

# Chapter 5

## Artistic beauty

Only in the course of the nineteenth century, and in the wake of Hegel's posthumously published lectures on aesthetics, did the topic of art come to replace that of natural beauty as the core subject-matter of aesthetics. And this change was part of the great shift in educated opinion which we know as the romantic movement, and which placed the feelings of the individual, for whom self is more interesting than other and wandering more noble than belonging, at the centre of our culture. Art became the enterprise through which the individual announces himself to the world and calls on the gods for vindication. Yet it has proved singularly unreliable as the guardian of our higher aspirations. Art picked up the torch of beauty, ran with it for a while, and then dropped it in the pissoirs of Paris.

### Joking apart

A century ago Marcel Duchamp signed a urinal with the name 'R. Mutt', entitled it 'La Fontaine', and exhibited it as a work of art. One immediate result of Duchamp's joke was to precipitate an intellectual industry devoted to answering the question 'What is art?' The literature of this industry is as tedious as the never-ending imitations of Duchamp's gesture. Nevertheless, it has left a residue of scepticism. If anything can count as art, what is the point or the merit in achieving that label? All that is left is the

curious but unfounded fact that some people look at some things, others look at others. As for the suggestion that there is an enterprise of criticism, which searches for objective values and lasting monuments to the human spirit, this is dismissed out of hand, as depending on a conception of the art-work that was washed down the drain of Duchamp's 'fountain'.

The argument is eagerly embraced, because it seems to emancipate people from the burden of culture, telling them that all those venerable masterpieces can be ignored with impunity, that TV soaps are 'as good as' Shakespeare and Radiohead the equal of Brahms, since nothing is better than anything and all claims to aesthetic value are void. The argument therefore chimes with the fashionable forms of cultural relativism, and defines the point from which university courses in aesthetics tend to begin—and as often as not the point at which they end.

There is a useful comparison to be made here with jokes. It is as hard to circumscribe the class of jokes as it is the class of artworks. Anything is a joke if somebody says so. A joke is an artefact made to be laughed at. It may fail to perform its function, in which case it is a joke that 'falls flat'. Or it may perform its function, but offensively, in which case it is a joke 'in bad taste'. But none of this implies that the category of jokes is arbitrary, or that there is no such thing as a distinction between good jokes and bad. Nor does it in any way suggest that there is no place for the criticism of jokes, or for the kind of moral education that has an appropriate sense of humour as its goal. Indeed, the first thing you might learn, in considering jokes, is that Marcel Duchamp's urinal was one—quite a good one first time round, corny by the time of Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and downright stupid today.

### Art as a functional kind

Works of art, like jokes, have a dominant function. They are objects of aesthetic interest. They may fulfil this function in a rewarding

way, offering food for thought and spiritual uplift, winning for themselves a loyal public that returns to them to be consoled or inspired. They may fulfil their function in ways that are judged to be offensive or demeaning. Or they may fail altogether to prompt the aesthetic interest that they petition for. The works of art that we remember fall into the first two categories: the uplifting and the demeaning. The total failures disappear from public memory. And it really matters which kind of art you adhere to, which you include in your treasury of symbols and allusions, which you carry around in your heart. Good taste is as important in aesthetics as it is in humour, and indeed taste is what it is all about. If university courses do not start from that premise, students will finish their studies of art and culture just as ignorant as when they began. When it comes to art, aesthetic judgement concerns what you ought and ought not to like, and (I shall argue) the 'ought' here, even if it is not exactly a moral imperative, has a moral weight.

It is true, however, that people no longer see works of art as objects of judgement or as expressions of the moral life: increasingly many teachers of the humanities agree with their incoming students, that there is no distinction between good and bad taste, but only between your taste and mine. But imagine someone saying the same thing about humour. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday recount one of the few recorded occasions when the young Mao Ze Dong burst into laughter: it was at the circus, when a tight-rope walker fell from the high wire to her death. Imagine a world in which people laughed only at others' misfortunes. What would that world have in common with the world of Molière's *Tartuffe*, of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*? Nothing, save the fact of laughter. It would be a degenerate world, a world in which human kindness no longer found its endorsement in humour, in which one whole aspect of the human spirit would have become stunted and grotesque.

Imagine now a world in which people showed an interest only in replica Brillo boxes, in signed urinals, in crucifixes pickled in urine, or in objects similarly lifted from the debris of life and put on display with some kind of satirical or 'look at me' intention—in other words, the increasingly standard fare of official modern art shows in Europe and America. What would such a world have in common with that of Duccio, Giotto, Velazquez, or even Cézanne? Of course, there would be the fact of putting objects on display, and the fact of our looking at them through aesthetic spectacles. But it would be a world in which human aspirations no longer find their artistic expression, in which we no longer make for ourselves images of the transcendent, and in which mounds of rubbish cover the sites of our ideals.

## Art and entertainment

In a striking work published a century ago the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce pointed to a radical distinction, as he saw it, between art properly so-called, and the pseudo-art designed to entertain, arouse or amuse. The distinction was taken up by Croce's disciple, the English philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who argued as follows. In confronting a true work of art it is not my own reactions that interest me, but the meaning and content of the work. I am being presented with experience, uniquely embodied in this particular sensory form. When seeking entertainment, however, I am not interested in the cause but in the effect. Whatever has the right effect on me is right for me, and there is no question of judgement—esthetic or otherwise.

The point urged by Croce and Collingwood is exaggerated—why cannot I be interested in a work of art for its meaning, and also be entertained by it? We are not amused *for the sake of amusement*, but for the sake of the joke. Amusement is not opposed to aesthetic interest, since it is already a form of it. It is not surprising, therefore, if, from their exaggerated dismissal of entertainment art,

Croce and Collingwood each derived aesthetic theories as implausible as any in the literature.

Nevertheless they were right to believe that there is a great difference between the *artistic* treatment of a subject-matter and the mere cultivation of effect. The photographic image has to some extent deadened us to the contrast here. While the theatrical stage, like the frame of a painting, shuts out the real world, the camera lets the world in—spreading the same bland endorsement over the actor pretending to die on the pavement and the accidental balloon drifting across the street in the background. And the temptation is to turn this defect into an enticement, by encouraging a kind of ‘reality addiction’ in the viewer. The temptation is to focus on aspects of real life that grip us or excite us, regardless of their dramatic meaning. Genuine art also entertains us; but it does so by creating a distance between us and the scenes that it portrays: a distance sufficient to engender disinterested sympathy for the characters, rather than vicarious emotions of our own.

## An example

Since cinema and its offshoots are most at fault among the arts, in pursuing effect at the cost of meaning, it is fitting to give an example of cinematic art from which that fault is absent. There have been few directors as conscious as Ingmar Bergman, of the temptation posed by the camera, and the need to resist it. You could frame a still from a Bergman film—the dream sequences in *Wild Strawberries*, the Dance of Death in *The Seventh Seal*, the dinner party in *The Hour of the Wolf*—and it would sit on your wall like an engraving, resonant, engaging and composed. It was precisely in order to minimize distraction, to ensure that everything on the screen—light, shade, form and allusion, as much as person and character—is making its own contribution to the drama, that Bergman chose to make *Wild Strawberries* in black and white, even though colour had by then (1957) become the *lingua franca*.



11. Ingmar Bergman: memory sequence from *Wild Strawberries*: each detail speaks

The film tells the story of a selfish but distinguished old man who has avoided love, who is approaching the end of his life and sensing its hollowness, and who—through a single day of simple encounters, memories and dreams—is able miraculously to save himself, to accept that he must give love in order to receive it, and who is granted, at the end, a transfiguring vision of his childhood and a final welcome into the world of others. The burden of the story is contained in the dreams and memories—episodes which play a part in the drama that is amplified by the cinematic medium. The camera fuses these episodes with the narrative, pressing them into the present through creating identities where words would enforce only differences. (Thus the faces in the dreams have already acquired another significance in the real events of the day.) The camera stalks the unfolding story like a hunter, pausing to take aim at the present only to bring it into chafing proximity with the past. And the images, often grainy, with sharply foregrounded details, leave many objects lingering like ghosts in the out-of-focus

hinterland. In *Wild Strawberries*, things, like people, are saturated with the psychic states of their observers, drawn into the drama by a camera which endows each detail with a consciousness of its own. The result is not whimsical or arbitrary, but on the contrary, entirely objective, turning to realities at every point where the camera might otherwise be tempted to escape from them.

*Wild Strawberries* is one of many examples of true cinematic art, in which the techniques of the cinema serve a dramatic purpose, presenting situations and characters in the light of our own sympathetic response to them. It illustrates the distinction between aesthetic interest and mere effect: the first creating a distance that the second destroys. The purpose of this distance is not to prevent emotion, but to focus it, by directing attention towards the imaginary other, rather than the present self. Getting clear about the distinction here is one part of understanding artistic beauty.

## Fantasy and reality

The distinction can be rephrased as one between imagination and fantasy. True art appeals to the imagination, whereas effects elicit fantasy. Imaginary things are pondered, fantasies are *acted out*. Both fantasy and imagination concern unrealities; but while the unrealities of fantasy penetrate and pollute our world, those of the imagination exist in a world of their own, in which we wander freely and in a condition of sympathetic detachment.

Modern society abounds in fantasy objects, since the realistic image, in photograph, cinema and TV screen, offers surrogate fulfilment to our forbidden desires, thereby permitting them. A fantasy desire seeks neither a literary description, nor a delicate painting of its object, but a simulacrum—an image from which all veils of hesitation have been torn away. It eschews style and convention, since these impede the building of the surrogate, and subject it to judgement. The ideal fantasy is perfectly realized, and

perfectly unreal—an imaginary object that leaves nothing to the imagination. Advertisements trade in such objects, and they float in the background of modern life, tempting us constantly to realize our dreams, rather than to pursue realities.

Imagined scenes, by contrast, are not realized but *represented*; they come to us soaked in thought, and in no sense are they surrogates, standing in place of the unobtainable. On the contrary, they are deliberately placed at a distance, in a world of their own. Convention, framing and restraint are integral to the imaginative process. We enter a painting only via the frame that shuts out the world in which we stand. Convention and style are more important than realization; and when painters endow their images with a *trompe-l'oeil* realism, we often question the result as tasteless or despise it as kitsch.

It is true that art may also play with illusionist effects, as Bernini does in sculpting St Teresa in Ecstasy, or Masaccio in his depiction of the Holy Trinity. But in such cases illusion is a dramatic device, a way of transporting the viewer into heavenly regions, where thought and feeling are purged of their earthly ties. In no sense are Bernini and Masaccio practising deception, or tempting the viewer to indulge his ordinary passions in substitute ways.

In the theatre too, the action is not real but represented, and however realistic, avoids (as a rule) those scenes which are the food of fantasy. In Greek tragedy the murders take place off stage, to be reported in lines that set the chorus in rhythmical motion, spelling out the horror and also containing it, subdued to the metre of the verse. The purpose is not to deprive death of its emotional power, but to contain it within the domain of the imagination—the domain where we wander freely, with our own interests and desires in abeyance.

Although the passions suffered in the theatre are directed towards imaginary objects, they are guided by a sense of reality, and evolve

and develop as our understanding grows. They derive from the sympathy that we feel for our kind, and sympathy is critical—it wishes to know its object, to assess its worth, and not to waste its heartbeats undeservedly. In *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argued that sympathy tends of its own accord towards the standpoint of the impartial spectator. Hence sympathy is never so active, or so controlled by judgement, as in the aesthetic context. Towards the imaginary and the framed we can adopt the disinterested posture that I described in Chapter 1. And, once our own interests have been set aside, we sympathize in a way that we cannot normally afford in our daily transactions. It would be plausible to suggest that this defines one aim of art: to present imaginary worlds, towards which we can adopt, as part of an integral aesthetic attitude, a posture of impartial concern.

## Style

True artists control their subject-matter, in order that our response to it should be *their* doing, not *ours*. One way of exerting this control is through style: as Picasso controlled erotic sentiment through his cubist reconstruction of the female face, or Pope controlled misanthropy through the polished logic of the heroic couplet. Style is not exhibited only by art: indeed, as I argued in the last chapter, it is natural to us, part of the aesthetics of everyday life, through which we arrange our environment and place it in significant relation to ourselves. Flair in dressing, for example, which is not the same as an insistent originality, consists rather in the ability to turn a shared repertoire in a personal direction, so that a single character is revealed in each of them. That is what we mean by style, and by the ‘stylishness’ that comes about when style over-reaches itself and becomes the dominant factor in a person’s dress.

Styles can resemble each other, and contain large overlapping idioms—like the styles of Haydn and Mozart or Coleridge and Wordsworth. Or they might be unique, like the style of Van Gogh,

so that anyone who shares the repertoire is seen as a mere copier or *pasticheur*, and not as an artist with a style of his own. Our tendency to think in this way has something to do with our sense of human integrity: the unique style is one that has identified a unique human being, whose personality is entirely objectified in his work: *le style c'est l'homme même*, as Buffon famously put it. (It is interesting to explore our reasons for saying that Mozart, who adapted the musical language of Haydn, is an original composer, whereas Utrillo, who is recognizably himself, even when most obviously following Pissaro or Van Gogh, is entirely derivative.)

Style must be perceivable: there is no such thing as hidden style. It *shows* itself, even if it does so in artful ways that conceal the effort and sophistication, as in the Chopin Mazurkas or the drawings of Paul Klee. At the same time, it becomes perceivable by virtue of our comparative perceptions: it involves a standing out from norms that must also be subliminally present in our perception if the stylistic idioms and departures are to be noticed. Style enables artists to allude to things that they do not state, to summon comparisons that they do not explicitly make, to place their work and its subject-matter in a context which makes every gesture significant, and so achieve the kind of concentration of meaning that we witness in Britten’s Cello Symphony or Eliot’s *Four Quartets*.

## Content and form

That suggestion immediately raises a problem that has become familiar in aesthetics, in literary criticism, and in the study of the arts generally: how can you separate the content of a work of art from its form? And if you *could* separate the content, would that not just show that it is irrelevant to the aesthetic goal, no part of what the work *really* means?

Suppose you ask me what is the content of Van Gogh’s famous painting of the yellow chair. What exactly does it *mean*? you ask:



12. Van Gogh, *The Yellow Chair*. A chair is a chair is a chair...

what am I supposed to *understand*, about this chair, or about the world, from looking at this picture? I might reply: it's a chair, that's all. But in that case what's so special about the picture? Wouldn't a photograph of a chair do just as well? Why travel all these miles to see a picture of a chair? I am likely to argue that this painting is saying something special about this particular chair, and also about the world as seen through the image of this chair. I might try to put my thoughts and feelings into words. 'It is an invitation to see the life that spreads from people into all their products, the way in which life radiates from the meanest things,

so that nothing is at rest, all is becoming.' But couldn't he have written that message on the bottom of the canvas? Why does he need a chair to communicate a thought like that? I am likely to respond that my words are only a gesture; that the real meaning of the painting is *bound up with, inseparable from*, the image—that it resides in the very shapes and colours of the chair, is inseparable from Van Gogh's distinctive style, and cannot be translated completely into another idiom.

That kind of argument, whether about painting, about poetry or about music, is now familiar, and is grounded in our ordinary ways of talking about art. We want to say that works of art are meaningful—they are not just interesting forms in which we take an unexplained delight. They are acts of communication, which present us with a meaning; and this meaning must be *understood*. Often we will say of a performer, that he did not understand the role he was playing. We listen to abstract music, like the quartets of Bartók and Schoenberg, and perhaps say that we do not understand them. And all this reference to meaning and understanding suggests that works of art are communicating a content, maybe that each work of art—or at any rate each work of any note—has its own peculiar content, which we must understand if we are to appreciate the work and have a sense of its value. Some works have changed the way we see the world—Goethe's *Faust*, for example, Beethoven's late quartets, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, Michelangelo's *Moses*, the Psalms of David and the Book of Job. For people who don't know those works of art the world is a different—and maybe a less interesting—place.

Yet, when it comes to saying, of any particular work of art, just *what* its content might be, we find ourselves very soon reduced to silence. The meaning does not reside in a content that could be identified just anyhow. It is a particular content *as presented*—seen, in other words, as inseparable from form and style. Thus we arrive at what has become a critical commonplace, which is the thesis of the inseparability of form and content. A particular

version of this thesis in the realm of literary criticism goes by the name of the 'heresy of paraphrase'—an expression due to the critic Cleanth Brooks. The heresy to which Brooks referred is that of thinking that the meaning of a poem can be contained in a paraphrase; from which you can easily proceed to the thought that it is a heresy to think that it can be contained in a translation or that it can be conveyed in another style or another art-form or in any other way than in the form of this particular poem.

Brooks is pointing to several distinct features of poetry. First, there is the fact that a line of poetry can express several thoughts simultaneously, whereas a paraphrase will at best lay them out in succession. For instance, the line 'bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang', describes both the trees in autumn and the recently ruined choirs of the monasteries that were still frequented in Shakespeare's youth. A paraphrase would give one of those readings, and then the other; but the power of the line consists partly in the fact that you hear them together, like simultaneous voices in music—and then the doom of autumn invades the image of the ruined monastery, just as the idea of sacrilege invades the image of the leafless tree.

Secondly, there is the fact that poetry is 'polysemous', developing its meaning on several levels—the levels of image, of statement, of metaphor, of allegory and so on. This point was made seven centuries ago in the celebrated letter to Can Grande della Scala explaining the allegorical meaning of the *Divine Comedy*—a letter normally attributed to Dante—and in Dante's *Convivio*. And it became a commonplace of late medieval and early Renaissance poetics. A paraphrase would have to spell out the levels of meaning separately; whereas the power of poetry depends on their being presented simultaneously.

Thirdly meaning is *lost* in any paraphrase. You could paraphrase the first line of Hamlet's famous soliloquy as 'To live or to die: that's the choice'; or 'to exist or not to exist; there's the problem'. But

Shakespeare wanted the verb 'to be', with all its metaphysical resonance, as touching the very mystery of the universe: the mystery of 'contingent being', as Avicenna and Aquinas had described it. Being is *already* a question, and an insoluble one, coming to the surface in Hamlet's existential anxiety with a new and disturbing resonance. It is not just the meaning and association of words that count towards their sense in poetry. The sound too is important—and not just sound: sound as organized by syntax, and shaped as language. So, finally, there is the sheer untranslateability of the semantic atmosphere in poetry. How could you render in English the ineffable melancholy of 'Les sanglots longs | Des violons | De l'automne'? 'The long sighs of autumn's violins' is just absurd, though it means the same.

And yet, we don't want to conclude that the meaning of a poem, or of any other work of art, is simply mysterious, so intimately bound up with the form that nothing can be said about it. I have said a lot about those examples already. True, there are examples where it is difficult to say anything—the poems of Celan, for instance. The imagery might be too dense to disentangle, too much a matter of suggestion, concerned indeed to avoid direct statement, lest the intensity of the experience be lost. But such exceptional cases merely prove the point, by being exceptional. For the most part you can say much about the meaning of a poem, a painting—even a work of music. But what you say will not explain the particular intensity of meaning which makes the work of art into the irreplaceable vehicle of its content.

## Representation and expression

Here philosophers make a distinction between two kinds of meaning in art: representation and expression. The distinction goes back to Croce and Collingwood, though it corresponds to thoughts that have been around for far longer. It seems that works of art can be meaningful in at least two ways—by presenting a world (whether real or imaginary) that is independent of

themselves, as in prose narrative, theatre or figurative painting, or by carrying their meaning intrinsically within them. The first kind of meaning is often called 'representation', since it implies a symbolic relation between the work and its world. Representation can be judged to be more or less realistic—in other words, more or less in conformity with the generality of the things and situations described. It admits of translation and paraphrase; two works of art can represent the same thing, situation or event—as Mantegna's and Grünewald's Crucifixions both represent the crucifixion of Jesus (though how differently it is not necessary to emphasize).

An accurate representation may also be meaningless as a work of art—either because what it represents is meaningless, or because it fails to convey anything meaningful about its subject-matter, like the nymphs of Bouguereau. All those features caused Croce to dismiss representation as inessential to the aesthetic enterprise. It is at best a frame upon which artists compose, but never in itself the source of the meaning of their work. Of course, you must still understand the representational content of a work if you are to grasp its artistic meaning: and this may require critical, historical and iconographical knowledge—knowledge that is not always easy to obtain, as we know from attempts to decipher Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, or Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. But someone could understand a representation and take no aesthetic interest in it; and it can be a good representation without eliciting such an interest—as most B movies are good representations of absurd events involving boring people to no artistic purpose.

### Expression and emotion

According to Croce, therefore, the burden of artistic meaning lies not with representation but with expression. And expression is the vehicle of aesthetic value. Works of art express things, and even abstract art, like instrumental music or abstract painting, can be an effective milieu for expression. So how do we understand

expression, and why is it a value? One suggestion is that works of art express emotion, and that this is of value to us because it acquaints us with the human condition, and arouses our sympathies for experiences that we do not otherwise undergo. But clearly works of art don't express emotion in the way that you express your anger by shouting at your son, or your love by speaking to him affectionately. Most works of art are not created in a sudden heat of passion; nor do we have the knowledge that will enable us to say what passion (if any) motivated the artist. Even when artists refer to the emotion that is allegedly conveyed by their work, we may not believe that their description is the correct one. Beethoven prefaced the slow movement of Op. 132 with the description 'Hymn of thanksgiving from the convalescent to the Godhead in the Lydian mode'. Suppose you respond by saying 'To me it is just a serene expression of contentment, and convalescence has nothing to do with it.' Does that show that you have not understood the movement? Why is Beethoven any better placed than you to put words to the feeling conveyed by his music? Maybe you, as critic, are better able to describe the emotional content of a piece of music than the composer. There are plenty of artists who are awoken by criticism to the meaning of their own works: such, for example, was T. S. Eliot's response to Helen Gardner's book about his poetry—namely, at last I know what it means.

In fact all attempts to describe the emotional content of works of art seem to fall short of their target. The feeling does not have an independent life: it is there in the notes, the pigments and the words, and attempts to extract it and trap it in a description seem lame and inadequate when set beside the work. In response to this objection Croce presented an ingenious theory. Representation, he argued, deals in concepts—characterizations that can be translated from medium to medium and still retain their sense. Thus a Constable sketch of Yarmouth represents the very same place as the Yarmouth scenes in *David Copperfield*. Both describe the Yarmouth flats in general terms; both contain messages that can be conveyed in other ways and by other media.

Representation, whether in words or images, is a relation between a work and a world, and the work applies to its world in the same way that concepts apply to the things that fall under them, by describing those things in general terms. Expression does not deal in concepts but in intuitions—particular experiences, that are conveyed by communicating their uniqueness. Two works of art can represent the same thing; but they cannot express the same thing—for a work expresses an intuition only by presenting its individual character, the character that requires just *these* words, or just *these* images, if it is to be put across. That is what is going on in art—the communication of individual experiences, in the unique form that identifies their individuality. And that is why artistic expression is so valuable—it presents us with the unconceptualized uniqueness of its subject-matter.

Ingenious though that theory is, it takes away with one hand what it gives with the other. It seems to be saying that a work of art has meaning because of the intuition that is expressed by it. But the intuition can be identified only through its artistic expression. If asked to identify the intuition expressed by some given work of art, the only answer is to point to that work of art, and to say that it is the intuition contained in *this*. That which seemed like a relation (expression) is no such thing, and to say that a work of art expresses an intuition is like saying that it is identical with itself. We are back with the old form and content problem—wanting to insist on a distinction, in order only to dismiss it as unreal.

There have been many attempts in recent years to revisit and reanimate the distinction between representation and expression, and also to give accounts of expression that will show why it is important, and how it captures that element of the aesthetic experience that we are inclined to describe in terms of meaning. We have witnessed semantic, semiotic, cognitive and similar theories, and attempts—in the philosophy of music especially—to show how emotion is expressed in art, and why this is important.

None of these theories, in my view, has advanced the subject very far.

## Musical meaning

Readers might wonder why, in a book devoted to the idea of beauty, it is necessary to explore the recondite problem of artistic meaning. But it is precisely beauty that leads us to this problem. Art moves us because it is beautiful, and it is beautiful in part because it means something. It can be meaningful without being beautiful; but to be beautiful it must be meaningful. An example from music might clarify this. Consider Samuel Barber's solemn *Adagio for Strings*—surely one of the most expressive pieces in the instrumental repertoire. How do we understand its expressive power? It is not telling a story about a state of mind, that could have been told in another way by another work: it is unfolding its own singular grave expression. The beauty of the music is bound up with this expression: there are not two qualities here, the beauty and the expression, but one quality. This leads us immediately to the problem that I have been discussing: what is the difference between the one who understands the expression, and the one who does not?

But the example also points to a solution. For it reminds us that there are two uses of the term 'expression': a transitive use, which invites the question 'expression of what?', and an intransitive use, which forbids that question. *Espressivo* in a musical score is always understood intransitively. The question: 'how can I play this expressively if you don't tell me what it means?' would normally be dismissed as absurd. Performers show their understanding of an expressive work of music not by identifying some state of mind which it is 'about', but by playing with understanding. They must fit themselves into the groove of the work. This process of 'fitting' is mirrored too in the audience, who 'move along with' the music, as though inwardly dancing to its step.

Hence although Croce's theory of art as intuition is far too stringent, it is pointing to a puzzle about beauty in art. Why are we so often tempted to speak of expression in this intransitive way? And why is expression a part of beauty? Such questions have animated the discussion of music ever since E. T. A. Hoffman's famous essay on Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and long before Croce made the concept of expression central to aesthetics.

## Musical formalism

Hanslick's essay *On the Musically Beautiful* of 1854 was to become a pivotal document in the dispute between the followers of Brahms, for whom the art of music was essentially architectural, consisting in the elaboration of tonal structures, and the followers of Wagner, who had defended the view that music is a dramatic art, giving form and coherence to our states of mind. Hanslick's argument was that music can express definite emotions only if it can present definite objects of emotion, since emotions are founded on thoughts about their objects. But music is an abstract art, incapable of presenting definite thoughts. Hence the assertion that a piece of music is expressive of some emotion becomes empty: nothing can be said in answer to the question 'expressive of what?'

Hanslick argued instead that music is understood as 'forms moved through sound'. This is the essential feature, and emotional associations are no more than that—*associations*, which have no claim to be the meaning of what we hear. Musical understanding is not a matter of lapsing into a self-centred reverie, prompted by the music, perhaps, but in no way controlled by it. Understanding consists in appreciating the various movements contained in the musical surface, hearing how they develop from each other, respond to each other and work towards resolution and closure. The pleasure that this causes is not unlike the pleasure of pattern in architecture, especially the kind of pattern that is achieved against awkwardnesses and obstacles, like the obstacle presented to

Longhena at Sta Maria della Salute, in which a circular dome had to meet an octagonal base.

But what is meant by musical movement? Consider the theme of the last movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony. This consists largely of silences. It begins on E-flat, continues through a long silence during which it seems to rise to B-flat, drops an octave, and so on. We can describe the movement easily enough, in terms of a beginning, a process that endures, and movements up and down the pitch-spectrum. But nothing *actually* moves, and most of the movement occurs when there is nothing to be heard. We also hear a kind of causal connection: that first note brings the second into being. But there is no such connection in reality. Talk of musical movement seems to be a deeply embedded metaphor. If that is so, however, Hanslick's theory is not really distinguished from that of the romantics whom he attacks. They agree that music moves, but add that, granted that metaphor, why not help yourself to another—namely, that music moves as the heart moves, when it is moved by feeling? In other words, beauty in music is not just a matter of form: it involves an emotional content.

## Form and content in architecture

In considering 'the aesthetics of everyday life' I made much of the small-scale practical reasoning whereby a carpenter fits part to part in the construction of a door. And there is a tradition in architectural thinking going back to Alberti's *Ten Books of Architecture* (*De re aedificatoria*, 1452) which sees architectural beauty (*conciinnitas*) as the appropriate fitting of part to part. This parallels the formalist approach advocated by Hanslick and is just as incomplete and just as unsustainable in architectural criticism as in the discussion of music. Consider again Longhena's Church of Sta Maria della Salute. This was dismissively described by Ruskin in *Stones of Venice*, as one of those 'contemptible edifices' which 'have good stage effect so long as we do not approach them', criticizing 'the meagre windows in the sides of the cupola and the

ridiculous disguise of the buttresses under the form of colossal scrolls', adding that the buttresses are in any case 'a hypocrisy', since the cupola is a timber construction that needs no such support. Ruskin saw in the forms and aspect of this church the theatrical insincerity of the Counter-Reformation (the 'Grotesque Renaissance'), in which incense and flowing robes smother the hand-made truths of real piety. Geoffrey Scott, in his great work of criticism, *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914), responded with what he took to be a purely formal account of the church's beauty and perfection:

The ingenious pairing [of the volutes] makes a perfect transition from the circular plan to the octagonal. Their heaped and rolling form is like that of a heavy substance that has slidden to its final and true adjustment. The great statues and pedestals which they support seem to arrest the outward movement of the volutes and to pin them down upon the church. In silhouette, the statues serve (like the obelisks on the lantern) to give a pyramidal contour to the composition, a line which more than any other gives mass its unity and strength... There is hardly an element in the church which does not proclaim the beauty of mass and the power of mass to give essential simplicity and dignity even to the richest and most fantastic dreams of the baroque...

Scott says nothing—or nothing clear—about the content of the church, not mentioning its ostensible invocation of the Virgin queen of the sea, who reaches out to save the shipwrecked sailor, and in general brushing aside its religious iconography. On the other hand, when we look at the detail of Scott's description, we see that it is a sequence of metaphors and similes: 'their heaped and rolling form (two metaphors) is like that of a heavy substance (simile)... the great statues and pedestals... seem to arrest the outward movement (simile)... the essential simplicity and dignity of the baroque (metaphors)...'. This purely 'formal' description, in other words, is logically on a par with the most adventurous attempt to describe the *meaning* of the church, and could easily be

pushed in that direction. Isn't this use of mass to create simplicity and dignity an exact parallel of the Counter-Reformation vision of the church, as dignifying ordinary life, and standing over it in a posture of fertile guardianship? Notice the way the statues balance themselves on the rolling form of the volutes, as though riding and controlling the waves—a symbol of the safety offered to 'those in peril on the sea'. The church is like a meeting between prayer and comfort: between the prayers of the sailor, symbolized by chapels which turn to each point of the compass, and the safety promised by Mary, *stella maris*, present in the all-embracing dome.

To point to these analogies and symbolic connections is as legitimate in the criticism of architecture as it is in the expressionist criticism of music. Browning produced a celebrated instance of such expressionist criticism, by way of a comment on a work composed in the shadow of the Salute (*A Toccata of Galuppi's*, the voice here being that of an imagined Victorian Englishman, summoning the world of Galuppi as he listens):

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh  
on sigh,  
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—  
'Must we die?'  
Those commiserating sevenths—'Life might last, we can but try!'

Baldassare Longhena's church expresses the civic vitality and sea-going adventurism which, by his namesake Baldassare Galuppi's day, were fading away. It seems odd to make a radical distinction between form and content, when the attempt to describe either involves the same recourse to metaphor, and the same building of bridges between experiences. Both Scott and Browning are invoking the way in which aesthetic judgement brings one experience to bear on another, and so transforms it. And, as Browning shows, the resulting transformation can bring an unexpected insight into the human heart.

## Meaning and metaphor

It seems therefore that our best attempts at explaining the beauty of works of abstract art like music and architecture involve linking them by chains of metaphor to human action, life and emotion. If we are to understand the nature of artistic meaning, therefore, we must first understand the logic of figurative language.

Figurative uses of language aim not to describe things but to connect them, and the connection is forged in the feeling of the perceiver. The connection may be made in many ways: through metaphor, metonymy, simile, personification or a transferred name. Sometimes a writer places two things side by side, using no figure of speech, but simply letting the experience of one leak into the experience of the other. Here is an example from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can  
Her heart inform her tongue—the swan's down feather,  
That stands upon the swell at the full of tide,  
And neither way inclines...

A striking image, rich in implications, which entirely transforms the audience's sense of Octavia's hesitation. That is the kind of transformation at which metaphors aim: dead metaphors achieve nothing, but living metaphors change the way things are perceived. Such is the function of figurative language generally.

Our reflections on the metaphorical nature of our attempts to assign an expressive meaning to music suggest a tentative conclusion. The connection between music and emotion is not established by conventions or a 'theory of musical meaning'. It is established in the experience of playing and hearing. We understand expressive music by fitting it to other elements in our experience, drawing connections with human life, 'matching' the

music to other things that have meaning for us. Thus we praise the Barber *Adagio for Strings* for its noble solemnity. The metaphor is not arbitrary, since it makes a connection with the moral life which explains why we feel at home with the piece, and elevated by it. But it is a metaphor that stands to be justified. If this is a true indication of what the piece *means*, then it must be anchored in the structure and argument of the music. The long step-wise melody in B-flat minor which is less a melody than a melody remembered; the tensions resolved on half cadences, as though pausing for breath but refusing to come to a halt, so that there is a continuous cycle of tension and relaxation; the constant fall of the melodic line that burdens every attempt to rise, until the sudden climb through a pair of diminished fifths, like the last efforts of someone struggling to free himself so as to reach the rock which is his goal, only to find that this rock, the high B flat which was the tonic for which the melody had longed for 12 bars, is without foundation, being now the dominant of E flat minor, lying above an unstable dissonance—all such details are relevant to the judgement and, in describing them, we will be backing up one metaphor with others, making further connections with the mental and moral life. Something similar occurs in the criticism of architecture. Here too metaphor plays a vital role in explaining the value and meaning of a building, and in justifying our metaphorical descriptions we will be arguing as Scott argues in the passage quoted, linking one metaphor to another and one part of the building to another, in an elaborate exploration of the way in which part fits to part, and both to the moral life of the observer.

This suggests a different model of expression from the one presented by Croce and his followers. The Crocean model is of an inarticulate inner state (an 'intuition') becoming articulate and conscious through its artistic expression. The rival model is of an artist fitting things together so as to create links which resonate in the audience's feelings. The question *what* is being expressed ceases to be relevant. What matters is whether *this* belongs (emotionally speaking) with *that*. This notion of belonging or

## Barber: Adagio for Strings

The musical score consists of three staves of music for strings. Staff 5 shows a melodic line with eighth-note patterns. Staff 8 features sustained notes and eighth-note chords. Staff 11 shows a more complex harmonic progression with various note heads and rests. The score is marked 'Molto adagio' and includes dynamics such as 'pp' (pianissimo).

13. Samuel Barber, *Adagio for Strings*: the meaning lies in the notes

fitting recalls the more formal idea of fittingness that we encountered in the last chapter, when discussing the aesthetics of everyday life. In art as in life fittingness is at the heart of aesthetic success. We want things to fit together, in ways that fit to us. This does not mean that dissonance and conflict have no part in the artistic enterprise: of course they do. But dissonance and conflict may also be fitting, like the climactic 9-note dissonance in Mahler's 10th Symphony, or the jarring disarray of Hamlet's encounter with his mother.

## The value of art

Works of art can be praised in many ways. They can be moving and tragic, melancholy or joyous, balanced, melodious, elegant, and exciting. Although beauty and meaning are connected in art, some

of the most meaningful works of recent times have been downright ugly and even offensive in their raw-nerve impact—think of Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, Gunther Grass's *Tin Drum*, Picasso's *Guernica*. To call such works beautiful is in a way to diminish and even to trivialize what they are trying to say. But if beauty is only one among many aesthetic values, why should a theory of art tell us anything about it?

Some insight is provided by the connection made by Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, between art and play. Art, he suggests, takes us out of our everyday practical concerns, by providing us with objects, characters, scenes and actions with which we can play, and which we can enjoy for what they are, rather than for what they do for us. The artist too is playing—making imaginary worlds with the same spontaneous enjoyment that children experience, when one of them says 'Let's pretend!', or producing objects that focus our emotions and enable us to understand and amend them—as Beethoven does in the late quartets. This activity, Schiller argued, is all the more necessary in that we are torn, in our everyday lives, between the severe demands of reason, which require us to live by the rules, and the temptations of sense, which prompt us to venture forth in search of new experience. In play, elevated by art to the level of free contemplation, reason and sense are reconciled, and we are granted a vision of human life in its wholeness.

In appreciating art we are playing; the artist too is playing in creating it. And the result is not always beautiful, or beautiful in a predictable way. But this ludic attitude is fulfilled by beauty, and by the kind of orderliness which retains our interest and prompts us to search for the deeper significance of the sensory world. Hence, as soon as we are engaged in generating and appreciating objects as ends in themselves, rather than as means to our desires and purposes, we demand that those objects be ordered and meaningful. This 'blessed rage for order' is present in the very first impulse of artistic creation: and the impetus to impose order and

meaning on human life, through the experience of something delightful, is the underlying motive of art in all its forms. Art answers the riddle of existence: it tells us *why* we exist by imbuing our lives with a sense of fittingness. In the highest form of beauty life becomes its own justification, redeemed from contingency by the logic which connects the end of things with their beginning, as they are connected in *Paradise Lost*, in *Phèdre* and in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The highest form of beauty, as exemplified in those supreme artistic achievements, is one of the greatest of life's gifts to us. It is the true ground of the value of art, for it is what art, and only art, can give.

## Beauty and truth

Keats's vision of the Grecian urn, with its message that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know', arises from a lingering glance at a vanished world. But it records a common experience. Our favourite works of art seem to guide us to the truth of the human condition and, by presenting completed instances of human actions and passions, freed from the contingencies of everyday life, to show the worthwhileness of being human.

The point is perhaps best made through an example. We know what it is to love and be rejected, and thereafter to wander in the world infected by a bleak passivity. This experience, in all its messiness and arbitrariness, is one that most of us must undergo. But when Schubert, in *Die Winterreise*, explores it in song, finding exquisite melodies to illuminate one after another the many secret corners of a desolated heart, we are granted an insight of another order. Loss ceases to be an accident, and becomes instead an archetype, rendered beautiful beyond words by the music that contains it, moving under the impulse of melody and harmony to a conclusion that has a compelling artistic logic. It is as though we looked through the contingent loss of the song-cycle's protagonist to another kind of loss altogether: a *necessary* loss, whose rightness

resides in its completeness. Beauty reaches to the underlying truth of a human experience, by showing it *under the aspect of necessity*.

I find this point difficult to express. And I am aware of the lesson that we must draw from the disputes over form and content. To refer to a truth contained in a work of art is always to risk the corrosive effect of the question: *what truth?* And yet that question must be disallowed. The insight that art provides is available only in the form in which it is presented: it resides in an immediate experience whose consoling power is that it removes the arbitrariness from the human condition—as the arbitrariness of suffering is overcome in tragedy, and the arbitrariness of rejection in Schubert's song-cycle.

Kant wrote in this connection of 'aesthetic ideas'—intimations in sensory form of thoughts that are inexpressible as literal truths, since they lie beyond the reach of the understanding. But Kant's strictures are too severe. For we can make comparative judgements. And these help to flesh out the idea of a truth beyond the work, to which the work is pointing. For example we can ask whether that which is captured by Schubert is captured also by Mahler in his *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*. And the answer is surely 'no': there is a self-referential character in Mahler's music which in a certain way detracts from its universal significance. One way of expressing this observation is to say that Mahler's song-cycle is not true to the experience that it expresses—that it loses sight of the reality of loss in order to indulge in a sentimental grief over a loss that is not truly regretted. In comparison with this beautiful but flawed work of art, the sublime truthfulness of the Schubert makes itself known.

## Art and morality

During the nineteenth century there arose the movement of 'art for art's sake': *l'art pour l'art*. The words are those of Théophile Gautier, who believed that if art is to be valued for its own sake

then it must be detached from all purposes, including those of the moral life. A work of art that moralizes, that strives to improve its audience, that descends from the pinnacle of pure beauty to take up some social or didactic cause, offends against the autonomy of the aesthetic experience, exchanging intrinsic for instrumental values and losing whatever claim it might have had to beauty.

It is certainly a failing in a work of art that it should be more concerned to convey a message than to delight its audience. Works of propaganda, such as the socialist realist sculptures of the Soviet period or (their equivalent in prose) Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don*, sacrifice aesthetic integrity to political correctness, character to caricature, and drama to sermonizing. On the other hand, part of what we object to in such works is their *untruthful* quality. The lessons urged upon us are neither compelled by the story nor illustrated in the exaggerated figures and characters; the propaganda message is not part of the aesthetic meaning but extraneous to it—an intrusion from the everyday world which only loses conviction when thrust on us in the midst of aesthetic contemplation.

By contrast, there are works of art which contain intense moral messages in an aesthetically integrated frame. Consider John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The advocacy of the Christian life is here embodied in schematic characters and transparent allegory. But the book is written with such immediacy and such a true feeling for the weight of words and the seriousness of sentiment, that the Christian message becomes an integral part of it, rendered beautiful by the compelling words. We encounter in Bunyan a unity of form and content that forbids us from dismissing the work as a mere exercise in propaganda.

At the same time, even while admiring *Pilgrim's Progress* for its truthfulness, we may reject its underlying beliefs. Bunyan is showing the lived reality of Christian discipleship, and atheists, Jews and Muslims can find truth in his story—truth to the human

condition and to the heart of one who has glimpsed in his life's disorder the hope of a better world. Nor does Bunyan's moralizing offend, since it emerges from experiences honestly captured and vividly confessed to.

Works of art are forbidden to moralize, only because moralizing destroys their true moral value, which lies in the ability to open our eyes to others, and to discipline our sympathies towards life as it is. Art is not morally neutral, but has its own way of making and justifying moral claims. By eliciting sympathy where the world withholds it an artist may, like Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, oppose the bonds of a too constrictive moral order. By romanticizing characters who deserve no such treatment an artist can also, like Berg (and Wedekind) in *Lulu*, endow narcissism and selfishness with a deceptive appeal. Many of the aesthetic faults incurred by art are moral faults—sentimentality, insincerity, self-righteousness, moralizing itself. And all of them involve a deficiency in that moral truthfulness for which, in the last section, I praised Schubert's never-to-be-surpassed song-cycle.