-consciously artistic: the use of irony and deliberate false-scents for the reader, the careful concern with the expressive power and emotional effect of his narrative, and finally the claim to achieve an overall architecture that is conceived not, say, in terms of premises and conclusions, or evidence and explanation, or even narrative coherence, but in terms of mood and musical pace: a cool beginning gradually giving way to a hectic and ferocious tempo.

But can Nietzsche's enterprise be essentially artistic if it is first and foremost concerned with the probing of human psychology and the revelation of truths? Someone might consider that these are not per se artistic aims. However, such an objector would most likely be operating with an unduly narrow concept of the artistic, perhaps in the grip of what Noël Carroll has recently diagnosed as the pervasive tendency in philosophical aesthetics to reduce art to beauty, or to the aesthetic, conceived in such a way that moral, political and historical concerns, as well as audiences' emotional involvement and even authors' intentions, can come to seem extraneous to art.<sup>3</sup> But Nietzsche himself never belonged to that theoretical tradition, and never really conceives art in that way. He does not put forward a theory of aesthetic experience as such, and in the *Genealogy* criticises both Kant and Schopenhauer for their reliance on the notions of passivity, disinterestedness and impersonality in accounting for the aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> In *Twilight of the Idols* he decries one influential conception of the autonomy of art:

When one has excluded from art the purpose of moral preaching and human improvement it by no means follows that art is completely purposeless, goalless, meaningless, in short *l'art pour l'art* – a snake biting its own tail [ . . . ] A psychologist asks on the other hand: what does all art do? does it not praise? does it not glorify? does it not select? does it not highlight? By doing all this it *strengthens* or *weakens* certain valuations [ . . . ]. – Art is the great stimulus to life: how could it be thought

3 See Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 'Beauty and the genealogy of art theory' (pp. 20–41), 'Art, narrative, and emotion' (pp. 215–35), 'Art, narrative, and moral understanding' (pp. 270–93).

4 See *GM* III: 6, 12. For some discussion see my 'Disinterestedness and objectivity: Nietzsche on Schopenhauer and Kant', *Studia Kantiana* (forthcoming 2002).



purposeless, aimless, *l'art pour l'art?* [. . .] art also brings to light much that is ugly, hard, questionable in life.<sup>5</sup>

The last clause here must signify the revelation of truths through art. Yet, by contrast, other Nietzschean remarks can seem to point in an opposed direction. In the *Genealogy* Nietzsche speaks of 'art, in which precisely the *lie* hallows itself, in which the *will to deception* has good conscience on its side'.<sup>6</sup> How then could Nietzsche's own truth-directed investigations be properly artistic? A Dostoevsky or a Shakespeare might probe the human psyche and bring to light much that is hard or questionable in life; they might even be said to strengthen or weaken valuations. But, the objector might say, what makes these writers artists is their deliberate and central use of artifice or pretense, in that they produce fictions first and foremost – and Nietzsche differs crucially in that he does not normally produce fictions, except when writing about Zarathustra.

This raises a deep question about the interpretation of Nietzsche: accepting that his narratives (concerning slave morality in the *Genealogy*'s First Essay, and the origins of guilt or bad conscience and the ascetic ideal in the Second and Third) are not, by his lights, straightforward fictions, where are we to locate them on the spectrum between sheer story-telling and literal presentation of truth? Supposing for now that we opted for the most extreme end of the spectrum in relation to the First Essay, and decided that Nietzsche's account of the origins of morality in the *ressentiment* of those oppressed by an ebullient aristocratic culture was meant as a bald, literal truth-claim about the past: would this un-lying, un-deceiving aim militate against conceiving Nietzsche as artist-like in his method? Arguably not. When Nietzsche enlists art as the opponent of the ascetic ideal, it is because in art there is no unconditional faith in truth-telling as the single unquestionable and overarching value.<sup>7</sup> But we need not infer that in artistic endeavours there occurs an unconditional valuing of falsehood-telling. Art can reveal truths even if it also lies with a good conscience. So Nietzsche can proceed in a manner akin to that of an artist without losing his claim to put forward truths about the origins of our values.

## II Nietzsche's choice of style

There are passages in Nietzsche's mature works that are sometimes decried (more often ignored) as unnecessary excesses of Nietzschean rhetoric. A prominent instance is this from the *Genealogy*'s First Essay:

5 *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Expeditions of an untimely man', p. 24, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

6 *GM* III: 25.

7 For this characterisation of the faith in truth as a form of the ascetic ideal, see *GM* III: 24.

[the noble, the powerful] are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey toward the outside world [. . .] There they enjoy freedom from all social constraint [. . .] they step *back* into the innocence of the beast-of-prey conscience, as jubilant monsters, who perhaps walk away from a hideous succession of murder, arson, rape, torture with such high spirits and equanimity that it seems as if they have only played a student prank, convinced that for years to come the poets will again have something to sing and to praise. At the base of all these noble races one cannot fail to recognize the beast of prey, the splendid *blond beast* who roams about lusting after booty and victory; from time to time this hidden base needs to discharge itself, the animal must get out, must go back into the wilderness: Roman, Arabic, Germanic, Japanese nobility, Homeric heroes, Scandinavian Vikings – in this need they are all alike.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Mann found in this passage among others a 'clinical picture of infantile sadism' before which 'our souls writhe in embarrassment'.<sup>9</sup> Mann is too subtle a reader of Nietzsche to let it rest there: he later asserts that anyone who reads Nietzsche 'as he is' is lost, and that, in the light of Nietzsche's deeper concerns, 'the whole aesthetic phantasm of slavery, war, violence, glorious brutality whisks itself off to a realm of irresponsible play and scintillating irony'.<sup>10</sup> But still for Mann the violence in these texts is something irresponsible and inessential, a superficial feature that a less enthusiastic genius might have curbed.

I want to suggest a different approach. At least some of these uncomfortable passages are uncomfortable because the writing is openly concerned with probing *the affects of the reader*. To this end the literary violence is an effective means. Nietzsche's project of revaluing moral values contains as an essential part the uncovering of a multifarious affective life underlying our moral judgements. By provoking a range of affects in the reader, Nietzsche

8 *GM* I: 11. I shall not rehearse any of the debate about the infamous 'blond beast'. There is a firm consensus among recent commentators that Nietzsche despised both German nationalism and anti-semitism (see, e.g. Yirmiyahu Yovel, 'Nietzsche, the Jews, and ressentiment', in Richard Schacht ed., *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 214–36; and Weaver Santaniello, 'A post-holocaust re-examination of Nietzsche and the Jews', in Jacob Golomb ed., *Nietzsche and Jewish Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 23). The extent to which Nietzsche's rhetoric itself is complicit in the development of National Socialism is another issue; Ken Gemes, for example, suggests 'the real question of Nietzsche's culpability is best addressed in terms of responsibility for fostering a set of metaphors, in particular, and most dangerously, the metaphor of degeneration' (Ken Gemes, 'Nietzsche's critique of truth' in John Richardson and Brian Leiter eds, *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 55, n. 14).

9 Thomas Mann, 'Nietzsche's philosophy in the light of recent history', trans. R. and C. Winston, in *Last Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959), pp. 165. *GM* II: 6–7 with its theme of 'without cruelty, no festival' provides a further example for Mann.

10 Mann, *ibid.*, p. 174.

enables the reader to locate the target for revaluation, the ‘morality’ which comprises a complex of attitudes of his or her own, central to which are affective inclinations and aversions. The rhetoric of Nietzsche’s mature works is thus in part a tool for bringing the reader’s ‘morality’ to light, so that the question of its value can be first properly posed. And this may help explain another feature of his method: that he nowhere sets out for us just what morality or moral evaluation as such consists in. He does not define morality. If, as Nietzsche alleges, the prime material we have to work with in re-valuing our moral evaluations is a wide range of affective attitudes whose existence in ourselves may be in some degree masked by the accretions of rationalising interpretation, then discovering even *what our morality is* may have as a necessary condition our being prompted into a reflection upon the many and various affective attitudes in question. If we were to find that the only way to reflect on the relevant affects was by first feeling them, then Nietzsche’s provocative rhetorical method could be seen as not only effective, but as essential to his task.

With some over-simplification, one might point to two basic versions of Nietzsche that have been on offer in recent commentaries. There has been the ‘literary’ or perhaps ‘postmodern’ Nietzsche whose prime concern is with style and rhetoric and with undermining the possibility of attaining truth or stable meaning. And there is the Nietzsche more congenial to analytical philosophers, who opposes transcendent metaphysics in a more or less neo-Kantian spirit, but is committed to there being empirical truths in the realms of the historical, cultural, and psychological, and who takes up coherent philosophical positions for which there are arguments (even if he does not always present them plainly as such).

A problem confronting common ‘postmodern’ readings of Nietzsche is that they implicitly undermine his claimed ‘revaluation of values’. This exercise has a diagnostic component, which consists in a description of the conscious and unconscious processes involved in the formation of those beliefs, desires, and other attitudes that combine to constitute moral evaluations. I argue that Nietzsche puts forward these descriptions as candidates for truth about the way human minds work. For, as he says quite bluntly, ‘there are [. . .] truths’ that are ‘plain, harsh, ugly, unpleasant, unchristian, immoral’.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, unless Nietzsche can conceive of himself as uncovering truths, he cannot revalue the values of morality. If he is to carry out his diagnostic descriptions, then he must be ‘allowed’ to advance some truths (or hypotheses – a word he likes – i.e. candidates for truth). The ‘postmodern’ type of reading in which Nietzsche discards truth altogether will not allow us to make sense of his central project.

On the other hand, a failing of those who allow truths to Nietzsche and concentrate on elucidating and finding arguments for his philosophical

11 *GMI*: 1.

positions has tended to be their relative silence on questions concerning his literary methods. But it is essential to ask: Why does Nietzsche elect to write not in the form of philosophical or scholarly argumentation, but in his subtle, provocative, emotive manner? It would be an absurd mistake to think that Nietzsche was unable to write in the conventional form of connected arguments running from premise to conclusion. It would be like treating Arnold Schoenberg as someone who never quite mastered major and minor scales, or de Chirico as someone who could not get the hang of conventional perspective drawing. (It would, in other words, be a kind of philistinism.)

In the firmament of the German academic world the young Nietzsche had been a star. He was a philologist who investigated the language, literature, and culture of the ancient world, studied with the strict systematician Ritschl,<sup>12</sup> and became a scholar so gifted that at the age of only twenty-four the academic establishment honoured him with a Chair at Basel. Nietzsche was an accomplished exponent of a *Wissenschaft*, a 'science' in a broad sense, or at any rate a *discipline*: a rigorous enterprise in which a body of knowledge was built up by argument from carefully sifted evidence, and findings presented for collective scrutiny. This philological discipline of nineteenth-century German academia became the foundation for much subsequent classical scholarship, including the study of the ancient philosophers. Perhaps it tends to be forgotten that for much of the twentieth century an education as a philosopher in the English-speaking world was likely also to be an education as a classicist. To that extent today's analytical philosophy owes some of its ingrained habits and assumptions to the very academic tradition in which Nietzsche was a prodigy – until he struck out in a new direction.

A new direction was of course evident in Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is arguably intended to be somewhat artistic in style and is preoccupied with art ancient and modern (and which was accordingly vilified by the academic establishment).<sup>13</sup> But it was through the sequence of works *Human, All Too Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche developed his mature style. That he gave one of his works the title *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* – the gay or joyful *Wissenschaft* – may be taken as emblematic of the new course Nietzsche hoped to follow.<sup>14</sup> We might also recall that in the middle of writing *The Gay Science* Nietzsche composed *Thus*

12 'Strict systematician' is the phrase used by Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

13 For a thorough discussion of this controversy see M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 90–131.

14 Bernard Williams's elucidation of the title is helpful: 'It translates a phrase, "gai saber", or, as Nietzsche writes on his title page, "gaya scienza", which referred to the art of song cultivated by the medieval troubadours of Provence [...] just as the troubadours possessed not so much a body of information as an art, so Nietzsche's "gay science" does not in the first place consist of a doctrine, a theory or body of knowledge. While it involves and encourages hard thought, and to this extent the standard implications of 'Wissenschaft' are in place, it is meant to convey a certain spirit, one that in relation to understanding and criticism could defy the "spirit of gravity" as lightly as the troubadours, supposedly, celebrated their loves'

*Spoke Zarathustra*, a book with evident artistic pretensions (even if many nowadays would place the emphasis on the second of these words), and that *The Gay Science* itself begins and ends with poems, in the very last of which Nietzsche reflects on his methods thus:

Let us dance in every manner,  
free – so shall be *our* art's banner,  
And *our* science – shall be gay!<sup>15</sup>

A presupposition, then, for reading the mature Nietzsche of the 1880s is to recognise his shift in method away from analytical argument as a deliberate choice of style. But why, with what aims, did Nietzsche make this move? I believe I can show that the appropriateness of Nietzsche's later style is more than just a matter of philosophising in a new mood or 'conveying a certain spirit'.<sup>16</sup> I wish to argue that Nietzsche moved towards a rhetoric of imaginative provocation of the affects, and that certain aspects of this mode of writing flow naturally from his descriptive moral psychology.

### III Moral feelings

How does Nietzsche's project of revaluing moral evaluations engage with moral feelings? Some passages in the earlier work *Daybreak* may help us to begin with, as they expound some of Nietzsche's psychological ideas in the manner of straightforward, truth-claiming diagnosis. In Section 34, Nietzsche makes a contrast between moral feelings and moral concepts:

the history of moral feelings is quite different from the history of moral concepts. The former are powerful *before* the action, the latter especially after the action in face of the need to pronounce upon it.<sup>17</sup>

Moral concepts result from later rationalisations of pre-existing feelings, as Nietzsche says very clearly:

moral feelings are transmitted in this way: children observe in adults inclinations for and aversions to certain actions and, as born apes, *imitate* those inclinations and aversions [*Neigungen und Abneigungen*]; in later life they find themselves full of these acquired and well-exercised affects and consider it only decent to try to account for and justify them. [In]

(Bernard Williams, 'Introduction' to *The Gay Science* (*GS*), trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, with poems trans. by Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. x–xi).

15 *GS*, 'To the Mistral. A Dance Song'.

16 Williams, 'Introduction', p. xi (quoted in n. 14 on p. 267).

17 *Daybreak* (*D*), trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[t]his 'accounting', however, [. . .] all one is doing is complying with the rule that, as a rational being, one has to have reasons for one's For and Against, and that they have to be adducible and acceptable reasons.

This suggests that in making moral judgements we redescribe something whose origin is different: affects and inclinations which are not rationally acquired. One warms to certain actions and character-types and shudders at others, but not in fact for any reason. Elsewhere Nietzsche extends the picture of the origins of moral judgement, in the pithy parenthetical remark 'only feelings, not thoughts, are inherited',<sup>18</sup> and in the saying that 'We still draw the conclusions of judgements we consider false, of teachings in which we no longer believe – our feelings make us do it.'<sup>19</sup>

The next section of *Daybreak*, however, complicates the picture in two ways. First, feelings are not fundamental: they are in no sense an absolute or unconditioned origin, because they have a hidden source in earlier judgements. Second, inherited feelings are of dubious value to the individuals who feel them. Here is the whole of *Daybreak* section 35:

*Feelings and their origination in judgements.* – 'Trust your feelings!' – But feelings are nothing final or original; behind feelings there stand judgements and evaluations which we inherit in the form of feelings (inclinations, aversions). The inspiration born of a feeling is the grandchild of a judgement – and often of a false judgement! – and in any event not a child of your own! To trust one's feelings – means to give more obedience to one's grandfather and grandmother and their grandparents than to the gods which are in *us*: our reason and our experience.

A similar thought, lengthening the time-span still further, is expressed in *The Gay Science*: 'You still carry around the valuations of things that originate in the passions and loves of former centuries!'<sup>20</sup>

Finally, let us recall a much-quoted passage from *Daybreak* in which Nietzsche illuminates his aims in revaluing the values of morality:

I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises [. . .] It goes without saying that I do not deny – unless I am a fool – that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*. We have to *learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*.<sup>21</sup>

18 My translation of *nur Gefühle, aber keine Gedanken erben sich fort* (D: 30).

19 D: 99.

20 GS: 57.

21 D: 103.

These passages together present an interplay between moral feelings (affects, inclinations, aversions) and moral thought (judgements, concepts, reasons) with a number of strands. Our current morality is a rationalisation of positive and negative feelings that are inherited from former moral judgements, which themselves were the rationalisation of earlier feelings. And Nietzsche's aim would be to bring it about that some of his readers 'feel differently', that is, feel different inclinations and aversions from those they now feel while party to the practice of moral evaluation. Notice that to feel differently one would not need to become attached to different *objects* and repelled by different *objects*. The contrary is often tacitly assumed by critics of Nietzsche: that he wishes us to be *for* the things moral judges are generally *against*: violence, oppression, disregard for others, or whatever it might be. In *Daybreak* he informs us that this is not necessarily the outcome of his envisaged project. Rather, if one is against violence or oppression in future, one will be against it in that one feels a different form of aversion towards it – very speculatively, one's attitude might become contempt in place of righteous indignation, shame instead of blame, ridicule or distaste rather than anger. What one would not feel are the aversions or positive attractions characteristic of someone who judges events, agents, or things as morally good or morally evil. For Nietzsche's 'feeling differently' has as a necessary condition the abandonment of the practice of judging things morally good or evil. As he puts it, we have to learn to think differently in order to feel differently.

Questions arise – Would it not be undesirable for human beings (or even some human beings) to lose their distinctly moral inclinations and aversions? To what extent would this loss really be possible? – but for now I wish simply to ask: how would Nietzsche think that his envisaged end, this change in inclinations and aversions, could be brought about, and how might his own writing contribute to that end? And here is a programme that would at least make sense: detach people from their practice of making moral judgements, thereby enabling them to feel non-moral inclinations and aversions. How to detach people from making moral judgements? Show them the inherited affects of which these judgements are the *post facto* rationalisations. How to show people the affects they have inherited? Provoke affective responses in them, and invite them to reflect on the explanation for their having them.

How would this work if applied to the particular example of *GM I*? Nietzsche's target for re-evaluation here is the pair of concepts 'good' and 'evil', which are used in making moral judgements about persons, their actions and other states (such as character-traits and emotions). According to the narrative he gives, there was a time when there was no pair of concepts 'good' and 'evil', and morality as such did not exist. There were modes of evaluation, but they were not, strictly speaking, moral (despite his occasional use of the expression 'noble morality' for what precedes morality

proper).<sup>22</sup> The pair of concepts 'good' and bad' originally existed, forming the basis of a noble or aristocratic form of evaluation: the good are those who are capable, strong, powerful, those to be admired for what they have and are; the bad are simply those who no one would have wanted to be if he or she had the power – the weak, the incapable, the subservient. The story Nietzsche tells is well known in outline. Morality was an invention in human history, and the driving force behind this invention was the class of people who were weak and marginal according to the aristocratic value-system. Morality resulted from a Judaeo-Christian 'slave-revolt' which creatively fashioned a new pair of values, and finally convinced even the powerful that to exercise their power over others weaker than themselves was 'evil', and that to be powerless – or not to exercise power – was 'good'.

At the earlier stage of the history we are asked to imagine here prominent affects are at work – hatred, thirst for revenge (see esp. *GM I*: 8) and *ressentiment*: 'The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who recover their losses only through an imaginary revenge' (*GM I*: 10). The morality of 'good' and 'evil' is a conceptual construction which meets the need for an affective release of hatred and revenge indirectly, not by attacking or defeating the hated object, but by redescribing it according to a new system of concepts.

The passage we quoted above concerning 'uncaged beasts of prey' is part of Nietzsche's description of the 'nobles' in this narrative about the origins of 'good' and 'evil'. What sometimes goes unnoticed is the complexity of the affective response Nietzsche prompts to this description. The nobles, as he here describes them, are 'monsters', their behaviour is 'hideous', their lightheartedness 'appalling', their effect one of 'horror'.<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche also conspicuously uses words such as 'splendid' – but he knows that his reader will be horrified and appalled. Or indeed the reader's response may also be mixed. And this is, I think, what Nietzsche hopes to elicit – for soon he talks of 'the contradiction posed by the glorious but likewise so gruesome, so violent world of Homer' which the later poet Hesiod had to process into separate eras, the age of gold and the age of bronze, in order to make a more comfortable historical narrative. If it was already hard for Hesiod to integrate admiration and terror, it has surely become very difficult for the modern, post-Christian reader. But this mixture of affects is what Nietzsche encourages: 'who would not a hundred times sooner fear if he might at the same time admire, than *not* fear?'

Readers will be indignant about the nobles as Nietzsche describes them. They will react with fear and disquiet, and moreover a disquiet that, on behalf

22 Cf. *GM I*: 10 and especially *Beyond Good and Evil (BGE)* 260. The line I am following is that of Maudemarie Clark in 'Nietzsche's immoralism and the concept of morality', in Richard Schacht ed. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, pp. 15–34.

23 See *GM I*: 11.



of the victims, gives rise to a desire to judge the nobles' behaviour wrong. Nietzsche must know this because he knows that the value system that originated with those who feared and recoiled from the nobles 'has been victorious'.<sup>24</sup> The reader's cultural inheritance includes this reactive value system, and so its characteristic aversions are likely to be salient in the reader's response. Thus Nietzsche prompts the reader to become conscious of himself or herself as an inheritor of affects whose origin is 'slavish'. But he does not leave matters there. In particular, note two further effects on the reader that he provides for in *GM I*: (1) The reader is given the opportunity to become conscious of himself or herself as the inheritor of some attitudes more in line with a noble mode of evaluation. (2) The reader is encouraged to question the polarised affective responses he or she has towards elements in the narrative: in particular, the reader is later encouraged to recognise that slave morality shares the same ultimate origin as the noble mode of evaluation, and to reorient his or her feelings accordingly.

On the first point compare *Beyond Good and Evil* 260:

in all the higher and more mixed cultures there also appear attempts at mediation between these two moralities, and yet more often the interpretation and mutual misunderstanding of both, and at times they occur directly alongside each other – even in the same human being, within a *single* soul.

So someone who winces at the description of the nobles in *GM I* might also be someone whose reaction is tinged with a kind of admiration or awe. Similarly, Nietzsche points up the complexity of our likely reaction to the 'slave-revolt' against the nobles. If we feel contempt at the weakness and hypocrisy of the slaves as portrayed in the narrative, we may also admire them for the creative act which changes history, the 'truly great politics of revenge'<sup>25</sup> which creates values, and makes mankind interesting.

The second point, about questioning the polarised nature of our responses, can best be elucidated by pointing to another passage in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

'How could anything originate out of its opposite?' [. . .] The fundamental faith of the metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values* [. . .] [But] it might even be possible that what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things – maybe even one with them in essence. Maybe!<sup>26</sup>

24 *GM I*: 7.

25 *GM I*: 8. See also *GM I*: 10 and 6.

26 *BGE*: 2, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

Nietzsche is only pretending to be tentative here, for *GM I* provides a clear example of his last point. Morality is founded on a fundamental opposition between 'good' and 'evil', but the essay locates the origin of the 'good' in just the same kind of drive to dominate as is abhorred under the description 'evil'. The difference is that in the 'good' the drive to dominate is overlain with mendacity and ends up justifying itself with metaphysics. That is why, as I shall argue, in the rhetorical climax of the essay (*GM I*: 14), a glimpse into the way the ideal of the good is manufactured fills the reader (or the reader's representative, 'Mr Rash and Curious') with disgust. Barbaric domination over others makes us uneasy; a value-system whose origin is in a drive to domination over others, but which pretends that its origin is in something 'higher', should trouble us as much, or more.

#### IV Nietzsche's dialogue with 'Mr Rash and Curious'

Section 14 of *GM I* is a good example of Nietzsche's use of artistic methods in pursuit of his diagnostic and therapeutic aims. He invents a character with whom the essay's narrative voice suddenly enters into comic dialogue. It is like calling for a volunteer from the audience: 'Would anyone like to go down and take a look into the secret of how they *fabricate ideals* on earth? Who has the courage to do so?' The supposed volunteer is addressed as *mein Herr Vorwitz und Wagehals* – rendered by translators variously as Mr Rash and Curious,<sup>27</sup> Mr Nosy Daredevil,<sup>28</sup> Mr Daredevil Curiosity,<sup>29</sup> or Mr Wanton-Curiosity and Daredevil.<sup>30</sup> The narrator affects to send this member of the public down into a fetid, cavernous workshop, reminiscent of Wagner's Nibelheim, where morality is cobbled together by shadowy, stunted creatures brimming with *ressentiment*. The authorial voice receives reports from the front-line emissary as if from the safety of surface daylight, goading him on until what he witnesses becomes unbearable and he demands to be returned to the open air.

This is a striking, virtuosic piece of writing, but also perhaps a good example of the embarrassment commentators can feel through apparently having no purchase on why it might benefit Nietzsche to write in this way. I assume that virtually everyone who writes about Nietzsche, from undergraduates on, has read the passage. It has scathing humour, deadly similes, a novel dramatic structure and great rhetorical power. So why are it and its role in the Essay as a whole not remarked upon more frequently? The very power of the imagery in the little drama may be inhibiting to interpreters. Aaron Ridley has called it 'one of Nietzsche's less attractive passages'.<sup>31</sup> Most

27 Kaufmann and Hollingdale translation (see n. 2 above).

28 Carol Diethe's translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

29 Douglas Smith's translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

30 Translation by Clark and Swensen (see n. 1 above).

31 *Nietzsche's Conscience: Six Character Studies from the 'Genealogy'* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 25.

commentators apparently say nothing. The simplest explanation, once again, is that people believe Nietzsche goes too far in this section and becomes unnecessarily unpleasant – so best not mention it. (Delving a little deeper, if we are right in finding here some echo of the sweatshops of the Nibelungs in *Das Rheingold*, familiar worries about the anti-semitism of Wagner’s symbolism may intrude, and threaten to render the least subtle of Nietzsche’s similes in this section, where as narrator he speaks of ‘these artists of black magic who produce white, milk, and innocence out of every black [. . .] cellar animals full of revenge and hate’, unbearably nauseating, especially in view of later anti-semitic propaganda. In fact, the target group for revulsion is quite clearly Christians, albeit as inheritors of the Jewish revolution in values.)

Whatever the reasons behind the comparative neglect of *Herr Vorwitz und Wagehals*, I would like now to examine the *Genealogy*’s First Essay precisely from the perspective of the section in which he features. It could be regarded as the rhetorical climax of the whole Essay, first because, after only one more section (*GM* I: 15) that offers corroboration in Christian texts for what Mr Rash and Curious discovers, Nietzsche rounds off with ‘Let us conclude’ (*GM* I: 16) – and second because of its heightened tone and emotional urgency, which might support the contention that this above all is the passage of *tempo feroce* in which the gruesome detonations are to occur and the new truth become visible.

What does Nietzsche achieve in casting section 14 in this vivid, dramatic form? My answer, in outline, is twofold. I suggest (1) that Nietzsche here completes the transformation of the Essay from a past-directed enquiry into a critique whose focus is the here and now, the present attitudes of his reader; (2) that his emotive rhetoric aims at harnessing the reader’s own disquiet over the untrammelled exercise of power by the overtly powerful – a disquiet he elicited and carefully nurtured earlier in the Essay – and converting it into a still greater disquiet over the covert desire to exercise power that drives Christianity and the post-Christian moral attitudes which are likely to persist in the reader. Nietzsche uses this dramatic characterisation to enact disgust on the reader’s behalf.

The fact of dramatisation itself switches attention to a present shared by the author and his interlocutor. But there are other contributory features with a similar effect: the section talks very much of ‘here’ and ‘now’ – ‘now for the first time I hear’, says Mr Rash and Curious at one point. There is an emphasis on what can be detected immediately by the senses: ‘the view [. . .] is unobstructed here’, ‘I don’t see anything, but I hear all the more’, ‘it [. . .] stinks of sheer lies’, ‘I’ll open my ears again (oh! oh! oh! and close my nose)’. And since Mr Rash and Curious is explicitly ‘anyone’ who is brave enough to investigate the murkier parts of the psyche, he must be read as the representative of you and me, the present readers of Nietzsche’s text.

Mr Rash and Curious perceives the affective states of the fabricators of the ideal of the good – their fear, hate, misery, revenge, hope, comfort – and his

own affective reaction is shown through the sustained metaphor of smell, stink, 'Bad air!': he is disgusted. But what disgusts him most are the lies involved in fabricating the ideal of the good. The desires that are born out of the affective states of the oppressed are for revenge, justice, judgement, kingdom – in short, power over those that oppress them. Frustrated by lack of actual power, but still desiring it, the Christian fabricates two things: a redescription in which failure to exercise power in this world has positive value ('weakness is to be lied into a *merit* [...] fearful baseness into "humility"; subjection to those one hates into "obedience" and so on), and a fantasy revenge located in another world 'beyond' this one. So Mr Rash and Curious realises (enacts for us the realisation of) what Nietzsche has elsewhere said about opposites: that 'what constitutes the value of these good and revered things is precisely that they are insidiously related, tied to, and involved with these wicked, seemingly opposite things – maybe even one with them in essence' – the basis for the Christian system of values is no different from that of the noble mode of evaluation: it resides in the tendency towards power.

## V Conclusion

Let us finally ask how the rhetoric of *GM I* – according to our partial and schematic account of it – would engage with the reader's moral feelings and moral evaluations in the manner discussed above. While initially directed towards investigating past stages of history, the reader has been prompted to feel anxiety at the untrammelled exercise of power by the nobles, and to experience the urge to condemn this exercise of power as wrong. The reader receives an explanation of his or her aversion to the nobles: it exists because of the invention of a moral system of value-concepts 'good' and 'evil' which the reader has inherited – but the explanatory basis of this system of concepts is once again affective, in that it arises out of the fear, hatred, *ressentiment* and the power-drive of the oppressed. That is one part of the mechanism for detaching the reader from making moral judgements, preparing the way eventually for what Nietzsche called 'feeling differently' on the part of the reader. The second part of this mechanism of detachment is the attempt to elicit at the same time an affective inclination in favour of the nobles, to show that one has also inherited from earlier value-systems an excitement and attraction for heroism, prowess and the exercise of power with aristocratic disdain. (A moment's reflection on some elements of contemporary popular culture might suggest that this is indeed a long-lasting and stubborn inheritance.) So our inheritance is mixed: at the same time we fear and admire, condemn and wish to emulate. Nietzsche's reader might be pictured as reflecting as the Essay progresses: 'Suppose I adhere to the concepts "good" and "evil" because I have inherited certain inclinations and aversions from a prior stage of development in which forming the concepts "good" and "evil" answered

the affective needs of *ressentiment*. Suppose that I also recognize in myself some inclination – mixed with aversion – towards the noble mode of being and valuing. Do I wish to continue adhering to the system of judging according to the concepts “good” and “evil”?”

Then the culmination of Nietzsche’s rhetoric in *GM I*, 14 functions to prompt in the reader a new and decisive affective reaction. Already averse to actions driven by the desire for power over others (because of his or her ‘slavish’ Christian inheritance), the reader is now led to understand how a desire for power also truly explains the invention of the categories ‘good’ and ‘evil’. As I have said, Nietzsche enacts disgust on the reader’s behalf, but it is a disgust with a specific and complex object: *that a system of values which exists to fulfil (in imagination) the drive towards power should falsely pass itself off as in opposition to the drive towards power*. At this point Mr Rash and Curious shouts ‘Enough! Enough!’ Nietzsche perhaps hoped that evoking this disgust might be enough to break the reader’s allegiance to judging things good or evil, preparing the way one day for new combinations of affects for and against that he would regard as healthier.<sup>32</sup>

32 I wish to acknowledge the assistance from the Arts and Humanities Research Board and Birkbeck College which allowed me research leave to complete this paper.

## Art, expression and morality

Colin Lyas

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This view should teach one profound humility, one deserves no credit for anything. [N]or ought one to blame others.

(Darwin)<sup>1</sup>

I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises [. . .] I [. . .] deny immorality: *not* that countless people *feel* themselves to be immoral, but that there is any *true* reason so to feel. It goes without saying that I do not deny – unless I am a fool – that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*. We have to *learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*.

(Nietzsche)<sup>2</sup>

English moral philosophy, with a few honourable exceptions, offers the gloomy spectacle of a *danse macabre*, in which the personnel of the familiar triangle of deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics, come, in an eternal recurrence, successively centre stage, remaining there with all the stability and conviction of post-war French governments. And stability has no more been given to this *mise-en-scène* by the lend-lease of such American coinages as moral realism, than permanence was given to French political life by the Marshall Plan. Something, Nietzsche remarked, is up with morality, but one searches in vain the bulk of anglophone moral philosophy for any sustained engagement with that possibility.

1 *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836–1844*, transcribed and ed. Paul H. Barrett, Peter, J. Gautrey, Sandra Herbert, David Kohn and Sydney Smith (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 608.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, intro. Michael Tanner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 60 (section 103).

Matters are no better when one thinks of discussions of the relation between art and morality. At one time this consisted in slow motion wrestling between something called ‘aestheticism’, which often seemed to provide artists with a justification for being moral cretins, and ‘moralism’, which seemed often to provide non-artists with a justification for being artistic cretins. Some have now attempted to steer between these twin perils by offering something called ‘moderate moralism’, according to which moral considerations are indeed a consideration in something called the ‘evaluation’ of art, although not the only consideration. But if something is up with morality, then something is up with moderate moralism.

One way to articulate the notion that something is up with morality might be through the thought that morality is always expressive of the culture in which it is embedded, as the ethics of Aristotle, Kant, Mill and Alasdair MacIntyre clearly are. But then we cannot foreclose on the possibility that we have available to us morality transcending possibilities of judging those cultural expressions. One extreme form such a reaction might take is to suspect that something is up not merely with this or that individual morality but with the notion of morality itself. Wollheim, for example, tantalisingly writes of ‘an issue that most philosophers profess to find far less serious than I do, and that is whether there really is such a thing as morality, or whether it is a dream, or perhaps a nightmare’.<sup>3</sup> ‘I deny morality’, as Nietzsche somewhat more fulminantly put it, ‘as I deny alchemy’.<sup>4</sup> We may, then, need, as Nietzsche put it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to oppose completely ‘the moral interpretation and significance of existence’.<sup>5</sup> Since Michael Tanner is one of the few to have addressed these issues in any sustained way, I shall conduct my discussion by examining the story he has provocatively told in writing of Wagner and Nietzsche.<sup>6</sup>

To begin with, the story embraces the possibility that an artist can, as much as any philosopher, meditate illuminatingly on the nature of human life. Thus Wagner’s works ‘constitute [. . .] a sustained investigation, often amounting to downright critique, of what love may be, and of what it is we seek when we seek redemption’ (W: 40).

Second, that possibility is what makes it possible, for those temperamentally so disposed, ‘to think about the issues of our lives in terms which are in large part provided for us by great art’ (W: 210).

3 Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. x.

4 Nietzsche, loc. cit.

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 8 (‘Attempt at a self-criticism’, section 5).

6 Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (London: Flamingo, 1997) and *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Page references to these works are given in the text as ‘W’ and ‘N’ respectively.

Third, meditations by artists can be not merely illuminating but, in addition, deeply transforming. Tanner writes:

For many people the gorgeous fabric of Wagner's music [. . .] is an object of contemplation in itself. But it is also possible, while being saturated by it, to have one's vision of things transformed, at any rate for a time. The world can seem to be different, and not in a merely metaphysically fairy-tale way. One can be led to interrogate the categories by which one normally experiences, and to ponder those vexing questions about what matters most.

(W: 208–9)

However, problems now arise. First, where are we to draw the line between art and philosophy?

Nietzsche undermines us by his extraordinary conceptual juxtapositions, forcing us, by the invention of myths of masters and slaves, to see ourselves as the outcome of a disastrous process which he alleges is historical. And yet, despite the evident absence of hard data to support his claims, his depiction of the sterility of our lives is so compelling that we accept him in a way which we would normally reserve for the communications of a consummate artist. Wagner is a consummate artist, but often seems to impel us to talk about him as though he were a philosopher. In the best writing about both of them, the barrier between philosophy and art is overcome, or discarded.

(W: 208)

Second, what exactly do we get from Wagner by way of a view of life? And, third, what possibilities are there for being transformed by art?

Wagner may be more dangerous [sc. than Nietzsche] in making us feel what it would be like to live with a radically different set of values. Of course it is extremely unlikely that we shall [. . . w]hen we meditate upon the price we would pay [. . .] we are overcome and decide that discretion is the wiser course. And even if we didn't come to that conclusion, how would we begin to change our lives, and where would the change start?

(W: 209)

## I

Let us make a start with the claim that works of art can be the places where, in ways complicatedly related to artistic greatness, serious thinking about central concerns of human life can go on. Tanner now adds a point not special to Wagner. That works of art contain such meditations enables those of us



who are temperamentally so inclined 'to think about the issues of our lives in terms which are in large part provided for us by great art' (W: 210).

There is a more and a less interesting version of this. The less interesting points out that we use material from the arts by way of helping people to see some aspect of their cultural surroundings. If I refer to the Prime Minister as the Uriah Heep of politics, I hope to get my audience to recognise him as an instance of a particular fictional realisation of a mixture of ingratiating and self-will used as a means to power and its retention. And if someone sees the aptness of that, then I have produced illumination.

If I think of this as less interesting it is for two reasons. First, it is not clear how this is anything special to art. For I might as well take non-artistic examples to produce illumination, as I might if I referred to Anthony Giddens as the Giovanni Gentile of the Third Way or, as Quinton did, to Wittgenstein as the Stalin of analytic philosophy. Second, these are cases in which we achieve a passing illumination of some aspect of the circumambient cultural milieu. Tanner, however, is after something far more profound. He has in mind the kind of thinking provided by art which can transform the *whole* of our existence. For, although 'the gorgeous fabric of Wagner's music [. . .] is an object of contemplation in itself [. . .] it is also possible, while being saturated by it, to have one's vision of things transformed' (W: 208–9).

I recognise the phenomenon of which Tanner is speaking. What are less clear are the roots of that transforming and illuminating capacity of art. It is here that I find the beginning of the thread in the intuition that art is something to do with expression.

## II

Any account of expression is best approached by way of a central passage from Croce's *Estetica*:

In common language the term 'expression' refers equally to the words of a poet, the notes used by a composer, the figures used by a painter, and to the blushing cheeks that accompany feelings of shame, the pallor that accompanies fear, the grinding of the teeth typical of violent anger, the shining eyes and the particular movements of the muscles of the mouth that display cheerfulness [. . .] But, in truth, between a man in the grip of rage, displaying all the natural signs of this state, and another man who aesthetically expresses his rage: between the appearance, the cries and the writhings of one who is torn by grief for the loss of a loved one, and the same person who at another time portrays in words or song his torment; between the grimace arising from a disturbance in the organism, and the gesture of an actor; there lies an abyss.<sup>7</sup>

7 Benedetto Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 106.

This shows a clear grasp of the difference, much later explored by Grice, between natural and non-natural meaning, the difference, for example, between saying ‘Those spots mean measles’ and saying ‘Those three rings mean that the bus is full.’<sup>8</sup>

Given that there are two uses of the term ‘expression’, one corresponding to what is conveyed by an expression which has natural meaning, and one which corresponds to what is conveyed by an expression with non-natural meaning, Croce identifies non-natural expression and art. Think, here, of the difference between one who kicks in a shop window as a natural expression of an overwhelming fit of rage and one who, having thus broken the window, then deliberately starts making adjustments to it until prepared to say ‘that captures how I feel’. The former is in the grip of emotion, the latter eventually has the emotion in his or her grip.

Croce stresses that an expressive work can express and clarify the inner life of one who understands it as much as it can the life of one who makes it. ‘Great artists,’ he remarks, ‘reveal us to ourselves.’<sup>9</sup> The character who read out Auden’s ‘Song for Hedli Anderson’ in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* did so not because it was what *Auden* might have felt, but because that poem helped *him* to articulate what *he* felt. It is painful to feel inarticulate. To find an articulation is to relieve that pain, which is why expression in art is of a piece with such mechanisms of the mind as projection that help the individual to achieve, restore or impose internal order.

### III

What I have said about expression has, to begin with, implications for the puzzlement Tanner declares about the boundary between art and philosophy. To recall:

Nietzsche undermines us by his extraordinary conceptual juxtapositions, forcing us, by the invention of myths of masters and slaves, to see ourselves as the outcome of a disastrous process which he alleges is historical. And yet, despite the evident absence of hard data to support his claims, his depiction of the sterility of our lives is so compelling that we accept him in a way which we would normally reserve for the communications of a consummate artist. Wagner is a consummate artist, but often seems to impel us to talk about him as though he were a philosopher. In the best writing about both of them, the barrier between philosophy and art is overcome, or discarded.

(W: 208)

8 H. P. Grice, ‘Meaning’, *Philosophical Review* 66, 1957, 337–88.

9 Croce, op. cit., p. 15.

This prompts two thoughts.

The first has to do with the question what art is. The debate about the definition of art has always been cast as a debate about how to distinguish, *within* the class of things that we make, between those that are art and those that are not. We might wonder about this. The essence of the account of expression, as I have presented it, lies in the notion that by finding an expression we bring to clarity the inchoate within us. The next tempting step is to look for a way of subdividing cases in which we find clarity into those which are art and those which are not. But that does not look plausible: there do not seem to be different ways of bringing the inchoate within us to clarity. A bolder alternative is simply to treat all activities of expression as art, as the manifold ways by which we make sense of the world. Then we arrive precisely at the position adopted by Croce himself:

The total difference, then, is a difference of degree and, as such, is a matter of indifference to philosophy [. . .] When it comes to expressing fully a particular and complex state of soul some have a greater aptitude, a readier bent, than others: and these are called, in current language, ‘artists’: some rather more complex and difficult expressions are more rarely attained, and these are called ‘works of art’. The boundaries between the expressions–institutions that are called ‘art’ and those that are commonly called ‘not-art’ are purely empirical [. . .] An epigram belongs with art: why not a simple word? A novel belongs with art: why not a brief item in a newspaper? A landscape painting belongs with art: why not a topographical sketch?<sup>10</sup>

To take this line is to have one answer to the question that Tanner raises about the relationship between what Nietzsche is doing, which is called philosophy, and what Wagner is doing, which is called art. For we will recognise that what they are both doing is bringing certain thoughts about human life and culture to expression. That for whatever reason we refer to the one as an artist and the other as a philosopher is, as Croce would have put it, an accidental matter.

But there is a second aspect of this. One of the striking things about a successful expression is the sense of recognition with which it comes. When we find it, or when others find it for us, we say things like ‘That’s it.’ We have the sense that what is expressed was in some sense already known to us. This is commonplace in the case of art. But now, on one view, the matter is no different in philosophy. For we might contrast the Russell/Quine view of philosophy, which treats it as a species of science in which philosophical problems are solved by finding out new things, with the view of philosophy to be found in the later work of Wittgenstein, according to which

10 Croce, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15.

philosophical problems are solved by finding reminders that make articulate for us what we already knew.<sup>11</sup> But on that account it becomes very difficult to see wherein lies any difference in kind between the illumination that is produced by philosophical articulations and that produced by artistic articulations.

#### IV

I come now to the most intriguing elements of the story that I think to be implicit in Tanner's account of art and morality. I take it that we are to learn something from Wagner, and what we are to learn is to transform us. I begin with a key figure in Tanner's account, a self that is seeking answers from a position of discontent and which is to be transformed.

Often, in adumbrating their accounts of art, those given to talk of such things as disinterestedness and suspension of belief talk as if it were necessary, if we are properly to respond to art, to put aside our quotidian selves and in some kind of detached way engage with the work in imaginative exercise. That recipe seems to me to be incoherent on both psychological and logical grounds. How am I to understand, let alone judge, if I put aside *my* understanding and my powers of discrimination? Tanner takes an entirely different line. We bring our whole selves to a work, with our lasting obsessions and our transient concerns.

The self that Tanner speaks of as engaging with Wagner is an autobiographical self, but it is one that many of us share, namely a self that is on a quest. It is trying to come to terms with love and loss, sin and redemption, and it is trying to develop a coherent posture in the face of them. It is a self that is not entirely happy with the state of culture, particularly its smallness. It has a sense of the 'sterility' of much of modern life (W: 208). It suspects that it ought to be possible to live by an entirely different set of values (W: 209). It is a self that is constantly challenged to ask itself whether the decisions made in order to be civilised are the right ones.

And it aspires very high, asking whether 'the agonies of desire, of willing, couldn't be dealt with by a whole new way of living, one in which people [...] might find fulfilment rather than a kind of compromised respite' (W: 206). The questions are big ones, for example, whether it is 'possible to live a completely fulfilled existence' (W: 205). At the root of those discontents seems to be something that is captured in the following passage:

It is deeply embarrassing to be asked so insistently what we count as most valuable, in other words what we are prepared to sacrifice in order to feel fulfilled. For we can only give a truthful reply by examining how much we care about our own satisfactions at the cost of other people's. The

11 See Essay XIII in G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Essays on the Philosophical Investigations Volume One* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

notorious self-centredness of Wagner's characters (not to mention his own) is most comfortably coped with by dismissing them as fantasies, hardly to be counted as members of a conceivably civilised society. We know that in order to co-exist we have to suppress much of what we would most like to express, and hardly want the issued reopened at this stage.

But that is exactly Wagner's point. His art is devoted to refusing to accept that the decisions we have made in order to be civilised were the right ones. In this he is, of course, at one with the Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals*.

(W: 207)

We have here a characterisation of our discontents as flowing from a tension between what we want for ourselves and what we feel we owe to others, where to give what we owe to others is to give up something that we want for ourselves. That this is a correct diagnosis of our condition, seems to flow inevitably from the fact that we are born as an unsocialised collection of wants and needs which we are taught to restrain according to the bounds set by the social limits recognised by those who, however minimally and inadequately, nurture us. And what Wagner and Tanner are about here is, therefore, what philosophy has always been about: given that we feel we suppress ourselves in the interests of social peace and quiet, and given that this is a source of unhappiness to us, what is to be done? That was what Plato was concerned with when meditating on the contrary pulls of reason and desire, and what Rousseau was concerned with when he described us as born free but everywhere in chains.

That gives us the seeker who encounters the great artist and learns and is, possibly, transformed. What, now, might be learned, for example, from the other self in the artistic transaction, the artist and, in this case, Wagner? Here various things are offered. First, we might learn the details of *Wagner's* meditation on certain obsessive, 'eternal and recurring' (W: 205) human concerns. A reaction to this might be, if one is oneself engaged upon a deep and passionate quest for some kind of understanding of those recurrent difficulties, to welcome and admire evidence of serious and original thinking about those matters in others, and to rate highly that art which manifested such qualities.

Second, we encounter a descriptive diagnosis of certain shortcomings of our culture: Wagner, Tanner writes, like Nietzsche, 'found intolerable the smallness of contemporary life, its preoccupation with matters which would obviously shrink our souls still further. His life's work is a continuous effort to show how we might gain or regain the dimensions of mystery and potentiality which are certainly missing in a secular age' (W: 203). Here art as expression will have a role to play: for it is not unlikely that the unease that prompts our search is in various ways inchoate. To encounter an artistic

expression of them can be to be illuminated. What one uneasily felt to be something amiss with one's culture, is now brought to expression for us. When that happens, one will be moved to assent to the descriptive diagnoses that are offered of our current cultural maladies. It will not be enough, of course, in some kind of shoot-from-the-hip manner, simply to take them on because one is overwhelmed by their impressive statement. Only having thought long and hard about a culture, perhaps having been prompted to do so by these diagnoses, is one entitled to one's, always revisable, assent. And we assent as people who have internalised that culture and made it ours. That is why we only need reminders.

All this is to say that Wagner contributes to our hard thinking about important things and brings us to a certain sort of recognition of our culture. But more than that is sometimes hinted. For there is also the suggestion that Wagner suggests answers, confronted with which one may be transformed. I first look at the answers and then at the problems that Tanner raises about the notion of transformation.

## V

Here I note that Tanner finds at least two illuminating things in Wagner's treatment of the conflict between the personal and the social. One, which concerns *Tristan and Isolde*, is negative. The other, which has to do with the *Ring*, is positive. The former reminds us that one sort of illumination that art might give is illumination about what may not be possible for us.

Here the instructive case is the philosophy of Schopenhauer, whose work struck Wagner with 'the force of revelation'. For Wagner came to Schopenhauer vexed, as we have seen, by the problem of the relation between self and society. His question was:

What do we need, if anything, in terms of social context, for our deepest and most peremptory urgings [. . .] to be satisfied? Could one realise what matters most in isolation from society? And if not, what are the conditions that the society needs to possess for the individual's fulfilment?

(W: 104)

The relevance of Schopenhauer to his answer is that on that philosopher's account the very evils of life against which we kick are based on 'the principle of individuation', the illusion that there *are* separate selves. For Schopenhauer, to use Tanner's words:

We think that we are selves, but that is our worst mistake. For at the merely ethical level it leads to egoism and malice, the first being the illusion that we can thrive at the expense of other people, the second that we can hurt other people without hurting ourselves [. . .] each person has to

achieve his own salvation by negating his own will, finally by realising that there is not a genuine 'he' to be counted among the items of ultimate reality. Social relations are of no interest, except to the connoisseur of human folly.

(W: 105–6)

In *Tristan and Isolde* this philosophy is embodied in lovers who solve the problem of the relation between personal and public demands by 'explicitly reject[ing] the values of human society and the notion of selfhood' (W: 107). Hence expressions such as '*selbst dann bin ich die Welt*' in which the lovers claim to 'have expanded to embrace everything, or everything has contracted to satisfy their joint solipsism' (W: 142).

Two things are now important. First, we learn something about a particular relationship between art and philosophy of life. Tanner remarks that Wagner can make us 'feel what it would be like to live with a radically different set of values' (W: 209). Schopenhauer may tell us that something is the case, but there is also the question of what, in detail, it would be like were that true. This is a matter of bringing out imaginatively the lived implications of a philosophical view, and only an imaginative work of art seems able to do that, the only other alternative being to find out the hard way by trying to live it.

But now the line between art and philosophy again seems to blur. For, and this seems to be the conclusion that Tanner draws about *Tristan and Isolde*, and the elements of Schopenhauer therein enshrined, it may turn out, when fully imagined, that the philosophy is unliveable (as Candide found the philosophy of Pangloss unliveable when he tried to live it, and as Camus found the philosophy of *The Myth of Sisyphus* incoherent as a way of living with totalitarianism). So, too, *Tristan and Isolde* 'takes what is, for many people, a covert doctrine, makes it tactlessly explicit, one of Wagner's specialities, and shows where it leads if taken with a seriousness which most people shy away from' (W: 152–3). In Wagner's own words, it seeks 'to erect a monument to this most beautiful of all dreams' (W: 153).

## VI

What of the positive message, which is explored, Tanner claims, above all, in the *Ring*? It amounts to this: Wagner 'had long felt [. . .] that the rule of law of the gods should be replaced by a society in which human beings were governed by the love they felt for one another' (W: 100). And the *Ring* was 'crucially concerned to show how we might move from a law-governed to a love-governed society' (W: 107). What sense is to be made of this contrast?

Let us begin with what may be contained in the notion of a distinction between a law- and a love-governed society. The notion of the law here seems to sort with the notion of the forbidden, what must not be done, what is laid

down to us. With it go the notions of choosing to accept or to refuse, and the notion of praise, blame and punishment being allotted in accordance to whether we obey or disobey. And whether the law-giver is Wotan, God, Mussolini, Freud's father-figure or any of their internalised Kantian versions, the logic of this is the same. And now we are told that Wagner explores the coherence of this as a form of life.

I want now to say why I think that Wagner was right to think that the government of law must be replaced. I do so by showing a possible incoherence in that notion, a proof of which might give substance to the suspicions about morality to which I earlier adverted.

The 'government of law' notion of morality is bound up with the notion of praising and, notably, blaming. It was indeed this that led Winch, in an important paper, to say that the narrower notion of punishment and the wider notion of morality are intricate. He says:

It is perfectly true that our punitive reactions are continuous with other, very fundamental, moral responses. It is also true that our penal concepts are intimately and subtly interwoven with our other moral concepts.<sup>12</sup>

But if blame is intrinsic to punishment and punishment is continuous with wider moral concepts, it follows that blame is intrinsic to the notion of morality. It follows, in turn, that to demonstrate the incoherence of the notion of blame would be to demonstrate not merely the incoherence of the notion of punishment, but the incoherence of the notion of morality itself.

The notion of punishment goes with the notion of extenuating circumstances, so that a punishment might be attacked because it did not take account of mitigating factors. Intrinsic to the notion of blame, then, is the notion of an extenuating circumstance which absolves one from blame. If, therefore, we had an argument that, for any action to which we might ascribe blame, extenuating circumstances can be given, then the notion of blame, and indeed the notion of extenuating circumstances become vacuous.

Here I have two arguments, one technical, one not so.

The technical argument, for the full deployment of which I must refer the reader to Wollheim's essay on the topic, centres around the notion of what Wollheim, borrowing from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, calls 'pale criminality'.<sup>13</sup> It begins with the striking fact, brought to our attention by Herbert Hart, that the death penalty may operate as a stimulus to murder. Hart writes:

Very large numbers of murderers are mentally unstable, and in them at least the bare thought of execution, the drama and notoriety of the trial,

12 Peter Winch, 'He's to blame', in D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch, *Attention to Particulars* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 163.

13 Richard Wollheim, 'Crime, punishment and pale criminality', in *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).



the gladiatorial element of the murderer fighting for his life, may operate as an attractive tone, not as a repulsive force.<sup>14</sup>

And Freud more generally writes of those who are criminals from a sense of guilt, of forbidden acts done because forbidden, where doing them, or being detected doing them brought mental relief. Winch, too, writes of ‘a kind of repentance which demands punishment as a vehicle of expiation’, adding that ‘it seems to me just to be a fact that some people do sometimes experience such a need, a fact which is made possible by the existence of the concept of punishment’.<sup>15</sup>

Freudians, such as Wollheim, now tell a technical story. First we are told:

Freud sought to restore intelligibility to these actions by proposing that the agent already, independently, suffered, consciously or unconsciously, from a heavy burden of guilt, and it was in order to lighten this burden that he embarked upon his course of criminal action. The action served the guilt in two distinct ways. In the first place, it gave the guilt, which up till then appeared to float free, something on which to suspend itself: it rationalised the guilt. Secondly, by bringing punishment in train, the action offered the guilt a way of dissipating itself: the guilt could not only be rationalised, it could be purged [. . .] And as to the origin of that sense of guilt [. . .] Freud had no difficulty in tracing it back to the incestuous and murderous wishes omnipotently entertained at the height of the Oedipal phase.<sup>16</sup>

So:

the criminal, in finding the punishment purgative, thinks of those from whom it comes as continuous with, or as persisting versions of, those against whom the original, the Oedipal, wishes were directed. He must, in other words, identify the authors or the agents of the penal authority with the internalised parental figures [. . .] once we have taken this first step [. . .] it is natural to go on to believe that he will identify the crime he commits with the early wishful assaults on the parents’ bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Hence:

one crucial reason why a breach of the law is identified with a renewed attack upon the parents is because the law and the parents are both, in the criminal’s perspective, punishing forces.<sup>18</sup>

14 H. L. A. Hart, *Punishment and Rationality: Essays in the Philosophy of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon 1968), p. 88, quoted in Wollheim, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

15 Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 220.

16 Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths*, pp. 114–15.

17 *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

18 *Ibid.*

Like Wollheim I am inclined to think that pale criminality, that state of mind which moves a murderer to do what is forbidden because it is forbidden, is an excusing condition. But suppose now, as Wollheim suggests, we ask whether pale criminality might be a feature central to every psychology, so that, as he puts it, we all 'have a disposition, which is bound up with what is deepest in us, to do what is forbidden, and to do it for that reason'.<sup>19</sup> But then two things would follow about the law, and about any law-analogous account of ethics. First, the law depends upon the fact that not all of us have any excusing condition all the time, and that, under the technical story, is simply false. Second the law, and ethics, tell us what we ought not to do, but their very structures of forbidding injunctions motivate those very actions. And so:

if pale criminality is central, the law is an institution that misrepresents us to ourselves. It abets self-deception or self-disavowal.<sup>20</sup>

A non-technical argument seems to me equally compelling. A spontaneous reaction to some horrendous crime is a wish to inflict harm on the perpetrator. But that wish can simply diminish as more and more facts about circumstance are known, until anger is replaced with pity, the law by compassion. A newspaper advertisement asks me for donations for the NSPCC. It shows me a small child, bruised, filthy and vilely abused, and I feel compassion. And yet, so my social worker friends tell me, perhaps in fifteen years time that child may itself perpetrate some revolting act. Ought that equally to merit understanding and compassion? (This is not to underestimate what Winch calls '[t]he moral and psychological difficulties [. . .] in the way of taking up a compassionate attitude in the face of really beastly wrongdoing (and of course the beastlier the wrongdoing, the greater the demand for compassion)').<sup>21</sup>

## VII

My discussion of the coherence of the notion of the law-based conception of ethics is not the kind of discussion one finds in an artist such as Wagner. The story I have told about ethics as law leaves out what it would actually feel like for the parties involved in this scenario. For that we go to art. There expressive illumination is given through the imaginative treatment of the shortcomings of the government of the law, where again we are *shown* what the effect on a being of living under the government of the law might be. There are examples galore in imaginative literature of someone who lives out the consequences of living under the ethics of law (Mrs Solness, for example). It is less common to have powerful and persuasive imaginative

19 Op. cit., p. 129.

20 Ibid.

21 Winch, *Ethics and Action*, p. 227.

depictions of what it would be like to be the law-giver, the source of value in the world, where the only justification for any order one chooses to give is that one has the power to give it. An imaginative depiction of this might, as much as any theoretical philosophising, serve to tilt one against a government of the law.

Thus, in one of the finest pieces of analysis in Tanner's *Wagner*, we are told that Wagner offers us, in the depiction of Wotan in Act II of *Die Walküre*, the awesome picture of the author of treaties who is 'now the slave of treaties', who can only ever find himself in what he effects (W: 125). There is no character to whom he can turn for redemption, since he, the source of everything, is implicit in every character created in his image. No more vivid depiction of the spiritual bankruptcy of the master in the master/slave relation could be given.

## VIII

To urge the replacement of the government of law with the government of love is bound up with some thorough-going revision of attitudes. At the least it will require a search for what Winch referred to, in an uneasy near-oxymoron, as 'forms which punishing the offender might take which are not expressions of hostility towards him'.<sup>22</sup>

What does not follow is that we need entirely lose the vocabulary of morals. We can still talk of betrayal, trust, honesty, courage, perseverance. But I am not sure that this will mean that morality will have survived. For what turns a notion like 'betrayal' into a moral notion is its necessary connection with a kind of disgust, and if understanding is likely to mitigate, if not remove entirely that disgust to replace it with compassion, then it becomes unclear that, even if betrayal survives, it will survive as a moral notion.

Nor does it follow that we will simply be able to wash our hands of what we do on the grounds that since we were formed we didn't really do it. The example of Oedipus reminds us that we cannot easily disclaim having done something on the grounds of ignorance, lack of intention or inherited disposition. More strikingly, the appalling present situation of Stalin's daughter should remind us that we can even feel badly for things we didn't in any way do. So, even if the notion of blame attenuates, the notion of remorse for what one has done does not. Tanner rightly suggests that many of the things in Wagner hover about the cases of people who did things with the consequences of which they must live for ever, unless in the government of love someone redeems them. The Dutchman, for example, 'has done something so terrible that he has to spend the rest of his existence looking for salvation' (W: 38).

<sup>22</sup> Winch, 'He's to blame', p. 163.

## IX

So we have a vision offered to us of the possibility of a transition from the crippling effects of the government of law to the liberating effects of the government of love. But that vision is meant to be transforming on those who encounter it in the work of the great artist. What are the possibilities of that?

There is, first, a practical difficulty:

Nietzsche tells us, imperiously and irresistibly, to think about the basis of our evaluations, and about our whole set of moral attitudes. Wagner may be more dangerous [. . .] in making us feel what it would be like to live with a radically different set of values. Of course it is extremely unlikely that we shall, just as it is extremely unlikely that even the most receptive reader of the Sermon on the Mount will give away all his possessions. The inertia of culture is immense, and when we meditate on the price we would pay, especially perhaps the price we would pay in our relations with the persons who matter most to us, we are overcome and decide that discretion is the wiser course.

(W: 209)

Second, there are difficulties with the notion that a work of art could totally transform us. Indeed, in his *Nietzsche*, Tanner represents that philosopher as simply ruling out that sort of change:

What he seems to dislike is every aspect of contemporary civilisation [. . .] His underlying view that if we do not make a drastically new start we are doomed, since we are living in the wreckage of two thousand and more years of fundamentally mistaken ideas about everything that matters [. . .] offers *carte blanche* to people who fancy the idea of a clean break with their whole cultural inheritance. Nietzsche was under no illusions about the impossibility of such a schism.

(N: 3–4)

And:

It is usually Nietzsche's distinction as a connoisseur of decadence to realise that among the other options is not that of wiping the slate clean. We need to have a self to overcome, and that self will be the result of the whole Western tradition.

(N: 53)

For we have to remember that the person who encounters the work comes to the work encultured, that is to say, with an identity in part constituted by inherited attitudes, norms and ways of making sense. It is simply unclear either that one could in a twinkling change all that for a new encultured

apparatus. For one thing, what would survive the transformation? In what way would that be *my* salvation?

But matters are more complicated than this. For when the new message that is to transform us is to be offered, we have no way of judging its suitability to our needs other than in terms of the valuation system that constitutes our social encultured identity. How then can it transform that self? It is that difficulty that Tanner is confessing to when he writes:

how does Wagner free us from the sense that a radically new moral vision – which is self-evidently necessary for us as much as for the inhabitants of the world of the *Ring* – is bound to be trapped in its own dialectic?  
(W: 127–8)

Indeed the matter may be put even more dramatically thus:

the *Ring* is about the corruption of present society [. . .] But the corruption of consciousness of the members of society is so pervasive that they are not in a position to appreciate what the *Ring* is telling them.  
(W: 96)

Two other avenues are explored to escape this conundrum. First, there is the thought that Wagner's music so seizes us that, like the Wedding Guest before the Ancient Mariner, we cannot choose but hear. It works because:

the art itself possessed such transcendent authority that it was able, at one blow, to sweep away the accumulated traditions by which we live, or by which, as it is now customary to say, we are 'constituted', and replace our old feelings with a set of new ones which are self-evidently superior [. . .] They do change it [our life] – or that is the idea.  
(W: 127–8)

But first, that looks like the sudden conversion account about which Tanner is rightly sceptical. Second, Tanner also notes that these moments of transport are not merely unthinking, but also can be momentary, and not possessed of self-authenticating reliability, hence the 'at least for a time' and the word 'seem' in the, by now familiar, passage:

For many people the gorgeous fabric of Wagner's music [. . .] is an object of contemplation in itself. But it is also possible, while being saturated by it, to have one's vision of things transformed, at any rate for a time.  
(W: 208–9)

The other possibility is, to use Neurath's famous image, to rebuild the ship plank by plank in mid-ocean so that Wagner's art, surprisingly, is 'something to live with and slowly be affected by' (W: 210).

But maybe we should acknowledge the possibility of another kind of conversion, one which I believe is not all that uncommon, though since it lacks the sensational qualities usually associated with conversions it can easily be overlooked. There is also the complication that what is gradual is thereby much less readily recognised.

(W: 209)

This looks more promising. For it does not follow from the fact that we are formed that we are stuck with what we are, and this for three reasons. First, not realising what we are like, we may be reminded of this or brought to see it. One powerful way in which this happens is by the kind of illumination brought to us in imaginative art. That shock may initiate change. Second, few of us are undivided. One form being divided takes is not wanting some of our wants (perhaps, as in the case of addiction, helplessly so). But that very contradiction can generate change. Third, we live as social beings, with others and that can motivate us to change. Winch writes:

One person may impinge upon another in such a way as to call into question for him his own conception of himself and of his place in the world. Human beings are essentially potential critics of each other.<sup>23</sup>

We have the power, and, I suspect, the need, and, because our lives unavoidably impact on others, the unavoidable occasion, to reflect on what is implicit in us. An engagement with art in all its forms may be a source of such reflection. In such a way, we may, for example, come to find the impulses to vengeance in ourselves incompatible with what we learn of the springs of human motivation, and so come to understand the impossibility for us of a government of the law. That reflection need not be self-consciously philosophical. It may, as Peter Winch argued, be something that a parable, an event in life, a picture, a particular encounter with another, a loss, or a huge range of other things may help us with.

Tanner writes ‘the relationship between artistic experience and reflection on it is a complex matter’ (W: 61). Even more so is the relation between artistic experience and reflection per se. I do not think we can engage with the greatest of art unless we bring to it a history of intense experience and reflection on experience. When we do so we may, as Tanner clearly does, see the quality of thought and imagination with which an artist has approached a set of problems which are our problems. And when we so approach a work, it can happen that the tide of influence is reversed. For the work can feed back into our reflections. For one thing, as I have indicated in talking about expression, it may make available to us in a clear form thoughts previously only inchoately felt. But, and here the example of Wotan may be

23 Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 180.

exemplary, it may bring home to us just what we have committed ourselves to in accepting a certain picture of morality, or (even to a hooligan) a certain kind of morality, and then we may not want any longer to live with that picture of morality or even that particular morality at all.

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