

7

Art and *Erōs*

I have discussed four kinds of beauty: human beauty, as an object of desire; natural beauty, as an object of contemplation; everyday beauty, as an object of practical reason; and artistic beauty, as a form of meaning and an object of taste. In order to pursue the investigation to another level I want to consider, in this chapter, the interaction of the first kind of beauty with the last. I shall ask the question how beauty, as an object of desire, might be represented in art as an object of contemplation. The argument will take us deeper into the concept of individuality, will cast light upon both sexual desire and the aesthetic enterprise, and will give us new reasons for thinking that there is, after all, a standard of taste.

Individuality

Human beings are alone among the animals in revealing their individuality in their faces. The mouth that speaks, the eyes that gaze, the skin that blushes, all are signs of freedom, character and judgement, and all give concrete expression to the uniqueness of the self within. The great portraitist will ensure that these high-points of bodily expression reveal not

just the momentary thoughts but the long-term intentions, the moral stance and the self-conception of the individual who shines in them.

As Kenneth Clark pointed out, in his celebrated study of the nude, the reclining Venus marks a break with antiquity, when the goddess was never shown in a horizontal position. The reclining nude shows the body not as a statue to be worshipped but as a woman to be desired. Even in the *Venus of Urbino*—that most provocative of Titian's female nudes—the lady draws our eyes to her face, which tells us that this body is on offer only in the way that the woman herself is on offer, to the lover who can honestly meet her gaze. To all others the body is out of bounds, being the intimate property of the gaze that looks out from it: not a body but an embodiment, to use the language of Chapter 2. The face individualizes the body, possesses it in the name of freedom, and condemns every covetous glance as a violation. The Titian nude neither provokes nor excites, but retains a detached serenity—the serenity of a person, whose thoughts and desires are not ours but hers.

Titian's reclining Venuses are interestingly compared, in this respect, with the nudes of François Boucher, the brilliant painter-decorator of the Paris of Louis XV. Boucher's nudes are not individualized by their faces. As a matter of fact, they all have the same face, which is not a face at all, but an assemblage of facial parts. The lips just slightly apart as though in anticipation of a kiss; the clear eyes under lowered lashes, the oval contours filled with flushing cheeks that swell like sails in a summer breeze—all such features, brilliantly displayed from every angle and in every light, carry a single meaning, which is that of sexual appetite. The eyes look at things—but



Figure 16 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*: desire at home.

only inconsequential things in the picture. No soul shoots out from them, no gaze questions or troubles or enraptures: all is fixed in its stillness—the stillness of creatures too abstract to take ownership of life. The nereids in *The Triumph of Venus*, for example, are not distinct from the goddess; all are one woman, and also infinitely many—separate instances of a universal, whose vacuousness of expression derives from the fact that universals, unlike individuals, have nothing in particular to express. Boucher's painting is a picture of repose, and an adoration of the female body—at least as this body was esteemed in eighteenth-century France, with translucent skin, firm girlish breasts, and a ripple of fat around the thighs. Yet there is no-one there! These bodies are unowned, dis-souled,



Figure 17 Boucher, *The Triumph of Venus*: desire abroad.

not even the bodies of animals, since they contain the universal template of a human face, voided of the self that animates and redeems it. And this absence of a soul downgrades the painting: it is charming, attractive, decorative, a splendid piece of furniture—but beautiful? We are not so sure.

Heavenly and earthly beauty

It is tempting to compare the painting with its famous predecessor, *The Birth of Venus*. Botticelli's Venus is, from the anatomical point of view, a misshapen caricature, held together

by no skeletal structure or muscular tension, a helpless appendage to the face that looks out so wistfully, not at the viewer but past him—and yet who cares? This is a face dreamed of, longed for, unforgettable, the face of an idealized woman—and therefore not the face of any mortal, but a face all the same, and one that both individualizes and mystifies. Not that we should think of Botticelli's Venus as sensual: this is an early Renaissance Venus, who moves in heavenly spheres, and is outside the reach of mortal longings. And that is why the painting is so haunting: this woman conjured from desire lies beyond the reach of desire as we have known it.

With the reclining Venuses of Titian we are no longer in the heavenly realm, but very much on earth, although an earth of domestic safety and conjugal passion. The face of a Titian



Figure 18 Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*: beyond desire.

nude is that of an individual woman, who has taken possession of her surroundings, and is decidedly at home in them. She reclines among her drapes in full confidence of her personal right to them, immersed in a life that is larger, deeper, more inscrutable than the moment alone. Her body is revealed to us, but she does not show it to us—she is not as a rule conscious of being watched, save perhaps by a dog or a cupid whose calm unembarrassability merely emphasizes the fact that voyeurs cannot trouble her peace of mind, which is also a peace of body. She is not in a state of excitement, nor



Figure 19 Rembrandt, *Susannah and the Elders*: shame in the body.

does she have cause for shame. She is at one with her body, and this at-oneness is portrayed in her face. Sexual shame changes the contours of the female body and is revealed in both face and limb, as Rembrandt shows so brilliantly in his depiction of *Susannah and the Elders*. Set this beside the Titian and you will quickly see that the body in Titian's picture is neither on offer nor withdrawn, but simply at ease in its freedom, a person revealed in her flesh. And in some mysterious way the beauty of the painting and the beauty of the woman portrayed in it are not two beauties but one.

Erotic art

Anne Hollander has written of the extent to which the nude, in our tradition, is not naked but unclothed: it is a body marked by the shapes and materials of its normal covering. In Titian the body is at rest just as it would be if it were protected from our gaze by a veil of clothing: it is a body under invisible clothes. We no more detach it from the face or the personality than we would detach the body of a woman fully dressed. And by painting the body in this way Titian overcomes its eerie quality—its nature as forbidden fruit. This effect would vanish were the face to be replaced by an off-the-shelf stereotype of the kind used by Boucher. In Boucher the face is a pointer to the body, which is its *raison d'être*. In Titian it is not exactly the other way round: for certainly the emotion of the painting resides in the flesh-tints, the light, softness and promise of the full female form. But in Titian the face keeps vigil over this form, quietly asserting ownership and removing it from our reach. This is erotic art, but in no

way concupiscent art: Venus is not being shown to us as a possible object of our own desire. She is being withheld from us, integrated into the personality that quietly looks from those eyes and which is busy with thoughts and desires of its own.

When Manet famously painted the *boulevardienne* of nineteenth-century Paris in the pose of a Titian Venus, his intention was not to present her body as a sexual object, but to reveal another and more hardened kind of subjectivity. The hand on the thigh of Manet's Olympia is not the hand that Titian paints, schooled in innocent caresses and resting with a fairy touch: it is a raw, tough hand that deals in money, that grips far more readily than it strokes, and which is used to fend



Figure 20 Manet, *Olympia*: the body unashamed.

off cheats, nerds and perverts. The knowing expression neither offers the body nor withholds it, but nevertheless has its own way of saying that this body is wholly mine. Olympia addresses the viewer with a shrewd appraising look that is anything but erotic, and the great bouquet deferentially presented by the servant shows how futile it is to approach such a woman with romantic gestures. There is an intense moment of individualization captured in this painting—a moment related, albeit ironically, to the moment of individualization in the Titian Venus. We are presented with this woman's body through the lens of her own awareness. And the connection between self-identity and self-awareness is made vivid in her tough reclining form, which is not resting on the bed but ready to spring from it. This is a beautiful painting, but its beauty is not the beauty of the woman who is dandling her slippers on the sheets.

Eros and desire

The question raised by Plato in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* remains as pertinent today as it was in ancient Greece: what place is there, in sexual desire, for the individual object? Seen as a merely physical urge, desire can be equally satisfied by any member of the relevant sex. In which case the individual cannot be its true object, since he or she is merely an instance of the universal man or woman. Seen as a spiritual force, however, desire is equally indifferent to the individual. If the individual is targeted, it is on account of his or her beauty: and beauty is a universal, which can be neither consumed nor possessed but only contemplated. Either way the

individual drops out of consideration as irrelevant—physical desire doesn't reach him, and erotic love transcends him. In both Plato's version and that of the medievals the incarnate individual vanishes as the object of love, etherialized into a disincarnate smile like Beatrice in the *Paradiso*.

Gradually, in the aftermath of the Renaissance, the Platonic view of our condition lost its appeal, and erotic feelings began to be represented in art, music and poetry for what they are. In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* the goddess of love has definitively fallen to earth, becoming not merely a symbol of physical passion, but also a victim of it. Milton takes up the story in his portrait of Adam and Eve: a representation of 'the rites mysterious of connubial love' in which the body is all-important, not as an instrument, but as the physical presence of the rational soul. The body is not etherialized in the smile; rather the smile is realized in the body, though 'smiles from Reason flow, and are of love the food', as Milton puts it. So are Adam and Eve fully carnal beings, 'emparadised in one another's arms'.

Milton's aim was not to divide the goddess of love as Plato had divided her, but to show sexual desire and erotic love as intricately connected, each made whole and legitimate by the other. Dryden in England, and Racine in France, likewise portrayed erotic love as it is, a predicament of embodied individuals, for whom will, desire and freedom are all made of flesh. Such writers recognized the erotic as a kind of crux in the human condition, a mystery with which our earthly destiny is entwined, and from which we cannot escape without sacrificing some part of our nature and our happiness. The early Florentine Renaissance, however, remained true to

the medieval and Platonist conception of the erotic. In this respect the distance between Dante and Milton parallels the distance between Botticelli and Titian. While the Platonist mind of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance conceives the object of desire as a premonition of the eternal, the modern mind sees the object of desire as both rational and mortal, with all the poignant and grief-implying helplessness that stems from this.

Art and pornography

The ascent of the soul through love, which Plato describes in the *Phaedrus*, is symbolized in the figure of Aphrodite Urania, and this was the Venus painted by Botticelli, who was incidentally an ardent Platonist, and member of the Platonist circle around Pico della Mirandola. Botticelli's Venus is not erotic: she is a vision of heavenly beauty, a visitation from other and higher spheres, and a call to transcendence. Indeed, she is self-evidently both the ancestor and the descendant of the Virgins of Fra Filippo Lippi: the ancestor in her pre-Christian meaning, the descendant in absorbing all that had been achieved through the artistic representation of the Virgin Mary as the symbol of untainted flesh.

The post-Renaissance rehabilitation of sexual desire laid the foundations for a genuinely erotic art, an art that would display the human being as both subject and object of desire, but also as a free individual whose desire is a favour consciously bestowed. But this rehabilitation of sex leads us to raise what has become one of the most important questions confronting art and the criticism of art in our time: that of the difference,

if there is one, between erotic art and pornography. Art can be erotic and also beautiful, like a Titian Venus. But it cannot be beautiful and also pornographic—so we believe, at least. And it is important to see why.

In distinguishing the erotic and the pornographic we are really distinguishing two kinds of interest: interest in the embodied person and interest in the body—and, in the sense that I intend, these interests are incompatible. (See the discussion in Chapter 2.) Normal desire is an inter-personal emotion. Its aim is a free and mutual surrender, which is also a uniting of two individuals, of you and me—*through* our bodies, certainly, but not merely *as* our bodies. Normal desire is a person to person response, one that seeks the selfhood that it gives. Objects can be substituted for each other, subjects not. Subjects, as Kant persuasively argued, are free individuals; their non-substitutability belongs to what they essentially are. Pornography, like slavery, is a denial of the human subject, a way of negating the moral demand that free beings must treat each other as ends in themselves.

Soft pornography

The point can be put in terms of a distinction introduced in Chapter 5. Pornography addresses a fantasy interest, while erotic art addresses an interest of the imagination. Hence the first is explicit and depersonalized, while the second invites us into the subjectivity of another person and relies on suggestion and allusion rather than explicit display.

The purpose of pornography is to arouse vicarious desire; the purpose of erotic art is to portray the sexual desire of the

people pictured within it—and if it also arouses the viewer, as Correggio does from time to time, then this is an aesthetic defect, a 'fall' into another kind of interest than that which has beauty as its target. Hence erotic art veils its subject matter, in order that desire should not be traduced and expatriated by the observer. The supreme achievement of erotic art is to cause the body to veil *itself*—to make the flesh itself into an expression of the decency that forbids the voyeur, so that the subjectivity of the nude is revealed even in those parts of the body that are outside the province of the will. This is



Figure 21 Boucher, *Blonde Odalisque*: the shameless body.

what Titian achieves, and the result is an erotic art that is both serene and nuptial, an art that removes the body completely from the sully'ing interest of the Peeping Tom.

Turn now to Boucher's *Blonde Odalisque*, and you will see how very different is the artistic intention. This woman has adopted a pose that she could never adopt when dressed. It is a pose which has little or no place in ordinary life outside the sexual act, and it draws attention to itself, since the woman is looking vacantly away and seems to have no other interest. But there is another way in which Boucher's painting touches against the bounds of decency, and this is in the complete absence of any reason for the Odalisque's pose within the picture. She is alone in the picture, looking at nothing in particular, engaged in no other act than the one we see. The place of the lover is absent and waiting to be filled: and you are invited to fill it.

Of course there are differences between the Odalisque and the tits and bums on page three of *The Sun*. One is the general difference between painting and photography—the first being a representation of fictions, the second a presentation of realities (even when adjusted by the airbrush or the photosoftware). The least that can be said is that the bum on page three is as real as they come and interesting for that very reason. The second difference is connected, namely, that we need know nothing of Boucher's Odalisque in order to appreciate its intended effect, save what the picture tells us. There was a model who posed for this canvas; but we understand the canvas neither as a portrait of her nor as a painting about her. The bum on page three has a name and address. Very often the accompanying text tells you a lot about the

girl herself, helps you forward with the fantasy of sexual contact. For many people, with reason I think, this makes a decisive moral difference between the page three image and a painting like Boucher's. The woman on page three is being packaged in her sexual attributes, and placed in the fantasies of a thousand strangers. She may not mind this—presumably she doesn't. But in not minding she shows how much she has already lost. No-one is degraded by Boucher's painting, since no-one real occurs in it. This woman—even though the model who sat for her has a name and address (she was Louise O'Murphy, kept for the King's pleasure at the *Parc aux Cerfs*)—is presented as a figment, in no sense identical with any real human being, despite being painted from life.

The moral question

It is difficult to find your way through the moral morass of soft pornography. In a time like ours, when explicit images of the most blatant kind are available at the touch of a keyboard, when hard core pornography is protected by the US Supreme Court as 'free speech', and when human sexuality is discussed as though modesty, decency and shame were nothing more than oppressive illusions, it is hard to be disapproving towards page three. What harm does it do? Such is the natural response, and when provoked by censorious feminists it is a response with which you can sympathize. Nevertheless we should not deceive ourselves, as some commentators do, into thinking that the interest directed towards page three is an interest in beauty, in an ideal of womanhood or in some higher value than is revealed in the text. On the contrary, the

all-important feature of the girl on page three is that she is real, and on display as a sexual object. Even if the attitude towards her is muted, and even if she fills some compensating function in a life deprived of real sexual enjoyment, we should not believe that she competes in the realm of aesthetic interest—not even for the interest directed towards Boucher's *Blonde Odalisque*. Boucher's canvas lies on the dividing line between the aesthetic and the sexual, allowing our thoughts to stray into forbidden territory but not provoking them with the knowledge that this woman is real, ready and available—the knowledge that causes the jump from imagination to fantasy, and from the aesthetic appreciation of female beauty to the desire to embrace the particular instance of it.

The discussion of Titian's *Venus* indicates, I think, why pornography lies outside the realm of art, why it is incapable of beauty in itself and desecrates the beauty of the people displayed in it. The pornographic image is like a magic wand that turns subjects into objects, people into things—and thereby disenchanting them, destroying the source of their beauty. It causes people to hide behind their bodies, like puppets worked by hidden strings. Ever since Descartes's *cogito*, the idea of the self as an inner homunculus, has cast its shadow over our views of the human person. The Cartesian picture tempts us to believe that we go through life dragging an animal on a lead, forcing it to do our bidding until, at the last, it collapses and dies. I am a subject; my body an object: I am I, it is it. In this way the body becomes a thing among things, and the only way I can rescue it is to assert a right of ownership. To say, this body is not just any old object, but one that belongs

to *me*. And that is precisely how the relation between soul and body is viewed in the pornographic image.

There is another and better way of seeing things, however, and it is one that explains much of that old morality that many people now profess to find so puzzling. On this view my body is not my property but—to use the theological term—my incarnation. My body is not an object but a subject, just as I am. I don't own it, any more than I own myself. I am inextricably mingled with it, and what is done to my body is done to me. And there are ways of treating it that cause me to think and feel as I would not otherwise think or feel, to lose my moral sense, to become hardened or indifferent to others, to cease to make judgements or to be guided by principles and ideals. When this happens it is not just I who am harmed: all those who love me, need me or relate to me are harmed as well. For I have damaged the part on which relationships are built.

The old morality, which told us that selling the body is incompatible with giving the self, touched on a truth. Sexual feeling is not a sensation that can be turned on and off at will: it is a tribute from one self to another and—at its height—an incandescent revelation of what you are. To treat it as a commodity, that can be bought and sold like any other, is to damage both present self and future other. The condemnation of prostitution was not just puritan bigotry; it was a recognition of a profound truth, which is that you and your body are not two things but one, and by selling the body you harden the soul. And that which is true of prostitution is true of pornography too. It is not a tribute to human beauty but a desecration of it.

Beauty and *erōs*

In this chapter I have focused on painting, in order to pencil in the borderline between erotic art and sexual fantasy. My intention was to visit for the last time the old Platonic view, that *erōs* is the governing principle of beauty in all its forms, and to show in detail how this misrepresents both the nature of aesthetic interest and the kind of moral education which true art can accomplish. Beauty comes from setting human life, sex included, at the distance from which it can be viewed without disgust or prurience. When distance is lost, and imagination swallowed up in fantasy, then beauty may remain—but it is a spoiled beauty, one that has been priced free from the individuality of the person who possesses it. It has lost its value and gained a price.

Moreover human beauty belongs to our embodiment, and art that 'objectifies' the body, removing it from the realm of moral relations, can never capture the true beauty of the human form. By desecrating the beauty of people, it desecrates itself. The comparison between pornography and erotic art shows us that taste is rooted in our wider preferences, and that these preferences express and encourage aspects of our own moral character. The case against pornography is the case against the interest that it serves—the interest in seeing people reduced to their bodies, objectified as animals, made thing-like and obscene. This is an interest that many people have; but it is an interest at war with our humanity. In judging this interest adversely I move out of the sphere of

aesthetic judgement into that of sexual virtue and sexual vice. Pornography therefore offers a vivid illustration of the thesis touched on at the end of the last chapter. The standard of taste is fixed by the virtues of the critic, and these virtues are tried and proved in the moral life.

8

The Flight from Beauty

In the first chapter I distinguished two ideas of beauty—one denoting aesthetic success, the other a specific form of it, the form in which we delight in, and are at one with, the presented aspect of the world. Throughout this book I have pointed to aesthetic objects that succeed without necessarily being beautiful in this idealizing sense—either because they are too ordinary, like clothes, or because they attract our attention by disturbing us, like the novels of Zola or the operas of Berg.

Even in Zola and Berg, however, beauty shows its face—as in the lovely invocation of the young Françoise and her cow at the opening of *La Terre* or the equally lovely music with which Berg's orchestra sorrows over Lulu. Zola and Berg, in their different ways, remind us that real beauty can be found, even in what is seedy, painful and decayed. Our ability to *tell the truth* about our own condition, in measured words and touching melodies, offers a kind of redemption from it. The most influential work of twentieth-century English literature, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, describes the modern city as a soul-less desert: but it does so with images and allusions that affirm what the city denies. Our very ability to make

this judgement is the final disproof of it. If we can grasp the emptiness of modern life, this is because art points to *another way of being*, and Eliot's poem makes this other way available.

The Waste Land belongs to the tradition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and James's *The Golden Bowl*. It describes what is seedy and sordid in words so resonant of the opposite, so replete with the capacity to feel, to sympathize and to understand, that life in its lowest forms is vindicated by our response to it. This 'redemption through art' occurs only because the artist aims at beauty in the narrow sense. And this is the paradox of *fin-de-siècle* culture: that it continued to believe in beauty, while focusing on all the reasons for doubting that beauty is obtainable outside the realm of art.

Since that time art has taken another turn, refusing to bless human life with anything like a vision of redemption. Art in the tradition of Baudelaire floats like an angel above the world beneath its gaze. It does not avoid the spectacle of human folly, malice and decay; but it invites us to another place, telling us that 'là tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté: | Luxe, calme et volupté'. More recent art cultivates a posture of transgression, matching the ugliness of the things it portrays with an ugliness of its own. Beauty is downgraded as something too sweet, too escapist and too far from realities to deserve our undecieved attention. Qualities that previously denoted aesthetic failure are now cited as marks of success; while the pursuit of beauty is often regarded as a retreat from the real task of artistic creation, which is to challenge comforting illusions and to show life as it is. Arthur Danto has even

argued that beauty is both deceptive as a goal and in some way antipathetic to the mission of modern art.

This movement of ideas can be seen as in part a recognition of the ambiguous nature of the term 'beauty'. But it also involves a rejection of beauty in its narrow sense, an affirmation that the old invocations of home, peace, love and contentment are lies, and that art must henceforth devote itself to the real and unpleasant truth of our condition.

The modernist apology

The repudiation of beauty gains strength from a particular vision of modern art and its history. According to many critics writing today a work of art justifies itself by announcing itself as a visitor from the future. The value of art is a shock value: art exists to awaken us to our historical predicament and to remind us of the ceaseless change which is the only permanent thing in human nature.

Historians of painting therefore constantly remind us of the Salon Art of the mid-nineteenth century—art that was not art at all, precisely because it was derived from a repertoire of exhausted gestures—and of the resistance at first encountered by Manet, whom Baudelaire extolled as 'le peintre de la vie moderne'. They remind us of the great force that was released into the world by Manet's iconoclasm, and of the successive shocks to the system as one by one the experiments proceeded, until figurative painting came to be seen by many as a thing of the past.

Historians of music remind us of the last symphony and late quartets of Beethoven, in which the constraints of form

seem to be burst asunder by a titanic power; they dwell on the case of *Tristan und Isolde*, whose shifting chromatic harmonies seem to stretch tonality to the very limit, and on the music of Stravinsky, Bartók and Schoenberg—music which at first shocked the world, and which was justified in terms used to justify the abolition of figurative painting. The old language, the historians say, was exhausted: only clichés could result from the attempt to prolong its use. The new language was designed to place music in its historical context, to recognize the present as something detached from the past, a new experience which we seize only by understanding it as 'other' than what has gone before. But in the very moment of seizing the present we become aware of it as past and superseded.

Tradition and orthodoxy

In architecture and literature we find the same story, of art at war with its past, forced to challenge the rule of clichés, and to set off on a path of transgression. However, the story is fed on a one-sided diet of examples. At the moment when Rothko, de Kooning and Pollock were engaged in their (to my mind highly repetitive) experiments, Edward Hopper was producing figurative paintings that showed him to be as much the painter of modern American life as Manet had been the painter of life in nineteenth-century Paris. At the moment when Schoenberg was jettisoning tonality for the twelve-tone serial method, Janáček was composing *Kaťa Kabanová* and Sibelius beginning his great series of tonal symphonies. Moreover, there is another, and truer, history of the modern artist which is the story told by the great modernists

themselves. It is the history told by T. S. Eliot, in his essays and in *Four Quartets*, by Ezra Pound in the *Cantos*, by Schoenberg in his critical writings and in *Moses und Aron*, and by Pfitzner in *Palestrina*. And it sees the goal of the modern artist not as a break with tradition, but as a recapturing of tradition, in circumstances for which the artistic legacy has made little or no provision. This history does not see the pastness of the present moment, but its present reality, as the *place we have got to*, and whose nature must be understood in terms of a continuum. If, in modern circumstances, the forms and styles of art must be remade, this is not in order to repudiate the old tradition, but in order to restore it. The effort of the modern artist is to express realities which have not been encountered before, and which are especially hard to encompass. But this cannot be done, except by bringing the spiritual capital of our culture to bear on the present moment and to show it as it truly is. For Eliot and his colleagues, therefore, there could be no truly modern art which was not at the same time a search for orthodoxy: an attempt to capture the nature of the modern experience, by setting it in relation to the certainties of a live tradition.

You may find the result impenetrable, unintelligible or even ugly—as many do in the case of Schoenberg. But that is certainly not the intention. Schoenberg, like Eliot, sought to *renew* the tradition, not to destroy it, but to renew it as a vehicle in which beauty, rather than banality, would once more be the norm. There is nothing absurd in the view that the gossamer lines of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* have more of real melody than the thick textures of a Vaughan Williams symphony. True, this little melodrama has a nightmarish

quality that is far from the consoling beauties of a song by Schubert. But Schoenberg's idiom can be understood as an attempt both to understand the nightmare, and to rein it in—to confine it in a musical form which gives meaning and beauty to catastrophe in the way that Aeschylus gave meaning and beauty to the avenging furies, or Shakespeare and Verdi to the dreadful death of Desdemona.

The modernists feared that the aesthetic endeavour would detach itself from the full artistic intention, and become empty, repetitious, mechanical and cliché-ridden. It was self-evident to Eliot, Matisse and Schoenberg that this was happening all around them, and they set out to protect an endangered aesthetic ideal from the corruptions of popular culture. This ideal had connected the pursuit of beauty with the impulse to consecrate human life and endow it with a more than worldly significance. In short, the modernists set out to reunite the artistic enterprise with its underlying spiritual aim. Modernism was not conceived as a transgression but as a recuperation: an arduous path back to a hard-won inheritance of meaning, in which beauty would again be honoured, as the present symbol of transcendent values. This is not what we see in the consciously 'transgressive' and 'challenging' art of today, which exemplifies a flight from beauty, rather than a desire to recover it.

The flight from beauty

One of Mozart's most endearing works is the comic opera, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, which tells the story of Konstanze, shipwrecked and separated from her fiancé Belmonte, and

taken to serve in the harem of the Pasha Selim. After various intrigues, Belmonte rescues her, helped by the clemency of the Pasha, who respects Konstanze's chastity, declining to take her by force. This implausible plot permits Mozart to express his Enlightenment conviction that charity is a universal virtue, as real in the Muslim empire of the Turks as in the Christian empire of the enlightened Joseph II (himself hardly Christian). The faithful love of Belmonte and Konstanze inspires the Pasha's clemency. And, even if Mozart's innocent vision is without much historical basis, his belief in the reality of disinterested love is everywhere expressed and endorsed by the music. *Die Entführung* advances a moral idea, and its melodies share the beauty of that idea and persuasively present it to the listener.

In the 2004 production of *Die Entführung* at the Comic Opera in Berlin, the producer Calixto Bieito decided to set the opera in a Berlin brothel, with Selim as pimp, and Konstanze one of the prostitutes. Even during the most tender music, the stage was littered with couples copulating, and every excuse for violence, with or without a sexual climax, was taken. At one point a prostitute is gratuitously tortured, and her nipples bloodily and realistically severed before she is killed. The words and the music speak of love and compassion, but their message is drowned out by the loudly orchestrated scenes of murder and narcissistic sex that litter the stage.

That is an example of a phenomenon with which we are familiar from every aspect of our contemporary culture. It is not merely that artists, directors, musicians and others connected with the arts are in flight from beauty. There is a

The Flight from Beauty

desire to spoil beauty, in acts of aesthetic iconoclasm. Whenever beauty lies in wait for us, the desire to pre-empt its appeal can intervene, ensuring that its still small voice will not be heard behind the scenes of desecration. For beauty makes a claim on us: it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world. (Cf. Iago of Cassio: 'He hath a daily beauty in his life | Which makes me ugly', and the soliloquy of Claggart in Britten's *Billy Budd*, raging against the beauty that shines its light on his own moral worthlessness.)

I have used the word 'desecration', thereby recalling the discussion of the sacred in Chapter 2. To desecrate is to spoil what might otherwise be set apart, in the sphere of consecrated things. We can desecrate a church, a mosque, a graveyard, a tomb; and also a holy image, a holy book or a holy ceremony. We can also desecrate a corpse, a cherished image, even a living human being—in so far as these things contain (as they do) a portent of some original 'apartness'. The fear of desecration is a vital element in all religions. Indeed, that is what the word *religio* originally meant: a cult or ceremony designed to protect some sacred place from sacrilege.

Our need for beauty is not something that we could lack and still be fulfilled as people. It is a need arising from our metaphysical condition, as free individuals, seeking our place in a shared and public world. We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves. The experience of beauty guides us along this second path: it tells us that we *are* at home in the world, that the world is already ordered in our perceptions as a place fit for the lives of beings like us. But—and this is again

The Flight from Beauty

one of the messages of the early modernists—beings like us become at home in the world only by acknowledging our 'fallen' condition, as Eliot acknowledged it in *The Waste Land*. Hence the experience of beauty also points us beyond this world, to a 'kingdom of ends' in which our immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered. As Plato and Kant both saw, therefore, the feeling for beauty is proximate to the religious frame of mind, arising from a humble sense of living with imperfections, while aspiring towards the highest unity with the transcendental.

Look at any picture by one of the great landscape painters—Poussin, Guardi, Turner, Corot, Cézanne—and you will see that idea of beauty celebrated and fixed in images. Those



Figure 22 Guardi, *Scene with Marine Landscape: joy in decay*.

painters do not turn a blind eye to suffering, or to the vastness and threateningness of the universe, of which we occupy so small a corner. Far from it. Landscape painters show us death and decay in the very heart of things: the light on their hills is a fading light; the walls of their houses are patched and crumbling like the stucco on the villages of Guardi. But their images point to the joy that lies incipient in decay, and to the eternal that is implied in the transient.

Even in the brutal presentations of thwarted and malicious life that fill the novels of Zola we find, if not the reality of beauty, at least a distant glimpse of it—recorded in the rhythm of the prose, and in the invocations of stillness amid the futile longings which drive the characters to their goals. Realism, in Zola as in Baudelaire and Flaubert, is a kind of disappointed tribute to the ideal. The subject-matter is profane; but profane by nature, and not because the writer has chosen to desecrate the few scant beauties that he finds. The art of desecration represents a new departure, and one that we should try to understand, since it lies at the centre of the postmodern experience.

Sacred and profane

Desecration is a kind of defence against the sacred, an attempt to destroy its claims. In the presence of sacred things our lives are judged and in order to escape that judgement we destroy the thing that seems to accuse us.

According to many philosophers and anthropologists, however, the experience of the sacred is a universal feature of the human condition, and therefore not easily avoided. For the most part our lives are organized by transitory purposes.

But few of these purposes are memorable or moving to us. Every now and then we are jolted out of our complacency, and feel ourselves to be in the presence of something vastly more significant than our present interests and desires. We sense the reality of something precious and mysterious, which reaches out to us with a claim that is in some way not of this world. This happens in the presence of death, and especially the death of someone loved. We look with awe on the human body from which the life has fled. This is no longer a person, but the 'mortal remains' of a person. And this thought fills us with a sense of the uncanny. We are reluctant to touch the dead body; we see it as in some way not properly a part of our world, almost a visitor from some other sphere.

This experience is a paradigm of our encounter with the sacred. And it demands from us a kind of ceremonial recognition. The dead body is the object of rituals and acts of purification, designed not just to send its former occupant happily into the hereafter—for these practices are engaged in even by those who have no belief in the hereafter—but in order to overcome the eeriness, the supernatural quality, of the dead human form. The body is being reclaimed for this world, by the rituals which acknowledge that it also stands apart from it. The rituals, to put it in another way, consecrate the body, purify it of its miasma and restore it to its former status as an embodiment. By the same token, the dead body can be desecrated, when it is displayed to the world as a mere heap of discarded flesh—and this is surely one of the primary acts of desecration, one to which people have been given from time immemorial, as when Achilles drags the body of Hector in triumph around the walls of Troy.

There are other occasions when we are in a similar way startled out of our day-to-day preoccupations. In particular, there is the experience of falling in love. This too is a human universal, and it is an experience of the strangest kind. The face and body of the beloved are imbued with the most intense life. But in one crucial respect they are like the body of someone dead: they seem not to belong in the empirical world. The beloved looks on the lover as Beatrice looked on Dante, from a point outside the flow of temporal things. The beloved object demands that we cherish it, that we approach it with an almost ritualistic reverence. And there radiates from those eyes and limbs and words a kind of fullness of spirit that makes everything anew.

The human form is sacred for us because it bears the stamp of our embodiment. The wilful desecration of the human form, either through the pornography of sex or the pornography of death and violence, has become, for many people, a kind of compulsion. And this desecration, which spoils the experience of freedom, is also a denial of love. It is an attempt to remake the world as though love were no longer a part of it. And that, surely, is what is the most important characteristic of the postmodern culture, as exemplified in Bieito's production of *Die Entförmung*: it is a loveless culture, which is afraid of beauty because it is disturbed by love.

Idolatry

The dialectic of the sacred and the profane is a leading theme of the Jewish Bible, in which God is constantly revealing himself in mysteries that emphasize his sacred character,



Figure 23 Poussin, *The Israelites Dancing around the Golden Calf*: in the world and of the world.

and in which the Jews are constantly tempted to profane him, by worshipping images and idols in his place. Why should God be profaned by idolatry, and why are people tempted by it? Why does God decree the terrible genocidal punishment of the Israelites for what (by modern standards) is the casual peccadillo of dancing before the Golden Calf? Does God have no sense of proportion?

Such questions point us to the peculiarity of sacred things, that they do not admit of substitutes. There are not degrees of profanation, but a single and unified thing that profanation is, which is putting a substitute in place of that for which there are no substitutes—the 'I am that I am' that is uniquely itself, and which must be worshipped for the thing that it is

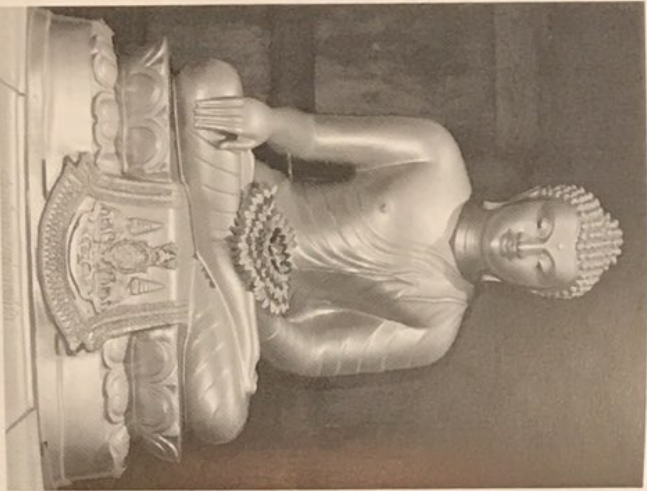


Figure 24 Golden Buddha: in the world, but not of the world.

and not as a means to an end that could be achieved in some other way or through some rival deity. Idolatry is the paradigm of profanation, since it admits into the realm of worship the idea of a *currency*. You can trade in idols, swap them around, try out new versions, see which one responds best to prayer, and which one strikes the best bargains. And all this is a profanation, since it involves trading that which cannot be traded without ceasing to be, which is the sacred object itself.

The object of worship is to be placed apart, *in* the world but *not of* it, to be addressed as the unique thing that it is, in which all the meanings of our lives are somehow summarized and consecrated—'robed as destinies', in Larkin's words. This is what we mean by calling it sacred. It is a deep question of anthropology why there should be the need for such objects, and a deep question of theology whether that need corresponds to any objectively existing reality. But it is important to see that the posture towards God that is advocated in the Hebrew Bible, although it is to a certain measure an innovation (as is the very idea that he is God, rather than a god), is one that we understand instinctively, even if we cannot give a rationalization of it, or explain why it has such importance in the life of a religious believer.

Profanation

There are other occasions in which we try to focus on something, to appreciate it for its own sake, as the thing that it is, and in which our attitude, while not one of worship, is nevertheless threatened by the pursuit of substitutes. The most evident example is the one that I have been considering on and off throughout this book—sexual interest, in which the object is idealized, held apart, pursued not as a commodity but for the particular person he or she is. That kind of interest, which is what we mean by erotic love, is at risk—and the principal risk is the appearance, in whatever guise, of a substitute. As I remarked in Chapter 2, jealousy is painful not least because it sees the object of love, once sacred, as now desecrated.

One cure for the pain of desecration is the move towards total *profanation*: in other words, to wipe out all vestiges of sanctity from the once worshipped object, to make it merely a thing *of* the world, and not just a thing *in* the world, something that is nothing over and above the substitutes that can at any time replace it. That is what we see in the spreading addiction to pornography—a profanation that removes the sexual bond entirely from the realm of intrinsic values. It involves wiping out one area in which the idea of the beautiful had taken root, so as to protect ourselves from the possibility of loving it and therefore losing it.

The other area in which this profanation regularly occurs is that of aesthetic judgement. Here too we are dealing with an attitude that tries to single out its object, to appreciate it for its own sake, to regard it as irreplaceable, without substitutes, bearing its meaning inseparably within itself. I don't say that works of art are sacred things—though many of the greatest works of art started life in that way, including the statues and temples of the Greeks and Romans, and the altarpieces of medieval Europe. But I do say that they are, or have been, part of the continuing human attempt to idealize and sanctify the objects of experience, and to present images and narratives of our humanity as a thing to live up to, and not merely a thing to live. And this is true even of those works of brutal realism, like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Zola's *Nana*, whose power and persuasiveness depend upon the ironical contrast between things as they are and things as people wish them to be. As I suggested, the temptation towards profanation, which manifestly exists in the sexual sphere, exists too in the aesthetic. Works of art become objects of desecration,

and the more likely to be targeted, the more claims they make for their own sacred status. (Hence the routine profanation of the Wagner operas by producers enraged by, or estranged from, their presumptuous spiritual claims.)

Anthropological remarks

Culture emerges from our attempt to settle on standards that will command the consent of people generally, while raising their aspirations towards the goals that make people admirable and lovable. Culture therefore represents an investment over many generations, and imposes enormous and by no means clearly articulated obligations—in particular, the obligation to be other and better than we are, in all the ways that others might appreciate. Manners, morals, religious precepts and ordinary decencies train us in this, and they form the central core of any culture. But they are necessarily concerned with what is common and easily taught.

As I have been at pains to point out, aesthetic judgement is an integral part of these elementary forms of social coordination, and aesthetic judgement leads of its own accord to other and potentially 'higher' and more stylized applications. It is constantly pointing away from our ordinary imperfections and fallings short, to a world of high ideals. It therefore contains within itself two permanent causes of offence. First it is urging upon us distinctions—of taste, of refinement, of understanding—which cannot fail to remind us that people are not equally interesting, equally admirable, or equally able to understand the world in which they live.

Secondly, because the democratic attitude is invariably in conflict with itself—it being impossible to live as though there are no aesthetic values, while living a real life among human beings—aesthetic judgement begins to be experienced as an *affliction*. It imposes an intolerable burden, something that we must live up to, a world of ideals and aspirations that is in sharp conflict with the tawdriness of our improvised lives. It is perched like an owl on our shoulders, while we try to hide our pet rodents in our clothes. The temptation is to turn on it and shoo it away. The desire to desecrate is a desire to turn aesthetic judgement against itself, so that it no longer seems like a judgement of *us*. This you see all the time in children—the delight in disgusting noises, words, allusions, which helps them to distance themselves from the adult world that judges them, and whose authority they wish to deny. (Hence the appeal of Roald Dahl.) That ordinary refuge of children from the burden of adult judgement, is the refuge too of adults from the burden of their culture. By using culture as an instrument of desecration they neutralize its claims: it loses all authority, and becomes a fellow conspirator in the plot against value.

Beauty and pleasure

The desire for desecration leads to its own kind of pleasure, and you might be tempted to think that this too is an aesthetic pleasure, a new phase of that *esthétique du mal* extolled by Baudelaire. To see that this is not so we must briefly revisit the discussion of Chapter 1. As I suggested in that chapter pleasure *in* must be distinguished from pleasure *that*. And I further argued that a distinction must be made between

two broad kinds of pleasure *in*: the sensory and the intentional. The first proceeds directly from a stimulus, has an excitable form, and can be produced automatically. Such are the pleasures of eating and drinking, which are easily obtained and easily over-indulged and which require no particular cognitive capacities. (Even laboratory rats can achieve such pleasures.) The other kind of pleasure proceeds from an act of understanding: not a sensory gratification of the subject but a pleasing interest in an object. Such intentional pleasures have a cognitive dimension: they reach out from the self to lay hold of the world, and their primary focus is not the feeling of pleasure itself, but the object that gives rise to it. They are, if you like, *objective* pleasures, that take in the reality of the thing towards which they are directed. Pleasures of the senses are, by contrast, *subjective*; they are focused on the experience itself, and how it is for the one who feels it. Between the two kinds of pleasure are a host of intermediate cases—such as the pleasures of the wine connoisseur, which involve a distinctive kind of ‘relishing’, but which do not depend upon interpreting their object in terms of its content or meaning.

Aesthetic pleasure is focused on the presented aspect of its object, and this tempts people to assimilate it to the pure sensory pleasures, like those of eating and drinking. And a similar temptation bedevils the analysis of sex. There is a kind of sexual interest in which sensory pleasure eclipses the inter-personal intentionality and becomes attached to scenes of generalized and impersonal excitement—an image or tableau, to which the subject responds compulsively. This kind of sexual interest can easily reshape itself as an addiction. The temptation is to suppose that this depersonalized and sensory

pleasure is the real goal of sexual desire in all its forms, and that sexual pleasure is a form of subjective pleasure analogous to the pleasures of eating and drinking—a claim explicitly made, for example, by Freud.

Pleasure and addiction

Cognitive states of mind are seldom addictive, since they depend upon exploration of the world, and the individual encounter with the individual object, whose appeal is outside the subject's control. Addiction arises when the subject has full control over a pleasure and can produce it at will. It is primarily a matter of sensory pleasure, and involves a kind of short-circuiting of the pleasure network. Addiction is characterized by a loss of the emotional dynamic that would otherwise govern an outward-directed, cognitively creative life. Sex addiction is no different in this respect from drug addiction; and it wars against true sexual interest—interest in the *other*, the individual object of desire. Why go to all the trouble of mutual recognition and shared arousal, when this short cut is available to the same sensory goal?

Just as there is sex addiction, arising from the decoupling of sexual pleasure from the inter-personal intentionality of desire, so too is there stimulus addiction—the hunger to be shocked, gripped, stirred in whatever way might take us straight to the goal of excitement—which arises from the decoupling of sensory interest from rational thought. The pathology here is familiar to us, and was interestingly caricatured by Aldous Huxley, in his account of the 'feelies'—the panoramic shows in *Brave New World* in which

every sense-modality is engaged. Maybe the Roman games were similar: short cuts to awe, horror and fear which reinforced the ensuing sense of safety, by prompting the visceral relief that it is not I but another who has been torn to pieces in the ring. And maybe the 5-second cut which is the stock-in-trade of the B movie and the TV advert operates in a similar way—setting up addictive circuits that keep the eyes glued to the screen.

The contrast that I have been implicitly drawing between the love that venerates and the scorn that desecrates is like the contrast between taste and addiction. Lovers of beauty direct their attention outwards, in search of a meaning and order that brings sense to their lives. Their attitude to the thing they love is imbued with judgement and discrimination. And they measure themselves against it, trying to match its order in their own living sympathies.

Addiction, as the psychologists point out, is a function of easy rewards. The addict is someone who presses again and again on the pleasure switch, whose pleasures by-pass thought and judgement to settle in the realm of need. Art is at war with effect addiction, in which the need for stimulation and routinized excitement has blocked the path to beauty by putting acts of desecration centre stage. Why this addiction should be so virulent now is an interesting question: whatever the explanation, however, my argument implies that the addiction to effect is the enemy not only of art but also of happiness, and that anybody who cares for the future of humanity should study how to revive the 'aesthetic education', as Schiller described it, which has the love of beauty as its goal.

Sanctity and Kitsch

Art, as we have known it, stands on the threshold of the transcendental. It points beyond this world of accidental and disconnected things to another realm, in which human life is endowed with an emotional logic that makes suffering noble and love worthwhile. Nobody who is alert to beauty, therefore, is without the concept of redemption—of a final transcendence of mortal disorder into a 'kingdom of ends'. In an age of declining faith art bears enduring witness to the spiritual hunger and immortal longings of our species. Hence aesthetic education matters more today than at any previous period in history. As Wagner expressed the point: 'It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them.' Even for the unbeliever, therefore the 'real presence' of the sacred is now one of the highest gifts of art.

Conversely the degradation of art has never been more apparent. And the most widespread form of degradation—more widespread even than the deliberate desecration of humanity through pornography and gratuitous violence—is kitsch, that peculiar disease which we can instantly recognize but never precisely define, and whose Austro-German name links it to the mass movements and crowd sentiments of the twentieth century.

In a celebrated article, 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', published in *Partisan Review* in 1939, Clement Greenberg presented edu-

cated Americans with a dilemma. Figurative painting, he argued, was dead—it had exhausted its expressive potential, and its representational aims had been bequeathed to photography and the cinema. Any attempt to continue in the figurative tradition would inevitably lead to kitsch, in other words to art with no message of its own, in which all the effects were copied and all the emotions faked. Genuine art must belong to the avant-garde, breaking with the figurative tradition in favour of 'abstract expressionism', which uses form and colour to liberate emotion from the prison of narrative. In this way Greenberg promoted the paintings of de Kooning, Pollock and Rothko, while condemning the great Edward Hopper as 'shabby, second-hand and impersonal'.

Look back at figurative art in the Western tradition and you will observe that, prior to the eighteenth century, there was primitive art, naive art, routine and decorative art, but no kitsch. Just when the phenomenon first appeared is disputable: maybe Greuze shows traces of it; maybe it had even been foreshadowed in Murillo. What is certain is that, by the time of Millet and the Pre-Raphaelites, kitsch was in the driving seat. At the same time fear of kitsch had become a major artistic motive, prompting the impressionist and cubist revolutions as well as the birth of atonality in music.

It is not only in the world of art that we observe the steady advance of kitsch. Far more important, given its influence on the popular psyche, has been the kitschification of religion. Images are of enormous importance in religion, helping us to understand the Creator through idealized visions of his world: concrete images of transcendental truths. In the blue robe of a Bellini virgin we encounter the ideal of motherhood,



Figure 25 Garden gnomes: The Disneyfication of everyday life.

as an enfolding purity and a promise of peace. This is not kitsch but the deepest spiritual truth, and one that we are helped to understand through the power and eloquence of the image. However, as the puritans have always reminded us, such an image stands on the verge of idolatry, and with the slightest push can fall from its spiritual eminence into the sentimental abyss. That happened everywhere in the nineteenth century, as the mass-produced votive figures flooded ordinary households, the holy precursors of today's garden gnomes.

Kitsch is a mould that settles over the entire works of a living culture, when people prefer the sensuous trappings of belief to the thing truly believed in. It is not only Christian civilization that has undergone kitschification in recent times. Equally evident has been the kitschification of Hinduism and its culture. Mass-produced Ganeshas have knocked the subtle temple sculpture from its aesthetic pedestal; in *bunjee* music the *talas* of Indian classical music are blown apart by tonal harmonies and rhythm machines; in literature the *sutras* and *puranas* have been detached from the sublime vision of Brahman and reissued as childish comic-strips.

Simply put, kitsch is not, in the first instance, an artistic phenomenon, but a disease of faith. Kitsch begins in doctrine and ideology and spreads from there to infect the entire world of culture. The Disneyfication of art is simply one aspect of the Disneyfication of faith—and both involve a profanation of our highest values. Kitsch, the case of Disney reminds us, is not an excess of feeling but a deficiency. The world of kitsch is in a certain measure a heartless world, in which emotion is directed away from its proper target towards sugary stereotypes, permitting us to pay passing tribute to love and sorrow without the trouble of feeling them. It is no accident that the arrival of kitsch on the stage of history coincided with the hitherto unimaginable horrors of trench warfare, of the holocaust and the Gulag—all of them fulfilling the prophecy that kitsch proclaims, which is the transformation of the human being into a doll, which in one moment we cover with kisses, and in the next moment tear to shreds.

Kitsch and desecration

Those thoughts return us to the earlier argument of this chapter. We can see the modernist revolution in the arts in Greenberg's terms: art rebels against the old conventions, just as soon as they become colonized by kitsch. For art cannot live in the world of kitsch, which is a world of commodities to be consumed, rather than icons to be revered. True art is an appeal to our higher nature, an attempt to affirm that other kingdom in which moral and spiritual order prevails. Others exist in this realm not as compliant dolls but as spiritual beings, whose claims on us are endless and unavoidable. For us who live in the aftermath of the kitsch epidemic, therefore, art has acquired a new importance. It is the real presence of our spiritual ideals. That is why art matters. Without the conscious pursuit of beauty we risk falling into a world of addictive pleasures and routine desecration, a world in which the worthwhileness of human life is no longer clearly perceivable.

The paradox, however, is that the relentless pursuit of artistic innovation leads to a cult of nihilism. The attempt to defend beauty from pre-modernist kitsch has exposed it to postmodernist desecration. We seem to be caught between two forms of sacrilege, the one dealing in sugary dreams, the other in savage fantasies. Both are forms of falsehood, ways of reducing and demeaning our humanity. Both involve a retreat from the higher life, and a rejection of its principal sign, which is beauty. But both point to the real difficulty, in modern conditions, of leading a life in which beauty has a central place.

Kitsch deprives feeling of its cost, and therefore of its reality; desecration augments the cost of feeling, and so frightens us away from it. The remedy for both states of mind is suggested by the thing that they each deny, which is sacrifice. Konstanze and Belmonte in Mozart's opera are ready to sacrifice themselves for each other, and this readiness is the proof of their love: all the beauties of the opera arise from the constant presentation of this proof. The deaths that occur in real tragedies are bearable to us because we see them under the aspect of sacrifice. The tragic hero is both self-sacrificed and a sacrificial victim; and the awe that we feel at his death is in some way redemptive, a proof that his life was worthwhile. Love and affection between people is real only to the extent that it prepares the way for sacrifice—whether the *petits soins* that bind Marcel to Saint Loup, or the proof offered by Alcestis, who dies for her husband. Sacrifice is the core of virtue, the origin of meaning and the true theme of high art.

Sacrifice can be avoided, and kitsch is the great lie that we can both avoid it and retain its comforts. Sacrifice can also be made meaningless by desecration. But, when sacrifice is present and respected, life redeems itself; it becomes an object of contemplation, something that 'bears looking at', and which attracts our admiration and our love. This connection between sacrifice and love is presented in the rituals and stories of religion. It is also the recurring theme of art. When, in the carnage of the Great War, poets tried to make sense of the destruction that lay all around, it was in full consciousness that kitsch merely compounded the fault. Their effort was not to deny the horror, but to find a way of seeing it in sacrificial

The Flight from Beauty

terms. From this effort were born the war poems of Wilfred Owen and, much later, the *War Requiem* of Benjamin Britten.

So there, if we can find our way to it, is the remedy. It is a remedy that cannot be achieved through art alone. In the words of Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo': 'you must change your life'. Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as though it did not matter; and we live that way because we have lost the habit of sacrifice and are striving always to avoid it. The false art of our time, mired in kitsch and desecration, is one sign of this.

To point to this feature of our condition is not to issue an invitation to despair. It is one mark of rational beings that they do not live only—or even at all—in the present. They have the freedom to despise the world that surrounds them and to live in another way. The art, literature and music of our civilization remind them of this, and also point to the path that lies always before them: the path out of desecration towards the sacred and the sacrificial. And that, in a nutshell, is what beauty teaches us.