ART AND THE PLATONIC MATRIX

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(Sydney 2004)

JÜRGEN LAWRENZ

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Art and the Platonic Matrix, by Jürgen Lawrenz

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In Lieu of a Foreword

It is a rare privilege for an author, after asking colleagues for one or two commendatory sentences, to receive enthusiastic 'mini-reviews' instead, which would have been suitable for a Foreword. Accordingly I share the full text of their encomia on the dust jacket with the reader on these pages where they might otherwise have found their place.

In sorting through the explosions and implosions of aesthetic philosophizing from the days of Plato, Jürgen Lawrenz marches securely to the present, effectively questioning his predecessors' cultural assumptions, showing how aesthetic speculation is culture-specific even in our time when beauty is often ugly. He demonstrates that in the field of aesthetics, old beliefs die hard, and when they are vague old beliefs, they can hardly be killed at all.

Writing in a lively contemporary style, Lawrenz opens new windows on aesthetic speculation that face even onto the current art world in which "marketing makes beautiful" is advanced as an axiomatic statement by its purveyors. Lawrenz is ready to call their bluff.

To read this book, you will have to play with possibilities you have not considered before. It is considerably more revolutionary, revisionary than is apparent from its initial chapters. The sentence on p. 10 shows his hand, simply and admirably: "This issue, intentionality transformed into communication, is the key never discovered on the inside of the Platonic Matrix."

Lawrenz has put a lifetime of thought and experience, happy enlightenment and not so happy frustration, imaginative speculation and common sense, into it. It comes across as appropriately personal in the way that if philosophy is not personal it is fraudulent.

A most admirable synthesis of a wide array of philosophical, scientific and humanistic expositions of aesthetic understanding, from Plato to last year. But much more than a synthesis, the book is a sorting through inadequate formulations of aesthetics which acquired a ripple effect through history and by now needed logical scrutiny. Lawrenz's feet are always on the ground as a sensing human being, but his head is in the intellectual air of his peers, and his heart is manifestly in the right place. Aesthetic thinkers have had to become secular prophets in our time; this trait is also pervasive in this book as Lawrenz writes with conviction and passion.

Thomas Kuhn, Professor of English, University of Toronto

Lawrenz's book tells a prodigious and enchanting story about the "myth of the given" in the domain of aesthetics, that is about the "Platonic matrix" which casts a long shadow into present-day deliberations in aesthetics and leads into a sort of cul-the-sac. It is written like a detective story – in spite of the fact that we know, from the beginning, whodunit or who committed the original sin. Lawrenz sets in a row the accomplices of the "crime" that contributed to the domination and preservation of that myth. In this intellectually engaging and demanding enterprise, he exhibits erudite knowledge, sometimes verging on brilliancy, of main issues in the domain of aesthetics, philosophy of art, history of art, literature. He is in good command of the aesthetic tradition in so-called continental and analytic philosophy; especially knowledgeable, moulded masterly and invaluable, are the parts concerning the views of German idealistic philosophy (Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel).

Lawrenz's fascinating book casts new light on the relations between beauty, goodness and truth, taken for granted in the aesthetic tradition from Plato onward, challenging some of our most deeply ingrained preconceptions or, better, platitudes. This book is very instructive in its own terms; it teems with numerous literary and philosophical examples and will, undoubtedly, help to open the door to further reflections on this topic. Lawrenz challenges steady dogmas in the field of aesthetics and offers the readers an intriguing and sometimes uncomfortable picture of present state of art in that domain. The book represents a good and solid groundwork for further steps in the task of a complete rearrangement and remapping of the furniture in the aesthetic field.

Bozidar Kante, Professor of Aesthetics, University of Maribor

Jürgen Lawrenz is an original voice in aesthetics, whose writing bears ample evidence of his committed engagement with the question of the nature of art and artistic activity. His arguments are subtle and demanding, requiring a not inconsiderable effort from the reader. Many disposable books have been written on aesthetics and art criticism which merely reflect passing fads and fashion. This work is essential reading, which will be on the shelves for a long time to come.

Geoffrey Klempner, Director of Studies, International Society for Philosophers

Contents

Acknowledgements

I have greatly benefited from the opportunity to discuss the ideas of this book with a number of scholars, of whom it would be better said that they are friends who share my concerns for humanity and humanism, as it is expressed in the arts. I owe to them the stimulus of debate and challenge; as well as a receptive and constructive approach to criticism which helped me to keep my goals steadfastly in sight. For this I thank *Matthew del Nevo* (Sydney), *Wayne Cristaudo* (Hong Kong), *Michael Gormann-Thelen* (Hannover), *Bozidar Kante* (Maribor), *Geoffrey Klempner* (Sheffield), *Gottfried Paasche* and *Joaquin Kuhn* (Toronto). A special thank you to Joaquin Kuhn for reading the book with a fine toothcomb and saving me from the infelicities that tend to creep into any text as if they had a will of their own!

Encouragement is too slight a word for the contribution made by *Caterina Pangallo*, who suffered with me the birth pangs of the whole book and read the manuscript with an unfailing eye for stylistic ambiguities. Best of all, she kept prodding me to say it as I meant to say it. It was her insistence on "making it flow" that resulted in a better book than my first draft would have suggested.

PROLOGUE

What is Art, really?

> "Listen, Boito," Verdi said, "I have figured out the true demon, the real secret behind all art." Saying these words, the maestro's face conveyed a sense of childlike innocence. Boito looked at him questioningly.
>
> "The secret of art is boredom."
>
> "Boredom?"
>
> "Yes. All effects suffer their natural attrition and make us yawn at them after a few exposures. We keep having to find new ones. That's what aesthetic progress is all about."
>
> "Bravo, Maestro!"
>
> FRANZ WERFEL *Verdi, Roman der Oper*

THE WISDOM OF ARTISTS does not usually make its way into aesthetic treatises. It is too much like their art—spontaneous, oracular, ambiguous. And multi-facetted, like truth and beauty, whose custodians they are. These are the features of art that worried Plato immensely, who went on to requisition the soul, where truth and beauty have their seat, for philosophy, while pronouncing his anathema over art. It was the moment in history when rational enlightenment took up the torch of humanness and sought a safe haven for it in discourse and dialectics.

This legacy obscures for us denizens of the modern era, industrious purveyors of aesthetic theories, the natural animosity of philosophy to art. Science and metaphysics between them seek to reduce the cosmos to simple laws, but cannot surmount the enigma in the question "What is art?" Like Proteus of the ancient legend, it slips through their fingers at every touch, refusing to be defined and fettered in verbal encapsulation. But if this fundamental premise of aesthetics remains unsettled, how can we put our trust in the efficacy of its other principles?

It is a problem that has kept philosophy restless. One after an-

other of its protagonists wrestled with it and sought to bring the truant to order. Yet even a cursory glance shows aesthetics taking premises for granted that were born and bred under different skies and constellations than art. Beauty and truth, arthood and objecthood, imitation and representation, form and idea, expression and feeling: we know and love them all and do not mind that they have nested in the heart of our thinking about art.

But somehow it seems they are cuckoo's eggs. We have asked too much of them. The fledglings of art persist in following their own orientation, thriving on tacit, vague, intuitive, ambiguous, equivocal, subconscious and spontaneous impulses that are wholly inimical to philosophy, revealing them to be strangers to each other. Yet those impulses are the very connivances that infuse our experience of art with truth and beauty and ideas.

We modernists have dared to assert, contra Plato, that art serves to *enrich* our lives and in some ways reveals the specifically human stamp on creation. Also, that we can learn something about ourselves from art in regions of the soul where the torch of philosophy is too dim. What this entails, however, is a radical confrontation with an all-pervasive Platonism which, to paraphrase a famous apophthegm, has been obsolete for so long that, in fact, no-one noticed that it is still alive.

The question, "what is art?" can be answered. Then the other principles will follow suit and take on the vibrancy and colour which are art's own. Art is too important to leave it to the experts, said one wise thinker. We should like to give *wings* to that thought.

SYDNEY 2010

I

The Platonic Matrix

Seeing and hearing build
bridges to the soul.
Oswald Spengler

Before he encountered Socrates, Plato was still fired with poetic aspirations of his own. Well might we wonder at the strength of iconoclasm instilled by the mentor in his young pupil! For after Socrates' death, he changed his tune, adopting a philosophical ambition that considered only the moral, paedagogical and especially epistemic dimensions of art, finding them to be obviously deficient. In the result, however, he bequeathed to his successors a clutch of misconceptions on its nature that impaired our relationship to art for two millennia. We give the name *Platonic matrix* to this collection of principles in our book.

Some writers propose they are passé. But this is an optical illusion; for whether we look into Aquinas or Danto, or anywhere in between, we find the framework still in place. However, the modern era abrogated Plato's negative attitude. Same principles, new orientation. We turned the tables on Plato when he left a crack in the wall for the arts to crawl back into civilised society, applying his ideas to the very metier he spurned.[1]

But an important consideration enters the picture here that has not been submitted to the scrutiny for which it seems to cry out. Namely, whether the arts embraced by the Platonic matrix reflect its principles or whether philosophers and experts have simply presumed this to be the case. We open a great expert's book and find him saying, "I shall discuss the history of art, that is ... of picture-making and of statue-making."[2] All true; but the writer adds no-

[1] Plato, *Republic* 607c.
[2] E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London 1955, p. 18.

where that pictures answer a deep spiritual need and are made with the blood and sweat of artists in the throes of a great experience they wish us to share. Gombrich and a legion of colleagues only want to give us "things of beauty that are joy forever", and suppress how few of these are *art*. For this and many other reasons, art and philosophy don't ever seem to be fully *en rapport.* In consequence art has mostly gone its own way in blissful disregard of the dicta of aesthetics, while on its own part philosophy has worked with smoke and mirrors to achieve a semblance of consonance that inspires little confidence in its aptness.

In this first glance at the Platonic matrix, we shall inspect the conceptual pillars that sustain it and indicate briefly what we propose to do with them. The paradox has been noted that most were not considered fit for art by Plato, but added by later thinkers over his head—with admittedly many changes to the lighting.

1. *Arthood and objecthood.* This, our first item of consideration, is at once the oldest and still the most debated concept pair on the itinerary. The idea of arthood understands creative activity as a specific category in which poetry, music, dance, drama, sculpture, painting etc. are lumped together and segregated *in toto* from all other human activities. Objecthood in turn supposes that the outcome of artistic production is some kind of object—and this may be taken in a wider sense so as to include intentional objects.

But this is precisely the problem that has embroiled aestheticians in thousands of learned debates, all *sans issue*.[3] A description of an object must necessarily end in a determinate concept in which the aesthetic criteria of arthood cannot be included. In turn the concept of arthood encounters insuperable problems with the relationship between various arts—e.g. what is common to architecture and comedy?—which, if at all, can only be decided intuitively. But a creative artist or an art lover might well question the aesthetician's priorities. He would wish to know what he has to say about the *meaning* of art in our life. He would properly remind us of Aristotle, who explained that philosophy arose from our wish to

[3] Typical for a fairly recent publication is Jerrold Levinson's book *Music, Art and Metaphysics*, Cornell University Press 1990, which devotes three chapters and nearly 60 pages to the topic, without coming to a conclusion that the author himself considers binding

know. Well, where is the philosopher who explained that *art exists because we wish to understand?*

2. *Paedagogy and epistemology.* Whether artistic activity involves a moral or paedagogical obligation has been hotly debated for centuries. It was a central concern for Plato, the Church and other educators, but is frequently repudiated by artists and aestheticians.

That aesthetics must stand in some kind of relationship to the theory of knowledge was also asserted by Plato, and this claim was taken very seriously by Renaissance artists, who studied science in order to render the truth of facts, seeking to bring the Platonic ideas to light. This effort was eventually abandoned as foreign to the inner nature of art; yet it had long-lasting repercussions on the related issue of truth in art. What kind of truth?

3. *Truth and Beauty*. Tasso introduces his great epic romance with some lines on this question:

> *... truth conveyed in verse of gentle kind*
> *To read perhaps will move the dullest hearts;*
> *So we, if children young diseased we find,*
> *Anoint with sweets the potions sharp we give;*
> *They drink deceived; and so deceived they live.*[4]

Here is paedagogy and truth! Make them swallow the bitter bill by coating it with sweet verses! Art wears an apparel of beauty; it is the consummate seducer (how often we hear Nietzsche saying this!). For a whole millennium, philosophers took the words out of each other's mouth that art is beauty, beauty art, not one of them stopping to look at our great art to see if this is actually true!

But the truth Tasso has in mind is nothing other than religion, revealed truth. Strange to say that Hegel still echoed similar sentiments (see Ch. II); but since then a great scepticism about religious and aesthetic truths has consigned both to the margins of aesthetic philosophy; and it seems that beauty has become a similarly irrelevant category.

In our pages it will be suggested that beauty is so rubbery a term as to be almost unserviceable, while truth, understood as absolute, makes art impossible. Human nature is ambiguous—its

4 Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*, trans. Edw. Fairfax, I, 12-16.

saving grace! Hence truth in the human (rather than metaphysical) context is focused on conation and self-discovery; and since art reflects all this, it represents most truly the human soul's self-entanglement.

4. *Mimesis and Idea*. Although the mimetic impulse is basic to human life, it incurred Plato's displeasure—from the best of motives! But his indiscriminate jumbling of spiritual utterance and the bric-a-brac of social life gave birth to the notion that artists *imitate* nature and are therefore engaged on a cognitively inferior enterprise.

In modern theories this led to the peculiar belief that photography killed art. But we have to confront the likelihood that both Plato's doctrine and the non-representational impulse of contemporary art rest on a desperate misunderstanding. Not only because it is rooted in the concepts of arthood and objecthood, but also from a complete disregard of the basic human fact that imitation is fundamental to learning in every mode of human activity. Accordingly the most notable absentee in the literature is the thought that *art is the mode of human self-exploration* and leads to self-discovery; that it is the *heuristic* mode of existence par excellence and that its objects bear the *creative signature* of the human being.

Instead the most sustained effort to overcome the Platonic anathema of imitation is found in the proposition that works of art embody 'the idea'. As Cicero famously said, Phidias did not sculpt a representation, but the *idea* of Zeus. Centuries later, Schopenhauer re-affirmed this principle. In a sense, the imitation is of secondary importance, its chief purpose being to give access to the idea. His exaltation of music is based on this conception, since music succeeds in depicting purely mental states without having to lean on empirical objects. In music, the auditor does not have to overcome the surface appeal of a painted scene—the impact is immediate and unfiltered, and aimed straight at the soul.

Yet despite its longevity and near-ubiquity in modern philosophy, this doctrine is a mistake. Ideas are concepts, not aesthetic features. Therefore they do not appear. To suggest that an idea leaps out of a work in the act of contemplation is to indulge in the intentional fallacy. To suppose on the other hand that a beholder can internalise it after reading the label is tantamount to render-

ing the aesthetic experience superfluous; or else that the painted scene or musical texture can undergo such a transformation in the beholder's mind. Both these suggestions are absurd. In contemporary art, they led to the nondescript decoration of surfaces and 'compositions' like Cage's *4'33"*, which invite the audience to create their own work of art from a mere suggestion.[5] But what is this other than artists laying down their tools and asking the audience to do their work for them?

5. *Object mentality*. One look around the commodities market leaves us in no doubt about the status of artistic products. They are *objects*. Yet only a second's thought is required to see that this insistence *erodes* the concept of art. In our time, it has given rise to theoretical notions with not a jot of self-evidence behind them, for example Danto's claim that "any definition of art must compass the Brillo boxes."[6] He cannot make good on it: for it posits that any commonplace object can be 'transfigured' by a mere act of consent. As an argument, it runs around in circles, for if everything can be art, then nothing is art.[7]

6. *Surveying the matrix*. These few remarks serve as hints for an agenda that must immediately get to grips with their relevance to the subject matter. For it is of considerable importance to realise that, if taken at face value, the above criteria amount to an abrogation of art as a value-bearing human endeavour, on which in consequence the dedication, attention and intellectual power of a thinker is wasted—and this is not mentioning the passion and imagination both artists and art lovers invest in it. Another outcome is that vis-à-vis the crafts, the quality of art objects alone does not

[5] Cage's 'work' asks a pianist to sit for four minutes and 33 seconds at the keyboard without touching it, and the audience to sit there is silence and endure it. It seems impossible for anyone not to see the joke; but such is the confusion about 'art' in our time that considerably more than 4'33" worth of verbiage has been concocted on it.

[6] Arthur Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace—A Philosophy of Art*, Harvard University Press 1981, p. vii.

[7] It promoted a notion which happens to be the latest fashion blown in by the wind, that art is what society agrees to accept as art, i.e. the 'institutional theory of art'; cf. George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1974. It is obvious at first glance, however, that such a definition can be valid only on the day it is written, nor can it commit members of any other society, whether historical or contemporary.

provide a sufficient warrant for the persistence with which we nurture them or look to them for something better than the crafts provide.

Historically the effect of Plato on aesthetic literature has been to provoke a large number of salvage operations. Key terms of his philosophy, never intended for art, were put into the forge and brought into aesthetics in their new shape to support the rebuilt mansion. Thus Plato's equation of goodness with beauty inspired scholastic thinkers to the conception that *Truth* and *Beauty* are implicated in artistic creativity as simulacra of God's creativity; the theory of *Ideas* led to the hypothesis that art is an appeal to the imagination for the construction of 'ulterior' realities lurking behind its representational facades; and so on.

Directly we are given a charter for our enquiry—namely a close scrutiny of the key terms of the Platonic Matrix. The following six points state in brief our objections to the obsessive preoccupation of aesthetics with philosophical principles of highly dubious pedigree, which nonetheless managed to obscure the true nature of art and its role in human affairs:

(1) that *beauty* is neither intrinsic nor indispensable to art; accordingly many supreme works bluntly contradict this naive expectation;

(2) that *truth* in art has no relation to the dogmatic or logical truth of science and philosophy, but is exclusively concerned with human intuitions of truth;

(3) that *ideas* intrude as foreign bodies into the aesthetic integrity of a work; further that (being concepts) they are imperceivable; finally that they cannot add value or meaning to a work;

(4) that the *mimetic impulse*, so far from being morally or philosophically reprehensible, is as indispensable to art as it is to life as the heuristic mode of human existence;

(5) that *expression* cannot reside 'in' a work of art (as the well-recognised dictum of 'intentional fallacy' testifies); nor can it assail the beholder: for the beholder is himself responsible for sensing and responding to it;

(6) that *pleasure* is a collateral effect of the aesthetic experience, not its substance. Great works of art tend rather to

be deeply disturbing, which indicates that an affect other than pleasant enjoyment is the source of our emotional attachment to art.

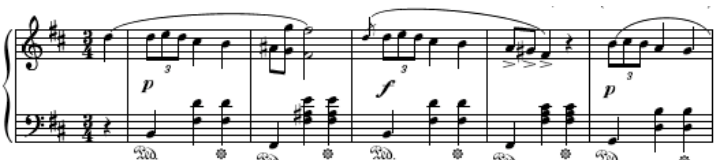
The list is by no means exhaustive; but in any case the important business arising from criticism is the amelioration of those perceived defects and misappropriations. Relatively speaking the bulk of this volume is devoted to criticism: one cannot shift a mountain without using picks and shovels, while the vista opening up as each cartload is carried away tends in the nature of things to be somewhat distant to the view. To occupy them, to live among them, is a second effort, possibly as onerous again as clearing the way.

This simile should put the reader in mind of Alfred Korzybski's exhortation not to confuse the map with the terrain. The Platonic matrix, of course, did worse: it drew up a map with signposts to landmarks that exist nowhere.

But we must also be clearly apprised of the roots of these misconceptions. There are two ways of tracking them down: firstly through perception, whose theory (at least in aesthetic writings) is riddled with obsolete Cartesian malapropisms; and secondly through language, which has ever since Plato's day brought the full weight of its prejudicial concept structure to bear on aesthetic thinking. These issues are also addressed here. But so as not to leave the reader in the dark about the underlying principles which inform all our proceedings, it seems advisable to present them at once, so that we can then commence our journey with at least one positive fundamental criterion in our satchel.

6. *What meaning 'meaning'?* Art is a form of communication. This seems to be an entirely unobjectionable claim. Yet none of the itinerary of the Platonic matrix encourages such a belief by an unequivocal statement that it is so, nor how it can be. If art is its objects, then no plausible explanation can be found to make dead matter speak. Putting paint on it, or carving a figure from it, changes nothing: it is still a mute thing. Dancers are mute too, and music, though sonorous, has no tongue to mould its meanings. Even poetry seems to ask more from us than we can intelligibly repeat in explicit paraphrase. Hence the embarrassed recourse to 'ideas', as the verbal tag that hints (very poorly) at the meaning we seek from a work.

It seems needless to emphasise that the whole notion of communicability thereby hangs in a strange limbo that is neither here nor there, neither fish nor fowl. The term 'aesthetics' refers to perception—precisely the gist of all our difficulties. We cannot see or feel meaning, nor discern the discourse in the seemingly discursive progressions of music. On rare occasions we may see images, like a male figure on a door or knife and fork on a road sign, which we can 'translate' into prose. But what kind of 'prose' semantics could be drawn from this?[8]



The crux of the aesthetic problem is, additionally, that aesthetic phenomena are not even art-specific. They are nothing more than aural, visual or tactile impingement on afferent nerves—in short: data. How can the brain of a human being turn such objective phenomena into intentional communications? Why does a landscape seen from a balcony elicit different emotions than a painting of the same scene by Constable?

This issue, intentionality transformed into communication, is the key never discovered on the inside of the Platonic matrix—partly because no-one looked for it, and partly because it seemed an unnecessary encumbrance on philosophical principles deemed to be sufficient. Now it transpires that there is hardly a resource among that clutter to enlighten us on the nature of the real thing. Hence all the volumes of interpretive appreciation literature.

To prove this point is a fairly straightforward task—a matter of adopting an untrammelled perspective. You have thoughts or emotions you wish to convey to another person. There is a ready-made facility for it: speech. You speak, another hears, communication is accomplished. But there is a mystery hidden in this easy transmission which we never think about. But this is what we must

[8] Chopin, Mazurka op. 30,2, downloaded courtesy of www.free-scores.com.

attend to; and once it has been divulged, it will be seen to be cut from the same cloth as all of our communications modalities.

Let us look at an example.

When someone speaks, their tongue and lips energise a mass of air molecules in such a way as to propel them in waves of a specific undulant frequency and form. When a bottle falls to the floor and shatters, the same kind of emission results. These waves are delivered to the auditory cortex where they are recognised by their form and frequency as particular species of sound: vocal noise here; shattering noise there. The aural faculty then separates one from the other, having resolved that the vocal noise is speech, i.e. intelligible communication. In other words: *a meaning is extracted from the aural phenomenon*. The italics have been added with malice aforethought; for compare this: If those sounds happen to be poetry the same process is enacted, but a qualitatively different attention is bestowed on them, even though the primary function is still to *extract meaning from the aural phenomenon*.

Clearly the same considerations apply to music, the rustling of leaves on a tree, animal cries, echoes. All are borne aloft by the air, and all are categorised into their appropriate pigeon-hole and assigned to the faculty most appropriate to the species of sound in order to derive whatever meaning they hold for the organism.

Interimistically, this invites a possibly startling conclusion: that speech is not a privileged communications modality. It is simply one form of traffic along a very busy route of sound transmissions. The privilege of being discerned as human communication eventuates after the categorisation has been accomplished.

And now, to save me from long-winded piling up of further examples, I invite the reader to form more sentences, but to replace the words 'speech' and 'sound' with 'kinaesthetic/visual/tactile impression', as appropriate to the mode of perception where the source may be acting, dancing, painting and sculpting. From this a distinctive clue will emerge, namely that our sensory apperception of the products of art differs in no way from the perception of all other objects or events. Yet in each case some faculty is responsible for *extracting meaning* from the various impressions and determine the species of meaning that has been received. Later in this book we will have occasion to enlarge on the absolute *priority of the ex-*

traction of meaning; but it is not too early for the reader to be aware of this pecking order—established by an organism whose survival depends on it.

8. *Bridging the gap*. The above makes a point so self-evident that one is thoroughly astonished not to find it as the common currency of the literature. Plainly a mind or soul cannot communicate with another without an empirical conduit. Minds have neither a tongue nor can they irradiate another mind. Fortunately for us, our ancestors were gifted at some stage in their evolution with the means of 'hijacking' our sensory and muscular equipment to serve for this purpose.

We cannot pre-empt the contents of later chapters here; but so much may be anticipated, that *understanding* is the absolutely primary task of our perceptive faculties. Everything else follows on from this. Yet nothing of this seems known to aesthetics inside the Platonic matrix.

To summarise our intentions:

To expose the Platonic matrix as a moribund and unworkable system of aesthetic philosophy. This book comprises a detailed critical account of each of its major criteria, stressing at each turn how and why it fails to meet the principles on which art thrives in the applicable situations. New principles are introduced and described at each step along the way, whose aggregate amounts to a series of doctrines suitable for a new and appropriate philosophy of art.

These are the deliberations here submitted to the reader's scrutiny; and if we add that a touch of *improcrastinabilita* is altogether apt, it may serve as an apology for not committing this volume to a comprehensive new treatise. We take refuge in the hope that the principles which emerge may serve enterprising spirits as a foundation for new ideas commensurate with the needs outlined herein.

II

Beauty, Truth and Art: A Quarrelsome Menage à Trois

Keats' famous line in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* has provoked innumerable learned and impassioned attacks and defences, even entire books devoted to its philosophical merits. But the poet can hardly have deigned to address the cognitive faculty! The line is pure Platonism; a conceit that seeks to harness *imagination* rather than intellect:

> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st:
> Beauty is truth; truth beauty,—That is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.[1]

The sentiment which couples truth with beauty and seeks them in art has a noble pedigree with roots deep in the middle ages. Then in the age of enlightenment, its affinity to rationality moved into focus. Leibniz, arch prophet of harmony as the principle of God's cosmic design, was moved to write that the abundance and variety of created phenomena is emblematic of the supreme host of reason:

> It follows in general that the world is a cosmos, full of ornament; that is, made in such a way that it gives the greatest satisfaction to an intelligent being. … An intelligent being's *pleasure* is simply the perception of beauty, order and perfection.[2]

Here we have it clearly announced that beauty gives pleasure; yet not *mere* pleasure, but something both higher and deeper, namely satisfaction to reason. Human creativity, capable of repli-

[1] *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.
[2] Leibniz, *Resumé of Metaphysics*, §17-9.

cating such beauty, is thus a *speculum* of God's activity, for which the best evidence may found in music as the artistic analogue of mathematics. And this would now urge the philosophical priority of educing *objective* criteria for truth and beauty, especially as they pertain to the arts—behind which lies the further surmise that a law of reciprocal influence may prevail between truth, beauty and art. We see here the influence of Renaissance art theory to which allusion has already been made, and of Pythagorean lore of the mortal soul's road leading to Elysium.

I. PURSUING OBJECTIVITY

1. *Standards of taste*. The difficulty is, of course, that works of art do not speak the language of logic. Hence principles appropriate to this syzygy must be to some extent tacit and rely on faculties of the mind other than pure reason. In the 18th century such enquiries looked to *good taste* as the instrument for safeguarding an appropriate level of rationality in the judging of fine arts. Yet this did not remove to everyone's satisfaction the possible stigma of idiosyncrasy (speak: subjectivity) clinging to the best of taste; nor was it possible to circumvent the inconvenient fact that in their overwhelming majority works of art happen to be the handiwork of men of little 'quality' and breeding.

It could not be denied, in addition, that 'good taste' is one of those portmanteau terms which evaporate into thin air when we try to attach logical handles to them. Good taste relies on nurture, which conflicts in many ways with the endowments handed down by nature. Reconciliation of these disparities was accordingly high on the list of priorities of Enlightenment thinkers. It typified their discovery of nature's beauty and 'natural' self-expression which was then becoming fashionable. What they understood by 'natural' was that one could cry tears in the sight of others without censure; and as to natural beauty, it was self-understood that one meant *nature improved by man*. It was in such company and amid these predilections that Hume was at home, whose essay on good taste is a superb documentation of their philosophical pretensions.[3]

[3] Hume: *Essays*. Liberty Classics, Indianapolis 1987.

Hume had perhaps the sharpest scent of any thinker for philosophical fandangle—his highly effective vandalism of metaphysics speaks volumes for this talent. In this essay he again set out to clear the decks of the flabby notions tossed around in his environment as the hallmark of aesthetic thinking.

Central to this endeavour was the idea that a neutral criterion of beauty must be available to justify the notion of 'good taste'. It seems that the existence of such a criterion is already vouched for by the endurance of many works of art across long stretches of time and cultural boundaries, urging us to accept that by the structure of the human mind these are "naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments", irrespective of educational conditioning. So far, so good; yet personal inclination seems an irremediable part of any upbringing: for how could a uniform education (not to say, drill) equip a gentleman with anything that nature and nurture together failed to instil? We are, after all, concerned with taste, not with horse racing. Yet the idiosyncrasy argument sounds like a weak objection when pitted against longevity of admiration.

In any case, when Hume stipulated those exceedingly choice qualities of his judges: acute discriminative ability, wide-ranging knowledge, high levels of discernment and above all impartiality, he did not imply their exercise in a manner as might (today) be written up as computer software. He was well prepared for the individuality of aesthetic response, noting that "the different humours of particular men [and] the particular manners and opinions of our age and country" summarily militate against uniformity. But still he maintained that impartiality is the yardstick by which to overcome these deficits. "Considering myself as a man in general [I must] forget my individual being and my peculiar circumstances," he writes, appealing to a community of sensibilities in which readers of Homer and Pope's Homer might find equal happiness.

Yet precisely this metier, literature, points to the Achilles heel of his striving. For Pope's English is a superb specimen not only of his handling of the language but of refined good taste; he is deservedly a 'classic' of its literary history. Yet no amount of sweet-talking can succeed with the pretence that he is in Homer's league, either as translator or as poet. So Hume finds himself with a self-defeating argument on his hands: namely the impossibility of ar-

riving at sound conclusions on the merits of poets, when the merits of their language are locked into their poetry and elude comparative valuation altogether.

2. *The transcendental I.* Yet the call to arms had been sounded, and Kant was there to take up the cudgels. To the 'Copernican revolutionary' the deficiency of Hume's exposition signified that aesthetic judgements remained elusive to reason, while 'agreeable sentiments' could hardly flow from the work across the air into our faculties. It was a crucial test of his Copernicanism whether it would pass muster in the effort to stabilise Hume's notions in this new perspective.

This, we should recall, included in its *dramatis personae* a new player, the 'transcendental imagination'—surely a prescient investment with an eye on a future aesthetics! In the *Critique of Pure Reason* it served Kant for grounding objectivity in the subject and dismantling the previous platform of an objective transcendent order. The transcendental subject is the pre-condition of empirical experience—it makes experience possible.[4] How important this principle is to aesthetic philosophy will be revealed in Kant's recourse to it in the *Critique of Judgement*.

Before we approach this work, we should clear up what kind of a subject this transcendental "I" purports to be. Naturally it is impossible in one sentence to give the whole gist of Kant's philosophy; yet if we take our bearings by his trinity of *imagination*, *understanding* and *cognition* we can approach sufficiently close. We will then see sensations and perceptions from empirical states of fact clamouring with inner states for the attention of our faculties. Kant's celebrated dictum that "sensation without understanding is blind and understanding without sensation empty" points to the necessity for synthesis of this information. Hence the manifold of experiences, *sensibility*, requires a complementary faculty of formal categories, *understanding*, as well as an energising agent, *imagination*, capable of manipulating the former for the benefit of the latter. All this, however, is a process integrally coupled to an "I"; and thus it is only in so far as these experiences accompany the motions of *one self-consciousness* that there exists a 'unity of apperceptions'. It

[4] *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 11.

is the anchor dropped into the ground to fasten judgement to the vessel of our faculties.

II. OCCASIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

> Every encounter with art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event.
> GADAMER

3. *The eye of the beholder*. Speaking in contemporary parlance, we should say that Kant denied the possibility of a libidinous fixation on beauty as an adequate *modus operandi* of aesthetic judgements. The notorious phrase 'disinterested contemplation' is the lever by which such an appreciation is unhinged. For Kant dismissed arousal of interest, emotion, possessiveness, moral sense or hedonism as personal colourings that are clearly not intrinsic to beauty. Along with these, individual vagaries in the perception of form and matter occur, as for example in people's differing receptivity to sensations. But the linchpin of his argument is that *seeing* is an essentially passive, *looking* an essentially active mode of experience (ditto for *hearing* and *listening*); and it is on this difference that the *Critique* ultimately hinges.

Kant's 'Copernican' discovery is best appreciated in juxtaposition with the Platonic presumption of beauty as an independently real substrate of the appearing world. Copernicanism implies an 180° rotation of perspective by the *observer* on a matter which thereupon reveals itself to be more felicitously oriented. Let us therefore follow Kant on this route by adopting this new starting point.

We might begin with the wholly uncontentious observation that challenges to our intellect are sources of the most intense pleasure. Accordingly creative and inventive work, and problem-solving at the highest theoretical and philosophical level, all associated with full-scale intellectual exertion, confer this sort of pleasure in such abundance that an 'addict' will continually seek it out, often at great sacrifice in material well-being and comfort. Most other pleasures, on the other hand, are responses to *desires* of various kinds demanding satisfaction; and now the difference is

that on the whole they draw their satisfactions from the world of food, fun, fighting and procreation. But in addressing the question of why the former is 'high', the latter 'low', we find Kant's answer in the explanation that the 'high' is engendered by a sense of freedom enjoyed by "the mind at play", which in such operations is wholly unconstrained by the physical and practical limitations that fence in our other activities. This is the gist of what has been called Kant's 'play aesthetics'.

Does this cancel out the commonplace phrase that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Could we not say that a judgement on beauty has only subjective validity because no cognitive issue is involved? And moreover that the object of contemplation has to be described subjectively (to the best of my abilities) as having those attributes? On this issue Kant sprang his first surprise. All this is quite false, he said, for *a subjective judgement cannot describe the object at all, but only the mental state of the subject*. Whatever sense of beauty impinges on us is not therefore an attribute of the object, but of the subject—specifically of the operations of the subject's faculties.

This is one crucial point in the line of argument. For when we speak of objectively ascertainable cognitive judgements we necessarily appeal to the court of reason, whereas aesthetic judgements pertain to singular instances which confer no advantage on the judge in respect of making judgements upon another object or even the same object at another time or under different conditions of observation. This leaves us with the now obvious conclusion that beauty cannot be *in* the object, for if it were, then everyone would discover it.

Yet so far from terminally disabling objectivity, this subjectivity in fact opens a route to superior insights. If the pleasure of the subject is the sole denominator in a judgement on an object of beauty, then the possibility of universal agreement consists in generalising the subject's aesthetic capacity. Having already learnt from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the subject takes responsibility for the appearing world and, so to speak, masters what appears in this symbiosis of world and mind, we have our handle on converting subjectivity. It leads to the proposition that on the strength of all human beings having possession of much the same mental equip-

ment, one perception of beauty can, at least in some instances, be another's pleasure, so that "we might attribute to others a consensual judgement."[5]

This possibility offers its own philosophical intrigue. For aesthetic experiences, taken by themselves, are nothing special. They are indeed the common coin of human experience. And this suggests a fundamental propinquity among all aesthetic judgements. In pre-Kantian theories the operative surmise was that aesthetic pleasure inflames itself on particular objects. This, Kant argued, is a mistaken surmise. The aesthetic object functions, on contrary, exclusively as the *occasion* for an aesthetic experience. The feeling of pleasure which settles into consciousness is not, therefore, bound to any such object, for it may as well be roused by an *imagined* object. In a word, the source of the mistake was the assumption that aesthetic pleasure is *conveyed by* the experience. This is wrong: *it is* the experience.[6]

Here is the fulcrum of the 'Copernican turn', from which now the question arises if this mental state of pleasure, this experience, is capable of furnishing a determination fit for a pure aesthetic judgement—a judgement on beauty itself. This is not the outrageous demand it might seem to be, for such mental states "may safely be presupposed among all human beings". Necessarily, though, there is a limiting condition. For in the apprehension of aesthetic experiences "there is no determinate concept which imposes a particular rule on cognition" on the activity. The rules of the game are different: instead of finding the two faculties of imagination and understanding welded together we find them engaged in a "free interplay" with each other.[7]

What does *this* mean? According to Kant every form of judgement requires the participation of both faculties; but different types of judgement differ in respect of their *structure*. In the case of determinate judgements the imagination is yoked to a fixed (discursive) mode of interaction with understanding; in aesthetic judgements on the contrary, the imagination remains free, the powers

[5] *Critique of Judgement*, PART I, SECT. I, §26.
[6] Ibid §37.
[7] Ibid §28.

funnelling them through a different kind of operation, namely *self-reflection*. Accordingly the aesthetic mode entails a specific *form* of reflection in the meaning of the mental structure which governs this process.

For example, a judgement on the beauty of an object does not provoke a determination of its aesthetic quality, but leads to an aesthetic reflection. Yet this is not a workaday reflection in the manner of reflecting on an ordinary empirical object. What transpires is rather the matching of the contents of imagination to the power of understanding. From this we can see that an aesthetic reflection is not the reflection *of* a given intuition, but rather a reflection *on the occasion* of an intuition in which the faculty of judgement recurs to or falls back on itself and its powers. And this self-reflection is the ultimate warrant and precondition for the possibility of an aesthetic experience.[8]

The point may be restated more simply as follows. The free interplay between the faculties in an aesthetic experience does not result in a conceptual determination of the object in question. Actually the opposite pertains, so that we are dealing with two different kinds of engagement: one (cognitive) in which an object is apprehended in its finality and the other (aesthetic) in which the object provides the *occasion for continuous exploration*. It is the latter of the two which the subject experiences as unconstraint. For we do not take the object into our faculties; rather the decisive criterion is that *in relation to the object* we undergo an experience which reveals to us the structure of our understanding. Accordingly our attribution of beauty does not concern any quality subsisting in objects. Such objects represent *occasions of and possibilities for aesthetic experience*. As Eagleton puts it so nicely: "The Kantian subject of aesthetic judgement ... misperceives as a quality of the object what is in fact a pleasurable coordination of its own powers."[9]

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[8] Ibid §xliv.

[9] Terry Eagleton: *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p. 87. — A handsome quote from Croce may also find its place here: "By working on our impressions we liberate ourselves. By bringing them as objects before our minds, we detach them from ourselves and raise ourselves above them. The liberating and purifying function of art is another aspect of its character as an activity. Activity is a liberator precisely because it drives out passivity." Benedetto Croce: *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*. Transl. Colin Lyas. Cam-

We have now a platform from which to assess what has been gained in these analyses. We have the means at our disposal to elucidate the issue of 'how a judgement on an object of beauty is possible in such a form that we may attribute a cognate judgement to others (indeed universally) in similar acts of contemplation'. This answer is, that we are so entitled because the *structure* of the experience is universal, and the conditions of its actualisation are likewise identical in respect of every conscious human mind. The only proviso to be appended is (as Nietzsche will point out) the sufficiency of the subject in the aesthetic transaction; there is no compulsion on every human mind to react to aesthetic experiences. But it remains a possibility. A mind which submits itself to the experience will find that these are the channels which aesthetic experiences and the contemplation of beauty traverse en route to their consummation.

4. *Disinterested contemplation*. But we must now look to the issue of why, according to Kant, this free interplay of the faculties results in pleasure. His reply is that it awakens in us a sense of its fitness to the structure of the subject's faculties,[10] precisely what Eagleton called the "pleasurable coordination", which really amounts to a *definition of aesthetic pleasure*. The reader may wish to compare this with our initial remarks on intellectual challenges to the mind. For although the faculties deal with a multitude of experiences where the outcome is fitness, yet these need not be pleasurable at all, but merely satisfying in any number of ways. The crux of the argument is accordingly that perennially surprising axiom of "fitness without [ulterior] purpose" which must now be put on the table.

To help us along, Kant draws on comparisons with *logical* judgements (which perforce call upon conceptual understanding) and *teleological* judgements, which are directly tied to an understanding of the ulterior purpose of an object under scrutiny. In both cases we are involved in determinate, discursive and (on the whole) practical judgements with relevance to objects which cannot be left out of sight because their constitution and actuality is a

bridge University Press 1992, p. 22.

[10] *Judgement* Introduction 42. — I translate *Zweckmäßigkeit* as 'fitness' because it is the simplest and yet perfectly adequate English rendering of Kant's term.

critical element of any judgement on them.[11] But we have already learned that aesthetic judgements are not primarily concerned with objects, but with states of mind, in which the object figures as the *occasion of experience*. With this clue in our hands we may now proceed to conclusions.

An aesthetic experience is entangled in sensuality; the *aisthesis* is the primary transaction on which judging and coordination ensues. Accordingly the experience constitutes the fitness, *for me*, of the experiential occasion. 'For me' here means, importantly, a fitness which is not bound to or dependent upon the object under contemplation, but which enters into a relationship between object and subject in the aesthetic experience. Fitness confers a perspective which is accessible solely through aesthetic experience: namely that of a relation *between* subject and world (rather than *on* the world).

This is a somewhat difficult point, and Kant does little to ease our travails. Nevertheless, once we put into our minds that the pleasure derived from the free interplay between imagination and understanding is grounded in pure subjectivity, it should be evident that this cannot result from, nor be concerned with any specific interest in the empirical world. It is 'disinterested' in the sense of being focused on the experience itself, and on taking up into this experience the sensual being of beauty, by which our mental pleasure is energised to a pitch limited only by our own capacity to handle it. In other words, *disinterested contemplation is not identical to the scrutiny of the work.* The latter might include minute examination, technical appreciation and the projection of historical, social, political and (why not?) hedonic interest upon the work. The disinterested contemplation in fact *takes over* from there and becomes the joy of the faculties in their synergised powers.

Thus, as long as we attend to the difference in meaning between *dis*-interested and *un*-interested, we will not commit the error of supposing Kant to prohibit our genuine and even passionate interest in art. Plainly it is a form of intellectual pleasure—indeed

[11] It is true that logical reflection (e.g. in mathematical work) may also operate on a level of pure formality. But this is pleasure in mathematical relations and hence in logical reflection, which is to say the pleasure of *reason* in its own powers.