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Melanie Hilario

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Phenomenal Beauty and an Aesthetic of Experience

MELANIE HILARIO

FROM classical and medieval times down to the eighteenth century, philosophy of art revolved around the metaphysical notion of an absolute Beauty which nature and the arts of man feebly adumbrated but never quite captured. Aesthetics was a mere appendage to general speculative metaphysics, and the work of art was of incidental value within a theoretical context whose main concern was the elucidation of beauty in terms of ultimate reality.¹ Pythagoras appreciated visible harmony only insofar as it gave access to invisible harmony,² a transcendental Beauty which eventually came to be one with the True and the Good. As recently as 1750, Alexander Baumgarten defined beauty as "the apprehension of the Absolute through the senses."³

An aesthetic that developed from this metaphysical presupposition necessarily assumed the nature of a search for objective, universal principles which defined the essence of beauty, for norms on the basis of which things were adjudged beautiful or not. According to the degree to which things com-

¹ J. Claude Piguet, *De l'Esthétique à la Métaphysique* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), p. 75.

² Louis Van Haecht, "Beauté visible et Métaphysique", *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* (février 1962), p. 103.

³ Harold Osborne, *Theory of Beauty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 36.

plied with these laws, they were thought to participate, in greater or lesser measure, in ideal Beauty.⁴

It took the empiricism of the eighteenth century British aestheticians, with their deep-seated distrust of *a priori* speculations, to wrench beauty from its metaphysical moorings and ground it on human experience of which it is inextricably a part. Empirical investigation of classical canons, such as those which stipulated proportion, harmony, congruence, and order to be essential to if not identical with beauty, revealed that these were neither common nor exclusive characteristics of beautiful objects. J. Donaldson said: "The common error of our modern writers on beauty has been that they have supposed all things, in order to be completely beautiful, subject to one fixed principle."⁵ In addition, experiential evidence revealed that many things which did not conform to the traditional formulas — which were, therefore, ugly by classical standards — could be objects of aesthetic enjoyment. Pursuing this anomaly, Edmund Burke came up in 1757 with the idea of the sublime, which, though antithetical to classical beauty, he showed to be an equally valid if not a superior aesthetic value. Thus the sublime rendered beauty dead and inoperative as an aesthetic key-notion. The conviction grew that the traditional search for a permanent formula which would embody the essence of beauty was a futile and quixotic task. By 1790 Alison concluded that the discovery of the objective and universal quality of beauty was "altogether impossible."⁶

Having pronounced their judgments of futility on the classical conception of beauty, the empiricists relegated the entire category of beauty to the sidelines and made the nature of the aesthetic experience their central concern. Lord Shaftesbury and Addison, for instance, first recognized aesthetic experience to be a perception of an object for its own sake, in an attitude of disinterestedness, followed by a re-

⁴ Piguët, *loc. cit.*

⁵ Jerome Stolnitz, "Beauty: Some Stages in the History of an Idea," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 22 (1961), p. 200.

⁶ Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (N. Y.: Macmillan Co. and the Free Press, 1966), I, 265.

sponse which is immediate and intuitive.⁷ Within this context, beauty, during the rare times it was considered, no longer claimed pre-eminence: it was, at most, one kind of aesthetic experience among others, one so ambiguous and vague it failed to satisfy British insistence on direct empirical evidence.

It was Kant who, in line with empiricist rejection of metaphysical beauty, gave aesthetics a certain autonomy by making its object not so much the abstract notion of beauty as the subjective experience of concrete beauty. In addition, he gave art a proper anthropological basis by linking it with a specific human faculty, that of judgment.⁸ He eventually arrived at four definitions of beauty which are, however, more descriptive of the subjective conditions under which beauty is appreciated than of the nature of beauty itself. When he defined beauty in terms of disinterestedness, non-conceptual pleasure, necessary satisfaction, and purposiveness without purpose, he actually stipulated a disinterested, non-practical attitude and a spontaneous, intuitive response to be essential to the aesthetic experience. This kind of an approach, however, was consistent with his presupposition: aware of the British assault on beauty's objective essence, he sought to clarify, not beauty as a substance, but the conditions that made the experience of beauty possible. For him, the quest of aesthetics was less a problem of object than a problem of attitude and experience. If a truly aesthetic attitude is assumed, the experience of the beautiful cannot be a matter of mere relativism, for the judgment of taste linked to it acquires a universality founded on a common human subjective structure. However, in spite of Kant's concern with beauty as intuited in an aesthetic experience, his reassertion and elaboration of Burke's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, both of which he admits into the aesthetic experience, is a denial of the centrality of beauty as the sole aesthetic value category.⁹

⁷ Stolnitz, p. 198.

⁸ Piguet, p. 74.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and The Sublime*, transl. John Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of

Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, beauty had been demystified, purged of its metaphysical aura, and re-instated in its proper anthropological context. Moreover, being too vague and unstable a category to serve as the core and starting point of a science of aesthetics, beauty had to give way to the more humanly verifiable categories of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic experience. In this rather belated discovery of its point of departure in the field of human experience and human subjectivity, aesthetics attained a limited degree of autonomy.

From this point of demystification to contemporary aesthetics, the dominant trend has been the search for a scientific approach to the nature of art through direct investigation of the aesthetic experience. Psychological aesthetics, for instance, has tried to experiment with varieties of aesthetic experiences and from an analysis of aesthetic responses, arrive inductively at so-called "laws of appreciation."¹⁰ Edward Bullough has tried to reconstruct aesthetics in terms of the notion of psychical distance, a personal, non-practical relation of a certain emotional colour between viewer and object.¹¹ In all psychological approaches, the work of art is a mere correlate to certain psychological phenomena like the aesthetic emotion or the aesthetic response.¹² Other aestheticians, seeking to found aesthetics on an empirical study of art as a function of a certain cultural context, have made aesthetics a branch of historical, sociological, and anthropological research; such an aesthetic Croce dismisses as nothing more than "a list of facts connected with the history of art or civilization."¹³ A few call for a return to an empiri-

California Press, 1965), pp. 46-50. Cf. translator's introduction, where Goldthwait points out that Kant thought the aesthetic experience to be a response to either the beautiful or the sublime, p. 35.

¹⁰ Edwards, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance in Art and Aesthetic Experience", *Art and Philosophy*, ed. W. E. Kennick (N. Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 536.

¹² T. E. Jessop, "The Definition of Beauty", *Art and Philosophy*, p. 526.

¹³ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, transl. Douglas Ainslie (N. Y.: Noonday Press, 1958), p. 399.

cal investigation of the properties of the work of art, with a view to formulating an objective canon of judgment.¹⁴

In these diverse aesthetic schools, the place of beauty has vacillated between pre-eminence, incidental importance, and futility. Santayana's entire psychological aesthetics, for instance, is built around the core-notion of beauty as "pleasure objectified,"¹⁵ Harold Osborne characterizes his philosophical studies of art as a theory of beauty; and Croce sees beauty as a peripheral category, a mere function of expression.¹⁶ Others consign it to irrelevance, counting it as no more than "a general term of approbation, of the most vague and extensive meaning."¹⁷

To summarize: Nineteenth and twentieth century reflection centered on the aesthetic experience as the object of a philosophy of art, or at least as the proper field of scientific inquiry. The result was that aesthetics, after having freed itself from metaphysical domination, became no more than an area of application of the empirical sciences. It was not until contemporary insistence on the primacy of phenomenal data had accorded the work of art its proper importance as the object of aesthetic study that philosophy of art became truly autonomous and self-contained.

In addition, the desacralization of the notion of beauty was completed when early twentieth century aestheticians hinged its ontological status to a strictly anthropological milieu. Beauty was explained, not in terms of transcendental perfection, but as a value rooted in human nature: in man's urge to resist nature's entropy by imposing order and harmony,¹⁸ or in his need to exercise and perfect his human powers for their own sake.¹⁹

¹⁴ Jessop, p. 528.

¹⁵ George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (N.Y.: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 16, 43.

¹⁶ Croce, p. 79.

¹⁷ Stolnitz, p. 203.

¹⁸ Jack Kaminsky, "Dewey's Concept of An Experience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 17 (1957), 317.

¹⁹ Osborne, p. 3.

With regard to the semantic range of the notion of beauty, aesthetics came to terms with the classical, metaphysically-inspired delimitation of what constitutes the beautiful. The variety of irreducible meanings given to beauty in modern aesthetics may be attributed to the tension between a traditionally narrow concept of beauty and a growing consciousness of a more intercultural horizon of the beautiful. Thus the delineation of a more universal scope compatible with the nonclassical sense of beauty is necessary to the determination of the status of an anthropologized notion of beauty in an aesthetics of experience. It is one of the strange paradoxes of the history of aesthetics that the concept of beauty became more universal in its concrete predication only after it had been purged of its pretensions to all-encompassing absoluteness and situated in the existential context of particular human experience.

The unwieldy stature of beauty in aesthetic theory is due mainly to the instability and multivalence of the concept itself, and any theoretical investigation of its nature and significance is inconclusive unless based on a clear definition of its scope and meaning. The drastic delimitation of beauty in classical times precipitated its eventual displacement as the basis of philosophical inquiry when modern aesthetics perceived beauty and artistic value even in works which did not comply with the rigid classical canons.²⁰ It is this extremely restricted concept of beauty which is generally appealed to when people speak of a beautiful sunset or when a layman contrasts the beauty of a Gothic cathedral or a Chinese landscape with the "ugliness" of *Guernica* or an African mask. In this narrow descriptive sense, beauty is not necessary to the excellence of the work of art; it is one among a number of vague categories which include 'nice', 'grotesque', 'noble', a notion which is irrelevant or at best incidental to intensive inquiry into the nature of the aesthetic experience and the work of art.

This historically recent universalization of the known world of art, together with the sense of an expanded horizon

²⁰ Edwards, *loc. cit.*

that it engendered, gave rise to efforts meant to stabilize the notion of beauty from a more catholic perspective which would accomodate, for instance, primitive and surrealistic art, phenomena which would have been doomed to ugliness in the context of a classical theory. Attempting to do no more than determine the range of the notion of beauty, Osborne gives it the logical definition of "the proper excellence of a work or art,"²¹ beauty thus becomes not one value category among others, but the fulness of aesthetic value in a particular work of art. In this more universal sense, beauty becomes a valid and necessary object of aesthetic inquiry.

II.

It is with the contemporary discovery of the *work of art* as the object and core of aesthetics that the validity and independence of a philosophy of art has been realized.²² While seeing the need for integration of aesthetic issues with the whole of philosophy, Roman Ingarden, who has been most active in pursuing a phenomenology of art, seeks to reformulate aesthetic issues on the basis of direct description of the structure of the work of art.²³ But the work of art is no different from all other things in that it can be known and described only insofar as and in the specific way that it presents itself to consciousness, as it appears and is intended in a given act: "Gestalt description (description of structure) is of the thing as experienced."²⁴

Part of the complexity of a descriptive aesthetics is due to the peculiar mode of presentation that characterizes the experience of a work of art. For the work of art may be the noematic given either of ordinary perception, in which case

²¹ Osborne, p. 12.

²² "C'est une constatation curieuse qu'il convient de faire ici: il a fallu deux mille ans de réflexion pour parvenir à ce résultat si simple et si fécond à la fois: l'objet de l'esthétique est l'œuvre d'art." Piguët, p. 75.

²³ Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, in a review of *Studia y Estetyki*, *Journal of Arts and Art Criticism*, 17 (1959), 391.

²⁴ Aaron Gurwitsch, *The Field of Consciousness* (Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1964), p. 170.

it is a thing among things; or of an aesthetic experience, in which case it assumes a mode of existence as a true aesthetic phenomenon, a presence, a quasi-subject. Ordinary cognitive perception of a work of art is not necessarily aesthetic perception. This ambivalence justifies Mikel Dufrenne's distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object. The work of art is the perceptual object accessible to any intending consciousness; the aesthetic object is the work of art as perceived and realized in an aesthetic experience. Thus the work of art is the unseen painting or the unheard song, or the painting seen or the song heard outside of an aesthetic experience. The crated Picasso is a work of art; so is Hagia Sophia, cognized as a building of worship, or the aria appreciated as a sleep-inducer. Only when these are perceived and enjoyed in the context of an aesthetic experience do they assume their full ontological status as aesthetic objects.²⁵

Since the work of art can be known in its unique aesthetic status only when it has become an aesthetic object, we may, against the background of this distinction, assert that aesthetics seeks not so much the work of art in itself, but the work of art fully actualized and experienced—i.e., the aesthetic object. Thus the aesthetic object, in the very specific sense in which it is used here, is the object and core of aesthetics. And because the work of art becomes an aesthetic object only by virtue of the peculiar mode of intentionality in which it is given, any inquiry into the aesthetic object is valid only within the context of a description of the aesthetic experience. Thus it is with justifiable reason that contemporary aesthetics, while asserting the primacy of the aesthetic object, has distinguished itself as an autonomous aesthetics of experience.²⁶ Moritz Geiger, for instance, has approached art phenomenologically by clearing the way to the aesthetic object

²⁵ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), pp. 583-584.

²⁶ Phenomenological aesthetics is interested in the aesthetic experience insofar as it illuminates the work of art, which remains the object of aesthetics. In this, it is to be distinguished from empirical aesthetics, in which the central object of inquiry is the experience itself.

through phenomenological studies of the aesthetic act in which it appears and from which it is inseparable.²⁷

Because of the reciprocity between aesthetic object and aesthetic experience, description of the specific nature of the aesthetic experience is simultaneously an elucidation of the phenomenological structure of the aesthetic object. Whatever conviction we may have of its nature and existence outside of aesthetic perception is bracketed, for the reality of an aesthetic object, as far as philosophy of art is concerned, consists in its being given as the object of an aesthetic experience; metaphysical elaboration on the ontological question of its objective reality or non-reality is beside the point.²⁸

The special mode of meaning and intending which is the aesthetic experience is marked by a dialogical dynamism by which the aesthetic object is not only perceived, but also created by the viewer. The object of a consummated aesthetic experience is a function not only of a presented work of art, but also of noetic capacity to take in more of the colors, tones, words, multifarious sensitivities and nuances of what is initially presented, an "increasing gestaltness" which comes only with constant experience. Thus the work of art is constituted as a new aesthetic object in every individual experience, and every aesthetic experience is, in a very real sense, what John Dewey calls a *re-creation*.²⁹ Merleau-Ponty likewise sees the aesthetic object or the "accomplished work of art", not as ordinary perceptual noema, but as intended in dialectical creativity:

The accomplished work of art is thus not the work which exists in itself like a thing, but the work which reaches its viewer and invites him to take up the gesture which created it, and skipping the intermediaries, to rejoin, without any guide than a movement of the line (an almost incorporeal trace), the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible.³⁰

²⁷ Spiegelberg, p. 212.

²⁸ Roman Ingarden, "Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Object", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 21 (1960-1961), 290.

²⁹ Kaminsky, p. 329.

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language and the Voice of Silence", *Signs* (Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 51.

This notion of noetic construction of the aesthetic object is, however, by no means a facile retreat into relativism on the part of phenomenological aesthetics: it is in fact an attempt to reconcile the phenomenon of subjective variations in the experience of the aesthetic object with the autonomy of the work of art, accessible to non-aesthetic perception as persistent in time and consistent in identity. The work of art presents itself to natural cognition as an organically bound structure possessing what Ingarden calls "undetermined places", aspects which are variously determined in individual experience; and the range of possible permutations in the different "re-creations" or concretions is prescribed by the structure of the autonomous work of art.³¹

The constitution of the aesthetic object on the basis of a presented work of art is the burden of the aesthetic experience.³² The total experience of this object, though intuitive and non-inferential, is by no means an instant satisfaction; it involves a unified but composition process which is spread out in time. This begins with a transition from the natural attitude of everyday life to one which is properly aesthetic, and concurrently, from ordinary sense perception to aesthetic perception. While sense perception of a present work of art is the basis of an aesthetic experience, it is perception correlative with the aesthetic attitude—i.e., aesthetic perception—which is the primal element of the aesthetic experience. For while ordinary sense perception precedes an aesthetic experience, it does not always lead to it; it does so only when, during sense perception, the perceiving subject is struck with an initial gestalt quality which invokes a desire for satiation.

³¹ Tymieniecka, pp. 391-392.

³² Dufrenne subscribes to Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the primacy of perception in the aesthetic experience; in this case, every constituted aesthetic object finds its basis on a present perceptual phenomenon, usually the work of art. Ingarden, however, asserts that it is possible to have an aesthetic experience of an aesthetic object without starting from the cognitive perception of a presented work of art, as when a poem is enjoyed from memory (Ingarden, p. 289). This article will limit itself to the aesthetic experience of a work of art, aiming, however, at the essence of the aesthetic experience in general.

This desire or preliminary emotion is usually strong enough to cause suspension of the ontological question that belongs to the natural attitude and of concern with theoretical and practical ends beyond the object; in other words, it induces an aesthetic attitude.³³ This is a disinterested, non-investigative attitude which has a visionary quality that is fixed on the presented phenomena or appearances and their relations with each other and with the whole.³⁴ With this shift from ordinary cognition to such an attitude, perception becomes truly aesthetic.

In aesthetic perception, the proper focus is now on the object's immediate presence, its abundance of qualities and nuances and unrepeatable peculiarities which reveal themselves according to the viewer's sensitivity and attention. The viewer's intuitive grasp of specific harmonies or formal ensembles takes place in temporal succession, from various perspectival abridgements. All this, however, is accomplished against a horizon of fulness, for aesthetic perception is dynamic: each ensemble or subwhole is integrated, even as it is perceived, in the context of the other ensembles or sub-wholes. The cumulative experience of these specific qualities or ensembles of qualities culminates in their harmonization into a unique and organic whole, which is the constituted aesthetic object: "The harmony quality, and in particular, its qualities, is the final principle of the creation and of the existence of an aesthetic object."³⁵ Before this moment of emergence of a harmonized totality, there is no realized aesthetic object to speak of. From this point, what follows is the positive consummation of the aesthetic experience in immediate, intuitive intercourse with the re-created work of art, the aesthetic object.

The aesthetic experience is thus a composite of several elements: 1. sense perception: presence as mediated by bodily senses; 2. transition from sense perception to aesthetic

³³ Ingarden, pp. 295-300.

³⁴ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Penguin Books, 1961). p. 25.

³⁵ Ingarden, p. 307.

perception, from natural attitude to aesthetic attitude; 3. the constitution of an aesthetic object on the basis of the present work of art; 4. intuitive contemplation in the immediate presence of the realized aesthetic object.³⁶ These are, however, not segmented stages: they run their fluid course to fulfillment in the unity and self-sufficiency of the total experience. Thus the aesthetic experience is truly a new "present", a secluded whole which is at the same time "integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences."³⁷

If the aesthetic experience is marked by such synthetic unity and disengagement from ordinary experience, (and here Dufrenne's notion of the reciprocity between experience and object is illustrated) it is only because this experiential unity is rooted in the structural wholeness of the aesthetic object: "The space and time of an art-object are such as to remove this object from every condition and determination of historical reality, from what we call the real world."³⁸ Thus the structure of the work of art assumes pre-eminence as the essential determinant of the aesthetic experience and as the ground of integration of a new concept of beauty which seeks to reconcile historical antinomies between subject and object, spirit and matter, form and meaning.

III.

Phenomenological emphasis on the intentional mode of existence of the aesthetic object reconciles the traditional dualism of subject and object in relation to beauty. Beauty

³⁶ Cf. Spiegelberg, p. 588 on the phases of the aesthetic experience as outlined by Dufrenne in *Phénoménologie de l'Expérience esthétique*, and Ingarden, p. 307.

³⁷ Kaminsky, p. 319.

³⁸ Arturo B. Fallico, *Art and Existentialism* (N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 19. This does not mean that the experience of art is entirely irrelevant to the general stream of historical existence. The aesthetic experience, because of the special attitude and perception peculiar to it, involves a withdrawal from the world of ordinary experience; but the consummated total experience is integrated into the whole of life *ex post*. Cf. Ingarden, p. 298.

is neither of the subject alone nor of the object alone, but of their dialogical interaction in the intended phenomenon. A thing is beautiful only insofar as it presents itself as beautiful to a perceiving subject. The beauty of a work of art is a function both of what presents itself to the perceiver and of noetic capacity to realize the aesthetic fulness of the perceived work in the constituted aesthetic object. Beauty is actualized only in creative perception: "The sense of beauty is the susceptibility to the dynamic life of forms, and this life cannot be apprehended except by a corresponding dynamic process in ourselves."³⁹ In literary criticism, for instance, it has been generally accepted, since I. A. Richards, that no two people experience exactly the same poem.⁴⁰ The rhythm, the tonal nuances, the association and undertones realized in the poem-object emerge from both the poem-as-work and the reader's cumulative poetic sensibilities. Thus there can be no genuine discrepancy between beauty judgments, for each is predicated of a unique, irreproducible aesthetic object. This, however, involves no deliverance to subjectivism: for the range of realizable beauty is dictated by the structural quality of the autonomous work of art.

A central contemporary insight is the recognition of structural unity as essential to phenomenal beauty, here understood as the fulness of aesthetic value in a perceived work of art. The notion of structural unity involves the organization of formal elements into a single organic whole, from which emerges a unique perceptual quality apprehensible in direct and immediate intuition.⁴¹ This wholeness is something more than the "gestalt unity" of all ordinary sense perception, which, far from being an inner unity, is a fusion resulting from an organizing principle outside the intended object. This external principle is man's pre-established tendency to perceive everything in terms of configurational wholes; the gestalt unity of ordinary perceptual objects is an achievement of human psychological processes, as distinguished

³⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 151.

⁴⁰ Osborne, p. 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

from aesthetic unity, which is intrinsic to the intuited work of art.⁴²

This structural unity cannot be deduced from a sequential consideration of isolated forms or elements, as a logical unity can be. It is intuited in the immediate presence of the perceived work. For the aesthetic object is organic precisely because the whole is always more than the simple sum of its parts: the living network of reciprocal relationships among the interpresent forms gives each one a specific character it would not have in isolation, and at the same time colors the total form with a pervading tonality, a unique identity which Ingarden calls the "harmony quality"⁴³ of the whole work of art. Thus the coherence of aesthetic elements within a work of art is not due to mere adjacency or succession; their relationship is one of necessary compresence within the total form.⁴⁴

This interaction of constitutive forms and their integration in a harmonious whole is not as unidimensional as the temporality of verbal expression makes it appear. The compresent forms in a work of art are internally related to one another and to the whole along a number of simultaneous dimensions, for each elemental form pertains to several different dimensions at the same time.⁴⁵ A red blot, for instance, has a definite quality, its hue; weight, for it is more or less brilliant; limits—its area and extent; shape; texture: it may be thick or transparent, smooth or coarse. Within this single red patch, all these dimensions coexist and interact; and along each of these different dimensions, this elemental form interacts with other forms to achieve a number of simultaneous harmonies of qualities or formal sub-wholes. These sub-harmonies, themselves necessarily compresent, unite in a poly-

⁴² Wolfgang Kohler, *Gestalt Psychology* (N.Y.: The New American Library, 1961), p. 94.

⁴³ Ingarden, p. 306.

⁴⁴ Fallico, pp. 27-29.

⁴⁵ Paul Klee on *Modern Art* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1961), pp. 15-17.

harmony: they interact and converge into an over-all "harmony quality". It is in the intuition of this harmony quality that the specific beauty of the aesthetic object is realized in aesthetic experience.

In an organic unity, therefore, nothing is unnecessary: any change in specific forms or relations alters the total aesthetic configuration and can make of a work of art an inert or chaotic mass. However, organic unity as an aesthetic phenomenon is not as absolute as it is in description, nor would it be desirably or possibly so. The necessity of the constituent to the aesthetic structure is always relative to the specific qualities involved and to their respective importance in the total form. Necessary compresence does not imply equal formal weight: a minor line or stanza, for instance, may be removed from a poem without serious damage to its identity as that specific poem; but the fact remains that the other parts of the poem suffer a certain diminution of the aesthetic life which they had when the lost part existed and stood to them in the particular relation in which it actually did.

If aesthetic unity were nothing more than the organization of formal elements, then beauty would be a simple matter of compositional mastery—the perceptual coherence of shapes, tones, sounds, patterns — and meaning would be an irrelevant issue. But histories and critical studies of art witness to creative vision as something that involves but is much more than the sensitivity of the senses. For aesthetic form is never form in itself in the narrow traditional sense: it is always form-as-meaning and form as embodiment of meaning.

It was Henri Focillon who first obliterated all duality between form and meaning when he asserted the very notion of form to be incomprehensible except as meaningful form. Form is not an inert perceptual shape or outline on which meaning may be super-imposed as a sign assumes, through force of convention, a significance extrinsic to it: "Le signe

signifie, alors que la forme se signifie." Form means, and "the fundamental meaning of form is a formal meaning."⁴⁶

This formal meaning is the intrinsic significance of the total form as a dynamic unity of necessary constituent parts fused into an organic presence by the creative intensity of the artist. It is the meaning of aesthetic form as the fixation in a living image of "the highest moments of phenomena", a unique intuitive interpretation of the perceptual dynamism of lines, colors, tones, rhythms, and patterns that make up the inexhaustible world of sensuous reality. In a painting, for instance, it may be the tonal nuances of color; the play of balance and tension; the shifting relationships of mass and space and shadow, of horizontals and diagonals; repetition, gradation, and blunt contrast of lines, colors, textures — all ineliminatable from and integrated within a unified visual structure.

But formal meaning is not the only meaning art, and therefore created beauty, expresses. Created form cannot be merely *se signifiant*; aside from being form, it is, to use K. Buller's terms, necessarily a symptom and often a sign: it has a *signifié* other than its meaning as form. Ingarden recognizes in the structural components of the work of art the indivisible function of constituting the total structure and of embodying or creating values; thus the emergent object is a living unity of forms-embodying-meaning.⁴⁷

On an intrinsic level, there is an embodied meaning of which the work of art is a symptom, one which is distinct from the formal meaning but inseparable from it and necessarily expressed by it.

Because aesthetic form is a humanly intended and humanly directed unity of sensuous forms, its very existence and meaning as form necessarily expresses the unique and conceptually incommunicable meaning of the human individual behind it. The work of art is always somebody's; the personal

⁴⁶ Henri Focillon, *Vie des Formes* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), p. 10.

⁴⁷ Tymieniecka, p. 392.

meaning and spirit of the sensitive, feeling, living, imagining subject behind it is the creative force of the constitutive forms and the binding power by which these forms cohere within the unified structural whole.⁴⁸ It is this inner life which directs and determines the formal meaning, and which is made phenomenal in the total created form as a primary and necessary embodied meaning.

It is this primary and necessary significance of all works of art that Paul Klee refers to when he speaks of the "happy association between my vision of life—Weltanschauung—and pure artistic craftsmanship."⁴⁹ It is this that makes the tremendous difference between the tranquil romanticism of the Delacroix *Pieta* and the steely anguish of Van Gogh's copy of it,⁵⁰ or between Soutine's and Rembrandt's recognizably similar versions of *The Flayed Ox*, a difference scarcely reducible to a matter of degree of talent or skill.⁵¹ The pent-up rage and mental torment of madmen are somehow infused into their sensuous creations that even the most meticulous and abstract forms of lunatic art cannot fail to embody and express a macabre meaning which always manages to disturb.⁵²

The intrinsic meaning of form — Focillon's formal meaning and the primary embodied meaning — is what is expressed in all arts, even in those totally devoid of subject matter. Thus Merleau-Ponty speaks of "the allusive logic of the perceived word" by which even the pure forms of art force us to admit "a truth defined as the painting's cohesion within itself, the presence of a unique principle in it which affects each means of expression with a certain contextual value."⁵³

On the basis of this essential form-meaning unity within the aesthetic structure, beauty, whenever it emerges from the organic unity of the aesthetic object, can never be purely

⁴⁸ Fallico, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Klee, p. 53.

⁵⁰ André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1953), pp. 580-581.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 612-613.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 531.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, p. 57.

sensory beauty: phenomenal beauty, insofar as it is found in the work of art, is always meaningful beauty.⁵⁴ For where form fails to rise to the level of meaningful form—i.e., 1. where formal meaning is absent, because the constitutive aesthetic elements are not successfully consummated in a unified “intensive manifold”,⁵⁵ and therefore, 2. where there is no primary embodied meaning to speak of, because the inadequacy of the form-as-meaning has failed to express the creative spirit in the embodied form — then there is no beauty and therefore no art to speak of.

While the formal meaning and the primary embodied meaning are present in all successful art forms, there is a more contingent level on which a unified aesthetic form may claim to embody meaning. This secondary embodied meaning is the meaning people are generally aware of and identify with great ease (usually through association of ideas and images), for it is more deliberately incorporated into the aesthetic form and more obviously expressed by the form. It is the perceptual or conceptual *signifié* outside the work of art and referred to by the work of art, one which is more readily verbalized and is often taken to be the only and total meaning a work of art can have. This secondary embodied meaning is what is generally specified as the content or subject matter of academic painting and sculpture, all representational art, programme music; in the literary field, it is the totality of ideas and realities of which the elemental words of a poem or a novel are essentially a sign. To illustrate on a rather simplistic scale: it is, for instance, the terror of the Spanish Civil War in Picasso's *Guernica*, the narrated

⁵⁴ Here lies one essential difference between natural beauty and artistic beauty: natural beauty claims meaningful form only in the sense of form-as-meaning, in the sense of the living exuberance of complex interrelated forms (and even here, the intensity and compactness that come from deliberate organization are rare). Created beauty, art in the real sense, is the unity of form-as-meaning and embodied meaning (in all cases, at least the primitive embodied meaning) because it is the expression, through a unified sensuous form, of an individual human person, his inalienable meaning and spirit.

⁵⁵ The expression is T. E. Hulme's.

chase in Prokofieff's *Peter and the Wolf*, or the traditional symbolic content in Christian art.

But whatever the embodied meaning, any opposition between form and meaning, between the spiritual and the sensual, loses validity. In the case of formal meaning and intrinsic embodied meaning, it is impossible to think of meaning in separation from the aesthetic form because the whole organic form *is* the formal meaning and *necessarily* reflects the creative human spirit behind it. Thus beauty is a question, not of unification of form with meaning, but of the organic form's very existence. Given the fact of the existence of a unified aesthetic form, the existence of a formal meaning which is one with the form and a primary embodied meaning which is intrinsically and necessarily unified with the form, is a simultaneous fact.⁵⁶

In the case of a work of art with a secondary embodied meaning, which is not a necessary function of the form, beauty becomes, in addition to a question of the existence of unified form, one of unification of this form with the secondary embodied meaning. In this case beauty emerges where this definite and distinct meaning cannot be expressed or experienced except in organic fusion with or inherence in the form. Where it is possible to experience one in separation from the other, i.e., where either assumes a superimposed character or is incommensurate with the other, there is no beauty and hence no work of art to speak of. For instance, a sentimental Hoffman portrait of Christ fails to attain the status of art precisely because the inadequacy of the aesthetic form or the human vision renders it incommensurate with the profound sense of divine presence it sought to embody. It is by this default of total unification that the work falls short of aesthetic fulness and is therefore ugly in the real sense: for with Croce, we "do not recognize any ugliness save the

⁵⁶ The relation of the primary embodied meaning to the organic form is so necessary and intimate only because, in the creative process, the organic form could not have come to being save "à travers un temperament" (Emile Zola, quoted by Cassirer, p. 145): the primary embodied meaning itself determined the creation of that specific aesthetic form.

anti-aesthetic or the inexpressive which can never form part of the aesthetic fact, being, on the contrary, its antithesis."⁵⁷

Beauty emerges from the incarnation of spirit in a material form; it appears out of the oneness of meaning and aesthetic form (itself an organic unity of constitutive forms) in embodiment. Where this living unity is achieved, expression becomes an aesthetic fact, and the result is truly beautiful,⁵⁸ however unfamiliar or difficult to appreciate according to classical standards.

Etienne Souriau asserts this same living unity of form and meaning when he says that the work of art consists, not of sensations as such, but of *qualia*, phenomenal entities revealing the spirit in its creative spontaneity. For phenomenal beauty partakes of the Greek *phainomenon's* radical significance: i.e., as phenomenal only because it is not mere appearance, but appearance comprehensible only in the fulness of its peculiar world of meaning, which belongs inevitably to the Life-world of human meaning. Thus art becomes truly an expression of man in his totality, and a philosophy which ignores aesthetics necessarily presents a mutilated image of man.⁵⁹

In fact, a major aesthetic theme is the contemporary understanding of art as a language which expresses the inexpressible by rendering meaning visible in aesthetic form. For, as Focillon says, "Life is form, and form is a mode of

⁵⁷ Croce, p. 88.

⁵⁸ Within the context of this description, beauty may be identified with expressiveness if the work of art is taken to depend, not on the emotion or expressed spirit alone, but on this spirit insofar as it is the creative principle of a unified form—i.e., insofar as it is expression through organic form. Likewise, form may be identified with beauty, but only insofar as it is form made whole by a creative human spirit or emotion—i.e., insofar as it is meaningful form or expressive form. Thus the irreconcilability of opposition between the expressionists (Croce, Collingwood) and the formalists (Clive Bell, Fry) is eliminated.

⁵⁹ Etienne Souriau, selection from *Esthétique et Philosophie, Anthologie des Philosophes Français Contemporains* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), ed. Armand Cuvillier, p. 202. Cf. Editor's introduction, p. 192.

life." Thus the structural organism which is the work of art — and, ultimately, the whole world of art — constitutes an order of created meaning, "a metaphor of the universe".⁶⁰ Thus the aesthetic experience becomes truly "the birth of meaning in the womb of perception."⁶¹ Thus phenomenal beauty the oneness of form and meaning in the organic structure of the aesthetic object, is the key to the revelation of man, of life, of being itself in its historical reality, incarnate but universal, intersubjective and transcendent.

In this phenomenological insight is completed the contemporary inversion of the classical order: for now aesthetics is not a footnote to *a priori* speculations on being: it is art that leads to metaphysics. And visible beauty, which in current thought is the triumph and the realization of art, unveils being itself, not through arid generalization, but in the immediate and more real life of forms in the context of human existence and human history.

⁶⁰ Focillon, p. 8.

⁶¹ Van Haecht, pp. 114-116.