There is a deep controversy here, whose contours will become clear only as the argument of this book unfolds. But let us add a caveat to the caveat, by pointing out that, *pace* Sullivan, when it comes to beautiful architecture function follows form. Beautiful buildings change their uses; merely functional buildings get torn down. Sancta Sophia in Istanbul was built as a church, became a barracks, then a stable, then a mosque and then a museum. The lofts of Lower Manhattan changed from warehouses to apartments to shops and (in some cases) back to warehouses—retaining their charm meanwhile and surviving precisely because of that charm. Of course knowledge of *architectural* function is important to the judgement of beauty; but architectural function is bound up with the aesthetic goal: the column is there to add dignity, to support the architrave, to raise the building high above its own entrance and so to give it a distinguished place in the street, and so on. In other words, when we take beauty seriously, function ceases to be an independent variable, and becomes absorbed into the aesthetic goal. This is another way of emphasizing the impossibility of approaching beauty from a purely instrumental viewpoint. Always there is the demand that we approach beauty for its own sake, as a goal that qualifies and limits whatever other purposes we might have.

Beauty and the senses

There is an ancient view that beauty is the object of a *sensory* rather than an intellectual delight, and that the senses must always be involved in appreciating it. Hence, when the philosophy of art became conscious of itself at the beginning of

the eighteenth century, it called itself 'aesthetics', after the Greek *aisthēsis*, sensation. When Kant wrote that the beautiful is that which pleases *immediately*, and *without concepts* he was providing a rich philosophical embellishment to this tradition of thinking. Aquinas too seems to have endorsed the idea, defining the beautiful in the first part of the *Summa* as that which is pleasing to sight (*pulchra sunt quae visa placent*). However he modifies this statement in the second part, writing that 'the beautiful relates only to sight and hearing of all the senses, since these are the most cognitive (*maxime cognoscitive*) among them'. And this suggests, not only that he did not confine the study of beauty to the sense of sight, but that he was less concerned with the sensory impact of the beautiful than with its intellectual significance—even if it is a significance that can be appreciated only through seeing or hearing.

The issue here might seem to be simple: is the pleasure in beauty a sensory or an intellectual pleasure? But then, what is the difference between the two? The pleasure of a hot bath is sensory; the pleasure of a mathematical puzzle intellectual. But between those two there are a thousand intermediary positions, so that the question of where aesthetic pleasure lies on the spectrum has become one of the most vexed issues in aesthetics. Ruskin, in a famous passage of *Modern Painters*, distinguished merely sensuous interest, which he called *aesthesis*, from the *true* interest in art, which he called *theoria*, after the Greek for contemplation—not wishing, however, to assimilate art to science, or to deny that the senses are intimately involved in the appreciation of beauty. Most thinkers have avoided Ruskin's linguistic innovation and retained the term *aesthesis*,

recognizing, however, that this does not denote a *purely* sensory frame of mind.

A beautiful face, a beautiful flower, a beautiful melody, a beautiful colour—all these are indeed objects of a kind of sensory enjoyment, a relishing of the sight or sound of a thing. But what about a beautiful novel, a beautiful sermon, a beautiful theory in physics or a beautiful mathematical proof? If we tie the beauty of a novel too closely to the *sound* of it, then we must consider a novel in translation to be a completely different work of art from the same novel in its original tongue. And this is surely to deny what is really interesting in the art of the novel—which is the unfolding of a story, the controlled release of information about an imaginary world, and the reflections that accompany the plot and reinforce its significance.

Moreover, if we tie beauty too closely to the senses, we might find ourselves wondering why so many philosophers, from Plato to Hegel, have chosen to exclude the senses of taste, touch and smell from the experience of beauty. Are not wine-buffs and gourmets devoted to their own kind of beauty? Are there not beautiful scents and flavours as well as beautiful sights and sounds? Does not the vast critical literature devoted to the assessment of food and wine suggest a close parallel between the arts of the stomach and the arts of the soul?

Here, very briefly, is how I would respond to those thoughts. In appreciating a story we certainly are more interested in *what is being said* than in the sensory character of the sounds used to say it. Nevertheless, if stories and novels were simply reducible to the information contained in them, it would be inexplicable that we should be constantly returning to

the words, reading over favourite passages, allowing the sentences to percolate through our thoughts, long after we have assimilated the plot. The order in which a story unfolds, the suspense, the balance between narrative and dialogue and between both and commentary—all these are sensory features, in that they depend upon anticipation and release, and the orderly unfolding of a narrative in our perception. To that extent a novel is directed to the senses—but not as an object of sensory delight, like a luxurious chocolate or a fine old wine. Rather as something presented *through* the senses, *to* the mind.

Take any short story by Chekhov. It does not matter that the sentences in translation sound nothing like the Russian original. Still they present the same images and events in the same suggestive sequence. Still they imply as much as they say, and withhold as much as they reveal. Still they follow each other with the logic of things observed rather than things summarized. Chekhov's art captures life as it is lived and distils it into images that contain a drama, as a drop of dew contains the sky. Following such a story we are constructing a world whose interpretation is at every point controlled by the sights and sounds that we imagine.

As for taste and smell, it seems to me that philosophers have been right to set these on the margins of our interest in beauty. Tastes and smells are not capable of the kind of systematic organization that turns sounds into words and tones. We can relish them, but only in a sensual way that barely engages our imagination or our thought. They are, so to speak, insufficiently intellectual to prompt the interest in beauty.

Those are only brief hints towards conclusions that demand far more argument than I can here afford to them. I propose that, rather than emphasize the 'immediate', 'sensory', 'intuitive' character of the experience of beauty, we consider instead the way in which an object *comes before us*, in the experience of beauty. When we refer to the 'aesthetic' nature of our pleasure in beauty it is presentation, rather than sensation, that we have in mind.

Disinterested interest

Setting those observations side by side with our six platitudes we can draw a tentative conclusion, which is that we call something beautiful when we gain pleasure from contemplating it as an individual object, for its own sake, and in its *presented form*. This is so even of those objects like landscapes and streets which are, properly speaking, not individuals, but unbounded collections of odds and ends. Such complex entities are *framed* by aesthetic interest, held together, as it were, under a unified and unifying gaze.

It is difficult to date the rise of modern aesthetics precisely. But it is undeniable that the subject took a great step forward with the *Characteristics* (1711), of the third Earl of Shaftesbury, a pupil of Locke and one of the most influential essayists of the eighteenth century. In that work Shaftesbury explained the peculiar features of the judgement of beauty in terms of the *disinterested* attitude of the judge. To be interested in beauty is to set all interests aside, so as to attend to the thing itself. Kant (*The Critique of Judgement*, 1795) took up the point, building from the idea of disinterest a highly charged

aesthetic theory. According to Kant we take an 'interested' approach to things or people whenever we use them as means to satisfy one of our interests: for example, when we use a hammer to drive in a nail or a person to carry a message. Animals have only 'interested' attitudes: in everything they are driven by their desires, needs and appetites, and treat objects and other animals as instruments to fulfil those things. We, however, make a distinction in our thinking and behaviour, between those things that are means to us, and those which are also *ends in themselves*. Towards some things we take an interest that is not governed by interest but which is, so to speak, entirely *devoted* to the object.

That way of putting things is controversial, not least because—as in all his writings—Kant is subtly coaxing us towards the endorsement of a system, with far-reaching implications for everything that we think. Nevertheless we can understand what he is getting at through a homely example. Imagine a mother cradling her baby, looking down on it with love and delight. We don't say that she has an *interest* that this baby satisfies, as though some other baby might have done just the same job for her. There is no interest of the mother's that the baby serves, nor does she have an *end* to which the baby is a means. The baby itself is her interest—meaning, it is the object of interest for its own sake. If the woman were motivated by an interest that she has—say, an interest in persuading someone to employ her as a baby-minder—then the baby itself would cease to be the full and final focus of her state of mind. Any other baby that enabled her to make the right noises and the right expressions would have done just as well. One sign of a disinterested attitude is that it does not regard its object as one

among many possible substitutes. Clearly, no other baby would 'do just as well' for the mother doting on the creature that she holds in her arms.

Disinterested pleasure

To be disinterested towards something is not necessarily to be uninterested in it, but to be interested in a certain way. We often say of people who generously extend their help to others in times of trouble, that they act disinterestedly—meaning that they are not motivated by self-interest or by any interest other than the interest in doing *just this*, namely helping their neighbours. They have a *disinterested interest*. How is that possible? Kant's answer was that it is not possible if all our interests are determined by our desires: for an interest that stems from my desire aims at the fulfilment of that desire, which is an interest of *mine*. Interests can be disinterested, however, if they are determined by (spring from) reason alone.

From this—already controversial—way of putting it, Kant went on to draw a striking conclusion. There is a certain kind of disinterested interest, he argued, which is an interest of reason: not an interest of mine, but an interest of reason *in* me. This is how Kant explains the moral motive. When I ask myself not what I want to do, but what I ought to do, then I stand back from myself, and put myself in the position of an impartial judge. The moral motive comes from setting all my interests aside, and addressing the question before me by appealing to reason alone—and that means appealing to considerations that any rational being would be equally able to accept. From that posture of disinterested enquiry we are

led inexorably, Kant thought, to the categorical imperative, which tells us to act only on that maxim which we can will as a law for all rational beings.

In another sense, however, the moral motive is *interested*: the interest of reason is also the determining principle of my will. I am making up my mind to do something, and to do what reason requires—that is what the word 'ought' implies. In the case of the judgement of beauty, however, I am *purely* disinterested, abstracting from practical considerations and attending to the object before me with all desires, interests and goals suspended.

This stringent idea of disinterest seems to jeopardize the first of our platitudes: the connection between beauty and pleasure. When an experience pleases me I have a desire to repeat it, and that desire is an interest of mine. So what could we possibly mean by a disinterested *pleasure*? How can reason have a pleasure 'in me', and whose pleasure is it anyway? Surely we are drawn to beautiful things as we are drawn to other sources of enjoyment, by the pleasure that they bring. Beauty is not the source of disinterested pleasure, but simply the object of a universal interest: the interest that we have in beauty, and in the pleasure that beauty brings.

We can approach Kant's thought more sympathetically, however, if we distinguish among pleasures. These are of many kinds, as we can see by comparing the pleasure that comes from a drug, the pleasure taken in a glass of wine, the pleasure that your son has passed his exam and pleasure in a painting or a work of music. When my son tells me he has won the mathematics prize at school I feel pleasure: but my pleasure is an interested pleasure, since it arises from the

satisfaction of an interest of mine—my parental interest in my son's success. When I read a poem, my pleasure depends upon no interest other than my interest in *this*, the very object that is before my mind. Of course, other interests *feed into* my interest in the poem: my interest in military strategy draws me to the *Iliad*, my interest in gardens to *Paradise Lost*. But the pleasure in a poem's beauty is the result of an interest in *it*, for the very thing that it is.

I may have been obliged to read the poem in order to pass an exam. In such a case I feel pleasure at having read it. Such a pleasure is again an interested pleasure, one that stems from my interest in *having read* the poem. I am pleased *that* I have read the poem: the word 'that' here playing a critical role in defining the nature of my pleasure. Our language partly reflects this complexity in the concept of pleasure: we distinguish pleasure *from*, pleasure *in*, and pleasure *that*. As Malcolm Budd has expressed it: disinterested pleasure is never pleasure *in a fact*. Nor—as I argued earlier—is the pleasure in beauty purely sensory, like the pleasure of a warm bath, even though we take pleasure *in* a warm bath. And it is certainly not like the pleasure that follows a snort of cocaine: which is not pleasure *in* the cocaine but merely pleasure *from* it.

Disinterested pleasure is a kind of pleasure *in*. But it is focused on its object and dependent on thought: it has a specific 'intentionality', to use the technical term. Pleasure in a hot bath does not depend upon any thought about the bath, and therefore can never be mistaken. Intentional pleasures, by contrast, are part of the cognitive life: my pleasure in the sight of my son winning the long-jump vanishes when

I discover it was not my son but a look-alike who triumphed. My initial pleasure was a mistake, and such mistakes can run deep, like Lucretia's mistaken pleasure at the embrace of the man whom she takes to be her husband, but whom she discovers to be the rapist Tarquin.

Intentional pleasures therefore form a fascinating subclass of pleasures. They are fully integrated into the life of the mind. They can be neutralized by argument and amplified by attention. They do not arise, as the pleasures of eating and drinking arise, from pleasurable sensations, but play a vital part in the exercise of our cognitive and emotional powers. The pleasure in beauty is similar. But it is not just intentional: it is contemplative, feeding upon the presented form of its object, and constantly renewing itself from that source.

My pleasure in beauty is therefore like a gift offered to the object, which is in turn a gift offered to me. In this respect it resembles the pleasure that people experience in the company of their friends. Like the pleasure of friendship, the pleasure in beauty is *curious*: it aims to understand its object, and to value what it finds. Hence it tends towards a judgement of its own validity. And like every rational judgement this one makes implicit appeal to the community of rational beings. That is what Kant meant when he argued that, in the judgement of taste, I am 'a suitor for agreement', expressing my judgement not as a private opinion but as a binding verdict that would be agreed to by all rational beings just so long as they did what I am doing, and put their own interests aside.

Maybe we are wrong to look for a causal connection between these two aspects of the human condition. Maybe they are more intimately connected than that implies. Maybe it is as Plato so forcefully argued, that the sentiment of beauty is a central component in sexual desire. If so, that must surely have implications not only for the understanding of desire, but also for the theory of beauty. In particular it should cast doubt on the view that our attitude to beauty is intrinsically disinterested. What attitude is more interested than sexual desire?

Beauty and desire

Plato was writing not about sex and sexual difference as we now understand them but about *erōs*, the overwhelming urge which, for Plato, exists at its most significant between people of the same sex, being felt especially by an older man moved by the beauty of a youth. *Erōs* was identified by the Greeks as a cosmic force, like the love that, according to Dante, 'moves the sun and the other stars'. Plato's account of beauty in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* therefore begins from another platitude:

(vii) Beauty, in a person, prompts desire.

Plato believed that this desire is both real, and also a kind of mistake, though a mistake which tells us something important about ourselves and the cosmos. Some argue that it is not beauty that prompts desire, but desire that summons beauty—that, desiring someone, I see him or her as beautiful, this being one of the ways in which the mind, to borrow Hume's

metaphor, 'spreads itself upon objects'. But that does not accurately reflect the experience of sexual attraction. Your eyes are captivated by the beautiful boy or girl, and it is from this moment that your desire begins. It may be that there is another and maturer form of sexual desire, which grows from love, and which finds beauty in the no longer youthful features of a lifelong companion. But that is emphatically not the phenomenon that Plato had in mind.

However we look at the matter, the seventh platitude creates a problem for aesthetics. In the realm of art beauty is an object of contemplation, not desire. To appreciate the beauty of a painting or a symphony is not to be prompted to any concupiscent attitude, and even if, for financial reasons, I may want to steal the painting, there is no way that I can walk away from the concert hall with a symphony in my pocket. Does this mean that there are two kinds of beauty—the beauty of people and the beauty of art? Or does it mean that the desire aroused by the sight of human beauty is a kind of mistake that we make, and that really our attitude to beauty tends to the contemplative in all its forms?

Erōs and platonic love

Plato was drawn to the second of those responses. He identified *erōs* as the origin of both sexual desire and the love of beauty. *Erōs* is a form of love which seeks to unite with its object, and to make copies of it—as men and women make copies of themselves through sexual reproduction. In addition to that base form (as Plato saw it) of erotic love, there is also a higher form, in which the object of love is not possessed

but contemplated, and in which the process of copying occurs not in the realm of concrete particulars but in the realm of abstract ideas—the realm of the 'forms' as Plato described them. By contemplating beauty the soul rises from its immersion in merely sensuous and concrete things, and ascends to a higher sphere, where it is not the beautiful boy who is studied, but the form of the beautiful itself, which enters the soul as a true possession, in the way that ideas generally reproduce themselves in the souls of those who understand them. This higher form of reproduction belongs to the aspiration towards immortality, which is the soul's highest longing in this world. But it is impeded by too great a fixation on the lower kind of reproduction, which is a form of imprisonment in the here and now.

According to Plato, sexual desire, in its common form, involves a desire to possess what is mortal and transient, and a consequent enslavement to the lower aspect of the soul, the aspect that is immersed in sensuous immediacy and the things of this world. The love of beauty is really a signal to free ourselves from that sensory attachment, and to begin the ascent of the soul towards the world of ideas, there to participate in the divine version of reproduction, which is the understanding and the passing on of eternal truths. That is the true kind of erotic love, and is manifest in the chaste attachment between man and boy, in which the man takes the role of teacher, overcomes his lustful feelings, and sees the boy's beauty as an object of contemplation, an instance in the here and now of the eternal idea of the beautiful.

That potent collection of ideas has had a long subsequent history. Its intoxicating way of mixing homoerotic love, the

career of the teacher, and the redemption of the soul, has touched the hearts of teachers (especially of male teachers) down the centuries. And the heterosexual version of the Platonic myth had an enormous influence on medieval poetry and on Christian visions of women and how women should be understood, inspiring some of the most beautiful works of art in the Western tradition, from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Dante's *Vita Nuova* to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and the sonnets of Michelangelo. But it requires only a normal dose of scepticism to feel that there is more wishful thinking than truth in the Platonic vision. How can one and the same state of mind be both sexual love for a boy and (after a bit of self-discipline) delighted contemplation of an abstract idea? That is like saying that the desire for a steak could be satisfied (after a bit of mental exertion) by staring at the picture of a cow.

Contemplation and desire

It is nevertheless true that the object of aesthetic judgement and the object of sexual desire may both be described as beautiful, even though they arouse radically different interests in the one who so describes them. Someone, looking at the face of an old man, with many interesting creases and wrinkles, with a fine and placid eye and a wise and welcoming expression, might describe the face as beautiful. But we understand that judgement in another way from 'She's beautiful!' said by an eager youth of a girl. The youth is *going after* the girl; he desires her, not just in the sense of wanting to look at her, but in that he wants to hold her and kiss her. The sexual act is described as the 'consummation' of this kind of desire—though

we should not think that it is necessarily the thing intended, or that it brings the desire to an end, in the way that drinking a cup of water brings the desire for water to an end.

In the case of the beautiful old man, there is no 'going after' of this kind: no agenda, no desire to possess, or in any other way to gain something from the beautiful object. The old man's face is full of meaning for us, and if we are looking for satisfaction we find it there, in the thing that we contemplate, and in the act of contemplation. It is surely absurd to think that this is the same state of mind as that of the youth in hot pursuit. When, in the course of sexual desire, you contemplate the beauty of your companion, you are standing back from your desire, so as to absorb it into another, larger and less immediately sensuous aim. This is, indeed, the metaphysical significance of the erotic gaze: that it is a search for knowledge—a summons to the other person to shine forth in sensory form and to make himself known.

On the other hand, beauty undoubtedly stimulates desire in the moment of arousal. So is your desire *directed at* the beauty of the other? Is it a desire to do something *with* that beauty? But what *can* you do with another person's beauty? The satisfied lover is as little able to possess the beauty of his beloved as the one who hopelessly observes it from afar. This is one of the thoughts that inspired Plato's theory. What prompts us, in sexual attraction, is something that can be contemplated but never possessed. Our desire might be consummated and temporarily quenched. But it is not consummated by possessing the thing that inspires it, which lies always beyond our reach, a possession of the other which can never be shared.

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

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

images of the transcendent, and in which mounds of rubbish cover the sites of our ideals.

Art and entertainment

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

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

Nevertheless they were right to believe that there is a great difference between the *artistic* treatment of a subject-matter and the mere cultivation of effect. The photographic image

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

An example

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

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

white, even though colour had by then (1957) become the *lingua franca*.

The film tells the story of a selfish but distinguished old man who has avoided love, who is approaching the end of his life and sensing its hollowness, and who—through a single day of simple encounters, memories and dreams—is able miraculously to save himself, to accept that he must give love in order to receive it, and who is granted, at the end, a transfiguring vision of his childhood and a final welcome into the world of others. The burden of the story is contained in the dreams and memories—episodes which play a part in the drama that is amplified by the cinematic medium. The camera

fuses these episodes with the narrative, pressing them into the present through creating identities where words would enforce only differences. (Thus the faces in the dreams have already acquired another significance in the real events of the day.) The camera stalks the unfolding story like a hunter, pausing to take aim at the present only to bring it into chafing proximity with the past. And the images, often grainy, with sharply foregrounded details, leave many objects lingering like ghosts in the out-of-focus hinterland. In *Wild Strawberries*, things, like people, are saturated with the psychic states of their observers, drawn into the drama by a camera which endows each detail with a consciousness of its own. The result is not whimsical or arbitrary, but on the contrary, entirely objective, turning to realities at every point where the camera might otherwise be tempted to escape from them.

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

Fantasy and reality

The distinction can be rephrased as one between imagination and fantasy. True art appeals to the imagination, whereas

effects elicit fantasy. Imaginary things are pondered, fantasies are *acted out*. Both fantasy and imagination concern unrealities; but while the unrealities of fantasy penetrate and pollute our world, those of the imagination exist in a world of their own, in which we wander freely and in a condition of sympathetic detachment.

Modern society abounds in fantasy objects, since the realistic image, in photograph, cinema and TV screen, offers surrogate fulfilment to our forbidden desires, thereby permitting them. A fantasy desire seeks neither a literary description, nor a delicate painting of its object, but a simulacrum—an image from which all veils of hesitation have been torn away. It eschews style and convention, since these impede the building of the surrogate, and subject it to judgement. The ideal fantasy is perfectly realized, and perfectly unreal—an imaginary object that leaves nothing to the imagination. Advertisements trade in such objects, and they float in the background of modern life, tempting us constantly to realize our dreams, rather than to pursue realities.

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

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

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

Although the passions suffered in the theatre are directed towards imaginary objects, they are guided by a sense of reality, and evolve and develop as our understanding grows. They derive from the sympathy that we feel for our kind, and sympathy is critical—it wishes to know its object, to assess its worth, and not to waste its heart-beats undeservedly. In *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argued that sympathy tends of its own accord towards the standpoint of the impartial spectator. Hence sympathy is never so active, or so controlled by judgement, as in the aesthetic context. Towards the imaginary and the framed we can adopt the disinterested posture that I described in Chapter 1. And, once our own interests have been set aside, we sympathize in a way that

we cannot normally afford in our daily transactions. It would be plausible to suggest that this defines one aim of art: to present imaginary worlds, towards which we can adopt, as part of an integral aesthetic attitude, a posture of impartial concern.

Style

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

Styles can resemble each other, and contain large overlapping idioms—like the styles of Haydn and Mozart or Coleridge and Wordsworth. Or they might be unique, like the style of Van Gogh, so that anyone who shares the repertoire is seen as a mere copier or *pasticheur*, and not as an artist with a style of his own. Our tendency to think in this way has something to

do with our sense of human integrity: the unique style is one that has identified a unique human being, whose personality is entirely objectified in his work: *le style c'est l'homme même*, as Buffon famously put it. (It is interesting to explore our reasons for saying that Mozart, who adapted the musical language of Haydn, is an original composer, whereas Utrillo, who is recognizably himself, even when most obviously following Pissaro or Van Gogh, is entirely derivative.)

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

Content and form

That suggestion immediately raises a problem that has become familiar in aesthetics, in literary criticism, and in the study of the arts generally: how can you separate the content of a work of art from its form? And if you *could* separate the

The value of art

Works of art can be praised in many ways. They can be moving and tragic, melancholy or joyous, balanced, melodious, elegant, and exciting. Although beauty and meaning are connected in art, some of the most meaningful works of recent times have been downright ugly and even offensive in their raw-nerve impact—think of Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, Gunther Grass's *Tin Drum*, Picasso's *Guernica*. To call such works beautiful is in a way to diminish and even to trivialize what they are trying to say. But if beauty is only one among many aesthetic values, why should a theory of art tell us anything about it?

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

contemplation, reason and sense are reconciled, and we are granted a vision of human life in its wholeness.

In appreciating art we are playing; the artist too is playing in creating it. And the result is not always beautiful, or beautiful in a predictable way. But this ludic attitude is fulfilled by beauty, and by the kind of orderliness which retains our interest and prompts us to search for the deeper significance of the sensory world. Hence, as soon as we are engaged in generating and appreciating objects as ends in themselves, rather than as means to our desires and purposes, we demand that those objects be ordered and meaningful. This 'blessed rage for order' is present in the very first impulse of artistic creation: and the impetus to impose order and meaning on human life, through the experience of something delightful, is the underlying motive of art in all its forms. Art answers the riddle of existence: it tells us *why* we exist by imbuing our lives with a sense of fittingness. In the highest form of beauty life becomes its own justification, redeemed from contingency by the logic which connects the end of things with their beginning, as they are connected in *Paradise Lost*, in *Phèdre* and in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The highest form of beauty, as exemplified in those supreme artistic achievements, is one of the greatest of life's gifts to us. It is the true ground of the value of art, for it is what art, and only art, can give.

Beauty and truth

Keats's vision of the Grecian urn, with its message that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know', arises from a lingering glance at a vanished

world. But it records a common experience. Our favourite works of art seem to guide us to the truth of the human condition and, by presenting completed instances of human actions and passions, freed from the contingencies of everyday life, to show the worthwhileness of being human.

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

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

the human condition—as the arbitrariness of suffering is overcome in tragedy, and the arbitrariness of rejection in Schubert's song-cycle.

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

Art and morality

During the nineteenth century there arose the movement of 'art for art's sake': *l'art pour l'art*. The words are those of Théophile Gautier, who believed that if art is to be valued for its own sake then it must be detached from all purposes, including those of the moral life. A work of art that moralizes, that strives to improve its audience, that descends from the pinnacle of pure beauty to take up some social or didactic

cause, offends against the autonomy of the aesthetic experience, exchanging intrinsic for instrumental values and losing whatever claim it might have had to beauty.

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

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

At the same time, even while admiring *Pilgrim's Progress* for its truthfulness, we may reject its underlying beliefs. Bunyan is showing the lived reality of Christian discipleship, and

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

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

6

Taste and Order

In a democratic culture people are inclined to believe that it is presumptuous to claim to have better taste than your neighbour. By doing so you are implicitly denying his right to be the thing that he is. You like Bach, she likes U2; you like Leonardo, he likes Mucha; she likes Jane Austen, you like Danielle Steele. Each of you exists in his own enclosed aesthetic world, and so long as neither harms the other, and each says good morning over the fence, there is nothing further to be said.

The common pursuit

But things are not so simple, as the democratic argument already implies. If it is so offensive to look down on another's taste, it is, as the democrat recognizes, because taste is intimately bound up with our personal life and moral identity. It is part of our rational nature to strive for a community of judgement, a shared conception of value, since that is what reason and the moral life require. And this desire for a reasoned consensus spills over into the sense of beauty.

This we discover as soon as we take into account the public impact of private tastes. Your neighbour fills her garden with

kitsch mermaids and Disneyland gnomes, polluting the view from your window; she designs her house in a ludicrous Costa Brava style, in loud primary colours that utterly ruin the tranquil atmosphere of the street, and so on. Now her taste has ceased to be a private matter and inflicted itself on the public realm. We begin to dispute the matter: you appeal to the town council, arguing that her house and garden are not in keeping with the street, that this particular part of town is scheduled to retain a Georgian serenity, that her house clashes with the classical facades of adjacent buildings. (In a recent British case a house-owner, influenced by art-school fashions, erected a plastic sculpture of a shark on his roof, to give the appearance of a great fish that had crashed through the tiles into the attic. Protests from neighbours and the local planning officer led to a prolonged legal battle, which the house-owner—an American, who no longer lives in the house—eventually won.)

We know from experience that there is much to argue about here, and that argument does not aim to win by whatever means, but rather to generate a *consensus*. Implicit in our sense of beauty is the thought of community—of the agreement in judgements that makes social life possible and worthwhile. That is one of the reasons why we have planning laws—which, in the great days of Western civilization, have been extremely strict, controlling the heights of buildings (nineteenth-century Helsinki), the materials to be used in construction (eighteenth-century Paris), the tiles to be used in roofing (twentieth-century Provence), even the crenelations on buildings that face the thoroughfares (Venice, from the fifteenth century onwards).

Nor is this desire for consensus confined to the public realm of architecture and garden design. Think of clothes, interior décor, and bodily ornaments: here too we can be put on edge, excluded or included, made to feel inside or outside the implied community, and we strive by comparison and discussion to achieve a consensus within which we can feel at home. Many of the clothes we wear have the character of uniforms, designed to express and confirm our inoffensive membership of the community (the office suit, the tuxedo, the baseball cap, the school uniform), or perhaps our solidarity with a community of offenders (the 'convict' style of black American 'gangstas'). Others, like women's party clothes, are designed to draw attention to our individuality, though without offending the proprieties. As I suggested earlier, fashion is integral to our nature as social beings: it arises from, and also amplifies, the aesthetic signals with which we make our social identity apparent to the world. We begin to see why concepts like decorum and propriety are integral to the sense of beauty: but they are concepts that range equally across the aesthetic and the moral spheres.

However, there are also private arts like music and literature. Why are we so concerned that our children should learn to like the things that *we* regard as beautiful? Why do we worry when children are drawn to literature that is, in our eyes, ugly, stupefying, sentimental or obscene? Plato believed that the various modes of music are connected with specific moral characteristics of those who dance or march to them, and that in a well-ordered city only those modes would be permitted which are in some way fitted to the virtuous soul. This is a striking and in its way plausible claim, though the

concept of 'fit' is explained by Plato through a theory of imitation (*mimēsis*) that is no longer plausible.

Subjectivity and reasons

Someone might respond that there is no real argument here—consensus, if it is achieved, arises in some other way, by emotional infection, rather than by reasoning. You like Brahms, say, and I detest him. So you invite me to listen to your favourite pieces, and after a while they 'work on me'. Maybe I am influenced by my friendship for you, and make a special effort on your behalf. How it happens, I do not know—but if it happens, that I come to like Brahms, then this is not a rational decision, nor a rational conclusion of mine: it is a change comparable to that undergone by children when, having begun life by hating greens, they learn at last to relish them. An experience that repelled them now attracts them; but it was not an *argument* that persuaded them. A change of taste is not a 'change of mind', in the way that a change of belief or even of moral posture is a change of mind. This doesn't mean that there are no extraneous reasons that might *justify* the change in taste. After all, there are extraneous reasons that justify the child's graduation from burgers to broccoli. Greens are far more healthy, maybe part of a superior lifestyle, maybe even a spiritual improvement, as the Vegans argue. But those reasons are not internal to the change in taste: they rationalize the change, but do not produce it—since it is not the kind of change that *could* be produced by rational argument.

We are in deep water here. But it is worth meditating on what actually happens, when you argue about matters of aesthetic taste. We have been listening to Brahms's Fourth Symphony, say, and you ask me how I like it. 'Heavy, lugubrious, oily, gross,' I say. You play me the first subject of the first movement on the piano. 'Listen,' you say. And you invert the sixths so that they become thirds, and I hear how the theme goes down one ladder of thirds and up another. You show me how the harmonies are also organized by third progressions, and how the ensuing themes unfold from the same melodic and harmonic cells that generate the opening melody. After a while I understand that there is a kind of minimalism at work here—everything emerges from a concentrated seed of musical material, and after a while I hear this happening and then—suddenly—it all sounds right to me, the heaviness and oiliness vanish in a moment, and instead I hear a kind of breaking into leaf and flower of a beautiful plant.

Or take another example: we are looking at a Whistler 'Nocturne'. You find it vapid, maybe (following a famous judgement of Ruskin's) reprehensible in its focus on momentary effects, and in its refusal to explore the deeper realities. This painting, you say, draws a veil over the toil and trouble of modern life; it sees as charm and evocation what is in fact labour and exploitation. And all this is summarized in the title: *Nocturne in grey and silver*, as though you could abstract the human energy that made this effect, and judge it as a play of lighted colours.

Yes, I respond, you can see it that way. But the painting is not just an impression: its very shadowy quality indicates the extent to which people and their projects have darkened

Figure 14 Whistler, *Nocturne in Grey and Silver*: surface shadow, or a deeper darkness?

the world. There is no denial, here, of labour and its exploitation, but on the contrary, an attempt to see in the shadow-filled moment, the extent of man's trespass on the natural order. The title opens our minds to this, in fact: a 'nocturne' is a human creation, and a recent one, not known before the industrial revolution and the retreat of the property-owning classes into their drawing rooms, to be entertained at the piano by willowy aesthetes. Silver and grey are the colours of widowhood, and the atmosphere of the painting is one of melancholy recognition that, thanks to human industry, the sheen of the world is henceforth to be an artificial one.

To justify this judgement, I will refer to the shades of colour, to the prominent shapes in the canvas, which are the shapes of man-made things, and to the points of light which are man-made lights. As our discussion proceeds, unfolding the two rival interpretations of the painting, as pure impression and as social comment, the aspect of the picture will perhaps shift from one to the other—so that the painting seems to contain a lesson, reminding us that we can to some extent choose how the new world of industry should be seen.

We can find simpler, and logically more transparent, cases of this kind of change in aspect—like the celebrated duck-rabbit discussed by Wittgenstein. There may be a right and wrong way to see such figures—and I can reason you out of seeing a duck, where you ought to be seeing a rabbit. (Say the figure appears on a packet of rabbit food.) Such cases are not exceptional. On the contrary, in every perspective picture there are choices to make, concerning what size to attribute to which figure, and what distance to see between the various grounds. And the reasoning here will be like that which I gave in connection with the Whistler: reasoning concerning the meaning of the picture, and how you should see the picture if the meaning is, as it were, properly to *inhabit* it.

The criticism of poetry, too, follows this pattern. When you describe Blake's 'Oh rose, thou art sick: | The invisible worm | That flies in the night' as an evocation of sexual desire and the worm of jealousy, and I reply with a theory of its Christian iconology, and interpret the worm and the bed of crimson joy as lust and the soul respectively, you begin to hear the words differently—that 'dark secret love' has a new resonance, and one that is filled with ominous meaning for your own life.

Such criticism is not just saying: here is what the poem means, as though you could now discard the poem and make do with my superior translation. The poetry is not a means to its meaning, as though a translation would do just as well. I want you to experience the poem differently, and my critical argument is aimed precisely at a change in your perception.

The argument can be mounted for architecture, for sculpture, for novels and plays; it can be mounted for natural objects too, such as landscapes and flowers. In every case we recognize that there is such a thing as reasoning, which has a changed perception as its goal. Moreover, any argument that did not aim at a changed perception could not be considered as a critical argument: it would not be a relevant reflection on its object, as an object of aesthetic judgement. You can confirm this by considering how you might answer questions like the following: is the Grand Canyon breathtaking or corny? Is *Bambi* moving or kitsch? Is *Madame Bovary* tragic or cruel? Is *The Magic Flute* childish or sublime? These are real questions, and hotly disputed too. But to argue them is to present an *experience* and to present it as *appropriate* or *right*.

The search for objectivity

Suppose you accept, in broad outline, what I have just argued for—namely that there is a kind of reasoning that has aesthetic judgement as its goal, and that this judgement is bound up with the experience of the one who makes it. You might still question whether this kind of reasoning is objective, in the sense of being rooted in, and invoking, standards that are

persuasive to all rational beings. Indeed, there are important considerations to the contrary.

First, taste is rooted in a broader cultural context, and cultures (at least in the sense that we here have in mind) are not universal. The whole point of the concept of culture is to mark out the significant *differences* between the forms of human life, and the satisfactions that people take in them. Consider the ragas of Indian classical music: these belong to a long-standing tradition of listening and performance, and this tradition is dependent on the discipline associated with religious rituals and a devout way of life. Conventions, allusions and applications resonate in the minds and ears of those who play and enjoy this music, and the difference between a good and a bad performance cannot be established in terms that might equally be used to evaluate a Mozart symphony or a work of jazz.

Secondly, as noted in Chapter 1, there is no deductive relation between premises and conclusion when the conclusion is a judgement of taste. I am always free to reject a critical argument, in a way that I am not free to reject a valid scientific inference or a valid moral claim.

Finally, we must recognize that any attempt to lay down objective standards threatens the very enterprise that it purports to judge. Rules and precepts are there to be transcended, and because originality and the challenging of orthodoxies are fundamental to the aesthetic enterprise, an element of freedom is built into the pursuit of beauty, whether the minimal beauty of everyday arrangements, or the higher beauties of art.

How might we respond to such arguments? First, it is important to recognize that cultural variation does not imply the absence of cross-cultural universals. Nor does it imply that those universals, if they exist, are not rooted in our nature, or that they do not feed into our rational interests at a very fundamental level. Symmetry and order; proportion; closure; convention; harmony, and also novelty and excitement: all these seem to have a permanent hold on the human psyche. Now of course those words are all vague and multiply ambiguous, and you might well object that they are themselves likely to fragment along the fracture lines that divide culture from culture in the human lot. The early medievals regarded the fourth as harmonious, the third as dissonant: for us, if anything, it is the other way round. *Harmonia* for the Greeks consisted in the relation between successive sounds in a melody, and not the consonance of simultaneous notes. And so on.

Objectivity and universality

But that brings me to a more important observation, which is that, in the matter of aesthetic judgement, objectivity and universality come apart. In science and morality, the search for objectivity is the search for universally valid results—results that must be accepted by every rational being. In the judgement of beauty the search for objectivity is for valid and heightened forms of human experience—forms in which human life can flower according to its inner need and achieve the kind of fruition that we witness in the Sistine Chapel ceiling, in *Parsifal* or in *Hamlet*. Criticism is not aiming to

show that you *must* like *Hamlet*, for example: it is aiming to expose the vision of human life which the play contains, and the forms of belonging which it endorses, and to persuade you of their value. It is not claiming that this vision of human life is universally available. This does not mean that no cross-cultural comparisons can be made: it is certainly possible to compare a play like *Hamlet* with a puppet play by Chikamatsu, for example: indeed, it has been done. There are works of Japanese theatre that satirize human life (the Kabuki comedy *Hokaibo*, for example), and works which exalt it, and the question whether Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* is a profounder treatment of human sexuality than *Hokaibo* is a perfectly meaningful one.

The objection that aesthetic reasons are purely persuasive simply reiterates the point, that aesthetic judgement is rooted in subjective experience. So is the judgement of colour. And is it not an objective fact that red things are red, blue things blue?

Rules and originality

The final objection is, however, more serious. There may be rules of taste, but they do not guarantee beauty, and the beauty of a work of art may reside precisely in the act of transgressing them. Bach's Forty-Eight illustrate all the rules of fugal composition: but they do so by obeying them *creatively*, by showing how they can be used as a platform from which to rise to a higher realm of freedom. *Merely* obeying them would be a recipe for dullness, as in all the exercises from which we begin our lessons in counterpoint. Likewise in

Figure 15 Michelangelo: Laurentian Library staircase: beauty and order that mock the rules.

architecture, there may be buildings which we understand as entirely rule-governed, like the Parthenon: but this does not explain their perfection. The serenity and solidity of the Parthenon come about through that extra creative something—the scale, proportions, detailing that arise from the thinking that begins when the rule-following stops. And again there are beauties that arise from the overt defiance of rules, as in Michelangelo's Laurentian library.

It is fairly obvious that there is no 'rule-following' or 'rule defying' in nature. Yet there are symmetries, harmonies, proportions, and also the aesthetically challenging lack of those things. Eighteenth-century thinkers, who wished to take natural beauty as their paradigm of the object of taste, were therefore quick to adopt Burke's contrast between the sublime and the beautiful. So too in art, we might usefully distinguish those works that please us on account of the order, harmony, and rule-governed perfection which they display, like the fugues of Bach, the Holy Virgins of Bellini, or the lyrics of Verlaine, and those which, on the contrary, please us by challenging and disturbing our routines, by throwing off the shackles of conformity and by standing out from the traditions to which they belong, like *King Lear* or Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony. But as soon as we make this distinction we realize that, even in the most orderly and rule-governed work, there is no way of fixing a 'standard of taste' by appeal to the rules. It is not the rules, but the use of them, that appeals in a Bach fugue or a Bellini Virgin. Those who seek a standard in the rules open themselves to refutation, when it is pointed out that obedience to the rules is neither necessary nor sufficient for beauty. For if it were sufficient then once again we

could acquire taste at second hand; and if it were necessary, then originality would cease to be a mark of success.

The standard of taste

Where then should we look for standards in the judgement of beauty? Or is our search destined to be vain? In a celebrated essay Hume tried to shift the focus of the discussion, arguing roughly as follows: taste is a form of preference, and this preference is the premise, not the conclusion of the judgement of beauty. To fix the standard, therefore, we must discover the *reliable judge*, the one whose taste and discriminations are the best guide to...

Guide to what? There is a potential circle here: beauty is what the reliable critic discerns, and the reliable critic is the one who discerns beauty. But such a circle is what we must expect: for Hume, seeing an object as beautiful is a matter of 'gilding or staining it with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment'. The standard, if it exists, does not lie in the qualities of the object but in the sentiments of the judge. So, Hume suggests, let us get away from the fruitless discussion of beauty, and simply concentrate on the qualities we admire, and ought to admire, in a critic—qualities such as delicacy and discernment.

However, this opens us to another kind of scepticism: why should it be *those* qualities that we admire? Even if it seemed natural, in the Scotland of Hume's day, to admire delicacy and discernment, it seems less natural today, when facetiousness and ignorance, so unfairly left out by the austere sages of

the Enlightenment, are demanding, and receiving, their share of attention.

Is this where we should leave the topic? I think not. For Hume's argument suggests that the judgement of taste reflects the character of the one who makes it, and character matters. The characteristics of the good critic, as Hume envisaged them, point to virtues which, in Hume's thinking, are vital to the good conduct of life, and not just to the discrimination of aesthetic qualities. In the last analysis there is as much objectivity in our judgements of beauty as there is in our judgements of virtue and vice. Beauty is therefore as firmly rooted in the scheme of things as goodness. It speaks to us, as virtue speaks to us, of human fulfilment: not of things that we want, but of things that we ought to want, because human nature requires them. Such, at least, is my belief, and in the next two chapters I will try to justify it.