Function, Understanding, and Assessment

A Functionalist Interpretation of the Assessment of Art

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a functionalist interpretation of the assessment of art. In the following chapters I will explore the idea that we can assess the value of art works in terms of the various *functions* that they serve. Rejecting the idea that the value of art works lies in some kind of metaphysical value, I suggest that art works are valuable because we *value* them. We value them, I argue, on account of the various artistic functions that they perform. The purpose of chapter one is to set the scene philosophically, by explaining in greater detail what is involved in a functionalist interpretation of the assessment of art. In this chapter I suggest that the primary objections to my framework of assessment derive from the idea that only *aesthetic* considerations are relevant to assessment. In response I argue that this idea, which is central to both modernism, aestheticism and formalism, is based upon an unacceptably narrow conception of the nature and purpose of art, and should be rejected. In chapters two to six, I discuss in detail five of the more important non-aesthetic functions of art, providing examples which help to illustrate their contribution to the value of art works. Together these functions help to show that the idea that only aesthetic considerations are relevant to the assessment of art is unacceptably restrictive.

Chapter two is a discussion of the idea that a central function of art is to *represent* the objects of reality. I argue that the concept of representation as ordinarily construed has serious difficulties, and is based upon assumptions which we are better off abandoning. I suggest that it would be better to conceive of art as a vehicle in which we can *present* ideas, depictions, and conceptualizations of various aspects of our understanding and experience. Such 'presentations', I argue, can be valued for the way in which they provide insights into different aspects of the world, and thus contribute to our understanding. In chapter three, I show that an important dimension of the value of art can be the way in which art works function to express cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. In chapter four, I discuss the way in which art can function to act as a

vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas. In chapter five, I show how the moral significance of an art work can contribute importantly to its value, and in chapter six, I discuss the relevance of the expression and arousal of emotion to the value of art works. In chapter seven, I return to discuss the importance of *aesthetic* considerations to the assessment of art. I suggest that although it would be difficult to sustain the argument that aesthetic merit is a *necessary* component of artistic value, it is nevertheless true that aesthetic considerations play a particularly important role in the assessment of art works.

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CHAPTER ONE

Function and Assessment: An Introduction

It is the purpose of this thesis to develop an interpretation of art and its assessment in terms of the various functions which we can identify art works to be serving. In this introductory section I wish to explain what is involved in the idea that we can assess works of art in terms of the various functions or ends which they serve. Art works serve numerous different functions, and have the potential to be evaluated in a multitude of different ways. For the purpose of formulating a workable framework of evaluation, I have classified what I see to be six particularly important functions of art. It is important at this stage to stress that the classification presented does not purport to be the last word, or even a fully comprehensive account, of the various functions served by works of art qua works of art. There is no doubt that many other functions could be added to such a classification. My purpose is rather to show that art works *do* perform a variety of significant functions, and that if we are to assess the full potential of a work of art, it is often necessary to take a variety of these functions into consideration. It should be noted that the focus of this thesis is not just upon the visual arts, but upon the arts in general. I shall thus be drawing upon examples from music, from painting, from poetry, from fiction, and from sculpture.

The functions which I have identified as being central to our understanding of art and its purpose are as follows:

1) Art can function to 'represent' the world around us. By presenting reflections and conceptualizations of various aspects of the world, art can alert us to new ways of seeing the familiar, and in doing so contribute to our understanding.

2) Art can function to reflect and promote the cultural and religious beliefs and values that are central to the world-view and identity of different groups of people.

3) Art can function to reflect and comment upon the social and political conditions of society. Art can convey social and political ideas, and criticize existing norms and practises. In this capacity, art often assumes a subversive role.

4) Art can act as a vehicle for the portrayal of morally significant situations and concerns. In doing so, art can encourage a greater understanding of morality, and perhaps even influence our behaviour as moral beings.

5) Art can be a medium for the expression and arousal of emotional feeling and depth.

6) Art can function to provide specifically *aesthetic* experience and contemplation. That is, art can be the object of appreciation when we look to the surface (formal) aspects alone.

As I have indicated, this classification is by no means final, and does not pretend to provide an exhaustive account of the possible functions of art. It is rather an attempt to give some kind of workable classification and order to several of the more significant functions served by works of art, especially as these functions may relate to a framework of assessment.

At this stage it will be useful to say something more about how a functionalist interpretation of art will fit into a theory of assessment. It must first be stated that I do not intend to provide a narrowly normative functionalist interpretation of assessment, according to which all art works must fulfil one or even a specific set of functions before they can be regarded as good art works (or even as works of art at all).[1] Thus I do not wish to claim that there is a single function or rigid set of functions which all art works must or should perform. I wish instead to develop a more flexible and pluralistic

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1. The normative functionalist will argue that there is a certain function (or group of functions) which all art works ought to serve. Only if an artwork serves this function (or group of functions) can a favourable assessment be given. Reciprocally, when an art work fails to serve its designated function, it is considered a failure as a work of art. (Novitz in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, p. 163)

interpretation of art and its assessment, according to which there are a *number* of significant functions which can be exhibited by works of art, any one of which may contribute importantly to the value of a work of art.

Although I have referred to the various aspects on account of which artistic merit may be awarded as the different *functions* of art, it would be possible to construe these functions alternatively as the different *strengths* or *facets* or *areas of excellence* of art. The purpose of the assessment of art, as we shall see, is to take an individual work of art and focus upon the various ways in which that work can stimulate and provoke contemplation and enjoyment.[2] We want to say that 'these are its strengths', or 'these are its areas of excellence'. 'In virtue of its excellence in performing *this* function, or *these* particular functions, this is a good work of art'.

The functions of art discussed in the following chapters are also closely related to the various *roles* which art works can play in our lives. As we shall see, art intersects with our lives in many significant and important ways.

While there is no single function which a work of art must fulfil in order to be a good work of art, it seems reasonable to hold that an art work would have to fulfil *some* of the functions which are considered in a particular society to be central to the nature and purpose of art if it is to be awarded a favourable assessment.[3] It may not be necessary to specify exactly which ones, but it seems plausible to claim that a work would have to excel in at least one or two of the 'functions of art' if it were to be considered a good work of art. Indeed, if an 'art work' fails to perform *any* of the functions which we

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2. 'Contemplation' in this context does not refer exclusively to the contemplation provoked by the *intellectual* dimension of art. Works of art may also stimulate *aesthetic* and *emotional* contemplation, as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters.

3. As we will see in chapter seven, although there are no artistic functions which we can rightly consider to be *necessary* to the value of art, it is nevertheless the case that one particular function is particularly important. As I will argue in chapter seven, the capacity to provoke a degree of *aesthetic satisfaction* is of particular importance to the value of a work of art.

hold to be central to our conception of art, we will hardly be able to call it a work of art at all. A functionalist account of assessment thus goes hand in hand with a functionalist account of the definition of art. In order for an entity to be included in the class of art works at all, it must exhibit (with at least a minimal degree of merit) at least some of the functions which we generally associate with art. For if it did not, it is doubtful that we would have any way of recognizing its artistic merit, or even its status as an art work, at all.

Objections to Functionalism in Evaluation

The most significant attacks against the idea that art works should be evaluated in terms of the various functions that they serve derive from the nineteenth century movement known as 'art for art's sake', or 'aestheticism'. They are based upon the idea that functionalism with respect to evaluation poses a threat to the aesthetic autonomy of art. In this section I wish to show that although it is possible to identify two distinct objections which have been levelled against various interpretations of functionalism, (each involving a different sense of 'autonomy'), neither of these objections need be considered a serious threat to the functionalist framework presented in this thesis.

1. The first objection from autonomy

The first objection 'from autonomy' is based upon a characteristic presupposition of art for art's sake, which is the belief that the *institution of art* is autonomous in the sense that artists are under no obligation to cater to the social, moral, political, religious, or economic demands of society.[4] This stance was adopted by proponents of the art for art's sake movement in part 'as a reaction to the utilitarian and materialistic values of the new industrial age'

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4. See Goran Hermeren, "The Autonomy of Art", for a discussion of the various senses in which a work of art may be thought to be *autonomous*.

(Whewell, p. 6).[5] Three of the central advocates of this view were Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater in England, and Theophile Gautier in France.

Although the idea that the institution of art is fully autonomous in the sense that artists are under no obligation to invest their works with any social, moral, emotional, or didactic purpose may be incompatible with the kind of utilitarian conceptions of art against which *art for art's sake* reacted, it is not incompatible with the functionalist framework presented in this thesis. Indeed, one of the most significant features of my framework of evaluation is that it *does* respect the autonomy of the artist to produce works which serve no purpose but to provide aesthetic stimulation. In other words, the framework of assessment presented in this thesis does not attach any *normative* value to the various non-aesthetic functions of art.[6] Although I acknowledge that works of art *can* perform certain non-aesthetic functions, and that the performance of these functions can contribute importantly to the value of an art work, I do not hold that it is *necessary* for a work to perform any of these functions before it can be considered either to be a work of art or a good work of art. In terms of my framework of evaluation, the purpose of articulating the various functions of art is rather to describe the various things that art can be, and to identify the various areas in which a work of art can provide stimulation and interest. The purpose of a functionalist interpretation of art is to elucidate the various perspectives from which a work of art may be appreciated. It is not, however, the purpose of a functionalist theory to specify the various functions which a work of art *ought* to perform.

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5. The idea that art works *ought* to serve certain functions was not confined to this period alone, however. Throughout the middle ages, for example, it was expected that art works ought serve an explicitly *religious* function. According to Tolstoy, art ought to be an instrument of *moral* instruction, and according to Marx, art ought to serve specific *social* ends.

6. In this thesis I refer to the functions described in chapters two to six as the 'non-aesthetic' functions of art. They are referred to as non-aesthetic because they would all be excluded from the purely formal aesthetic dimension of art, which the formalist holds to be the only relevant dimension of an art work. (Incorrectly, I believe.)

2. The second objection from autonomy.

The second objection from autonomy, also based upon a central tenet of aestheticism, involves a different sense of the 'autonomy' of art. This sense involves the belief that what is of central importance about art is its ability to provide an experience which is peculiarly *aesthetic*. Proponents of aestheticism hold that it is the aesthetic quality of art which gives it its special identity and autonomy, and which marks off art as constitutive of an independent and autonomous domain. They believe that in making an assessment of an art work's worth we should focus exclusively on the aesthetic (formal) qualities of that work, and purposely disregard any non-aesthetic functions which that work may happen to serve. A necessary condition of valuing a work of art 'for its own sake', according to the aesthete, is that it be valued on account of its intrinsic (aesthetic) properties, and not on account of anything external, such as moral or political systems, or emotional impact. Perhaps the most extreme advocate of this position was Gautier, who argued in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* that 'nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing; whichever is useful is ugly'. The aesthete would like to believe that it is never necessary to draw upon anything from *outside* a work of art to appreciate it. All that is relevant to the interpretation and the appreciation of art is right before us in the formal features of the work itself. Roger Scruton describes what it is to view something as an 'aesthetic object' in *Art and Imagination*, as follows:

> In viewing something aesthetically, it is said, I am viewing it as it is in itself, divorced from any practical interest, and from all comparison with other things. I see the object as an isolated, unique occurrence, and to the extent that I appreciate it aesthetically I neither bring it under concepts nor relate it to any practical end. (Scruton, 1974, p. 15)

The second objection is based upon the belief that it is only *aesthetic* features which are relevant to an assessment of the value of a work of art. According to the objection, any non-aesthetic functions which an art work may serve are irrelevant, and to focus on them would be to overshadow the importance of the autonomous (aesthetic) quality of art. Functionalist interpretations of art are seen by the aesthete to usurp the autonomy of art, by attempting to

provide a heteronomous interpretation, in terms of the various non-aesthetic functions which works of art may serve. Advocates of aestheticism insist that art works stand aloof from any attempt to provide an interpretation in terms of the various non-aesthetic functions which art works provide for human beings. The parameters of interpretation, according to the aesthete, are fixed by the formal features of the work of art. Any moral, social, intellectual, emotional, or other non-aesthetic feature must thus be discarded as irrelevant.

In response to the second objection from autonomy I wish first to point out that the idea that aesthetic considerations are of central importance to the evaluation of an art work is not at all incompatible with my functionalist account of the assessment of art. Indeed, I have already stated that it is an important function of art to communicate at this peculiarly aesthetic level. As I will argue in the chapter seven, one of the most important dimensions of the value of art is the capacity of art to provide aesthetic stimulation when we concentrate upon the formal aspects alone. It is thus certainly not my purpose here to dispute the importance of the 'aesthetic' in an account of evaluation.

What I do wish to dispute, however, is the claim that formal considerations are the *only* significant or allowable considerations in the assessment of a work of art. As I will argue in the following chapters, there are a number of important non-aesthetic functions of art which *do* play an important role in our appreciation of art works, and thus that *are* relevant to our assessment of the value of a work of art. As will be made clear by the various 'non-aesthetic' artistic functions which are discussed and demonstrated in chapters two to six, the second objection from autonomy must fail because it is based upon an unnecessarily narrow conception of what art can be. Providing aesthetic stimulation is but one of the functions on account of which we value works of art.

The doctrine of aestheticism represents an unacceptable puritanism with respect to the appreciation of art. In restricting its focus to a purely formal interpretation, aestheticism fails to acknowledge the potential of art to function in many other important ways. In its attempt to persuade us to look exclusively to the surface features of a work of art, aestheticism encourages an unnecessarily

two-dimensional view of art. I wish to show that such an interpretation is inadequate, and that there are many different legitimate perspectives from which we can access the value of art.

To use as an illustration one of J.L. Austin's insights into the nature of language, there is a similarity between an assessment of art that focuses exclusively on the formal features of art works, and an assessment of language which focuses exclusively upon the accuracy with which sentences describes states of affairs. As Austin points out in *How to Do Things with Words*, the straightforward description of states of affairs is but one function of sentences. Sentences have many functions besides description. They can be used to question, to frighten, to emphasize, to impress, to make a promise, and so on. To think that words function simply to describe or simply to refer would clearly be to have one's focus unnecessarily restricted upon but one of the many important functions of words. In a similar way, to think that the function of art is simply to provide aesthetic stimulation would be to take an unnecessarily narrow view of the nature and purpose of art. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, works of art perform a number of non-aesthetic functions which contribute in important ways to their value as works of art. If we are to exploit the full potential of art, we must get beyond the idea that art works serve only to stimulate the senses.

Having criticized the idea central to aestheticism that we ought to assess art works exclusively in terms of *aesthetic* merit, I wish now to question the related idea that we could ever really assess an art work 'in itself', or 'on its own terms'. The insistence that we must respond to the art work *itself* seems to be to suggest that any attempt to bring non-aesthetic aspects of art into evaluation is to give an unacceptably instrumentalist and heteronomous interpretation of the art work. In response to such a claim by the aesthete, I would say that surely *any* system of interpretation involves heteronomous elements, reflecting human values, preferences, and assumptions. Even when we respond exclusively to the *aesthetic* qualities of art, we are assessing our own reaction to certain patterns of sound and light. It is surely a mistake to think that we could ever respond to a work of art 'in itself'. Art is made by and for people, so it is hardly surprising that we should respond to art in terms of the various

functions which we perceive it to be performing. The idea that an art work should exist entirely for itself, in an 'aesthetic vacuum', is bizarre to say the least.

Art and Interpretation

In the preceding section I argued that it is a mistake to assume, as the aesthete assumes, that there is only one correct way to look at art. As I have explained, there are *many* ways or perspectives from which we can legitimately look at art. What I wish to argue briefly in this section, is that it would be a further mistake to assume that there can only ever be one correct assessment or interpretation of an art work. The legacy of simplistic objectivist theories about art has left us with the mistaken notion that there must be some unique correct authoritative judgement of an art work, which once intuited, ought to command the agreement of all parties engaged with the work. It is possible that such a notion arises partly from the expectation that judgements about art will be subject to an interpretation in terms of the same kind of black and white bivalent logic which straightforward descriptive sentences are subject to. Objectivist theories seem to imply misleadingly that just as it is relatively simple to discover the truth value of simple descriptive sentences, such as 'the cat is on the mat', so is it relatively simple to determine the truth value of judgements about artistic value, such as the statement 'Picasso's *Guernica* is a good work of art'.

Such an interpretation of aesthetic judgement is quite mistaken, however, for it gives an erroneous impression of the simplicity of artistic value. Artistic value does not happily conform to an interpretation in terms of a narrow either/or bivalent logic. The task of determining the value of art is complicated by a number of factors. Not only are there many different *facets* to the value of art (demarcated in this thesis by the various different *functions* of art), but there are also many *levels* of value. The contribution which the performance of a particular function makes to the value of a work of art is a matter of degree. It may be a significant component of artistic value, or it may make little impact. (It may of course even *detract* from the value of a work of art.) Another consideration which

complicates aesthetic judgement is that there are certain dimensions of artistic value which are particularly prone to conflicting assessment.[7] Works of art are at once far more ambiguous and provocative than straightforward descriptive sentences, and will resist any narrow framework of interpretation. Their meaning is not nearly so transparent.

Another reason for resisting the idea that judgements about art are subject to the same kind of bivalent logical interpretation as simple descriptive sentences, is that such an interpretation encourages a misconception of the purpose of the evaluation of art. The idea that the evaluation of art is a matter which can be cut and dried, as the objectivist supposes, suggests that the purpose of evaluation is to come up with some kind of objectively correct verdict about the value of an art work. I believe that such a conception is unnecessarily limited, and makes for a narrow, static and inflexible account of the purpose of assessment. What I propose in this thesis, is that we should view evaluation as a process in which we acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of art, and encourage an assessment which draws attention to the variety of ways in which we can appreciate a work of art, in terms of the various aesthetic and non-aesthetic functions which works of art can be seen to perform. Such an interpretation acknowledges that there is a diversity of perspectives from which we can evaluate art, and that different people will legitimately derive different interpretations of the value of the same works, by privileging different artistic functions or criteria.

Context and Evaluation

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein claims that in order to fully understand the meaning of a word, we must understand its

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7. I refer in particular to the 'aesthetic dimension' of art. Although there is some room for disagreement over the value of the *non-aesthetic* functions of art, we can usually come to a reasonable level of agreement as to how well an art work expresses a particular emotion or expresses a particular cultural value. It is the *aesthetic* value of a work of art which admits the most scope for subjective disagreement.

use. What is meant here is that if we are to understand a word's meaning, we must look beyond the word *itself* (and its immediate referent), and focus on the various *contexts* in which that word is used in language (Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 43). The meaning of a word is thus importantly determined by the uses to which it happens to be put in the public and communal world of language and communication. In an important sense, the meaning of a word is determined by factors which are *external*, and set up intersubjectively by a community of language users. In a similar way, the meaning of a work of art can also be importantly dependent upon conventions and beliefs which are essentially public, and external to the work itself. The full meaning of Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*, for example, can only be understood in the context of the beliefs and values which constitute the Maori world-view. And to provide an example from the graphic arts, the full meaning of Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Delights* can only be understood in the context of the fearful Christian ontology of fifteenth century Europe.

The extent to which the 'meaning' or 'identity' of an art work is dependent upon factors external to the work itself becomes evident when we examine the language with which we describe art. A great many of the words with which we commonly describe works of art, while grammatically predicates, are logically relations.[8] In order explain how such words are predicable of art works, we must 'unpack' the meaning of the word, so that we can identify the relations that are being implied to hold between the art work itself and various aspects of its environment. The words with which we describe art relate art works to many diverse aspects of the external world. When we call an art work original, for example, we do not mean that that work is original 'in itself'. We are rather asserting that that work, in relation to *other* art works, is in some respect innovative or new. Or when we call a performance in a play convincing, we are likely to be claiming that it is convincing in virtue of the degree to which it accurately reflects the realities of human relations, or accurately portrays some human character trait, such as jealousy or forgiveness. And when we call an art work moving, joyful,

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8. I owe this point to John Patterson, my supervisor.

or frightening, we are tacitly making a reference to the characteristic effect that that work has on its observer. In this respect the meaning of the evaluative word can be related directly to the 'perlocutionary' effect that the work has on its audience.[9]

It is clear that the evaluation of art is a heavily context dependent activity. Much evaluative language implicitly relates art works to external features in a variety of ways. And as we have seen, the value which we bestow on an art work is determined by such contextual factors as the degree to which we are moved emotionally by the work, the effectiveness of the work's portrayal of the values and concerns with which we identify as social beings, and the degree to which an art work promotes intellectual stimulation.

An important implication of the relation between evaluation and context is that particular evaluations, to the extent that they relate art works to external features, will be highly contextualized, and will exhibit a dependency on the particular contextual environments in which they are made. If we consider a particular work to be a good work, for example, on account of its bitingly satirical portrayal of an unpopular person or attitude, and we then take this work and give it to a critic in Tokyo, who is unaware of the of the localized satirical significance of the work, it will be highly unlikely that this work will continue to be rated as favourably in its new environment. (It is of course possible that the work will come to be admired on account of some entirely *different* feature.) In a similar way, it would not be possible for a person who is completely ignorant of Aboriginal culture and values to understand the full meaning and significance of Aboriginal graphic art. It is important that we realize that the evaluation of art works can be bound in this way to a certain place or time. Correspondingly, the criteria with which we evaluate an art work will vary over time, and also from community to community.

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9. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin refers to the effect that a word has on its audience (such as to cause embarrassment) as its 'perlocutionary force'. In a similar way, the effect that a work of art has upon its audience (such as to evoke sorrow or to make us laugh) can be thought of as the perlocutionary force of that work of art.

If we wish to access the full potential of a work of art, it is clear that we must be prepared to examine the work from a broad perspective, taking into consideration the relations which obtain between the work itself and various aspects of the wider 'context' in which it appears. A significant implication of the dependence of the meaning and value of art on contextual factors is that the aesthete's idea that we could evaluate art works by focussing exclusively on the internal features of the art work itself comes to look less and less plausible.

Art and Value

As we have seen, the values which we attach to art are dependent in part upon contextual factors which are external to art works themselves. That this is so indicates that the value of a work of art is not determined solely by internal features. In this section I wish to turn more directly to the issue of aesthetic value, and argue that we do indeed have reason to resist the idea that the values which attach to art works derive entirely from the works themselves. As an introduction to this discussion, I believe that it is profitable to test our intuitions regarding the nature of artistic value by conducting a thought experiment based upon the well known 'last person' example often cited in environmental philosophy.[10]

In the ordinarily construed 'last person' example, we are encouraged to imagine a world in which there is only one person remaining. How would we feel, we are asked, if this last person began to destroy shrubs and trees, pollute rivers, and generally abuse the environment? If our intuitions tell us that such behaviour is simply unacceptable, and that the last person has no right to damage the environment in such a disrespectful manner, we can supposedly conclude, if our intuitions are correct, that trees and rivers actually have value *in themselves*. In other words, we can suppose that the value of the natural environment is not contingent upon there being a

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10. See Mannison, Routley, and McRobbie (eds.) *Environmental Philosophy*, pp. 121-123.

class of valuers. Even if there were no people left to value it, the natural environment would continue to have value in itself. The last person, in destroying a plant or polluting a river, would be damaging the integrity and undermining the value of something which is intrinsically valuable. Given that the natural environment is indeed valuable in itself, as the thought experiment suggests, we can assume that it would be morally wrong for the last person to consider the environment as simply there for the plundering. The natural environment should rather be conceived of as being *intrinsically valuable*, and be respected and protected, even by the last person alive on Earth.

Having explained how the last person experiment is presented in the literature on environmental philosophy, and outlined the conclusion which we are expected to draw from this thought experiment (namely that the natural environment has intrinsic value, and thus should be respected and protected), it is now time to perform our own thought experiment. What happens when we substitute works of art for plants and trees in the last person experiment? Imagine a second scenario, in which the last person left on earth walks through the front door of Wellington's City Art Gallery, and proceeds to wantonly smash and destroy every sculpture and painting in the gallery. What do our intuitions tell us about the value of works of art in this thought experiment? Funnily enough, my intuition here is that it somehow *would not matter* if the last person left on earth destroyed works of art for pleasure. For if there is only one person left on earth, and this person has no regard or respect for works of art, then what difference does it make if remaining art works are destroyed? Since it makes no difference to the art work *itself* if it is destroyed, and since art works make no significant contribution to the environment at large, it would seem implausible to assert that art works continue to have any value at all when there is nobody left to appreciate them.

What is suggested by such a response to the destruction of art works by the last person is that art works do *not* derive their value from any intrinsic or internal merit-conferring properties or qualities. They rather derive their value by *being valued* by a class of valuers who admire and appreciate their various features. Art works

are valuable because we value them. We value them on account of the various ways in which they can provide stimulation, 'enlightenment', pleasure, and understanding. (Hence the appropriateness of a functionalist account of evaluation.) If my intuition about the value of art is correct, and it is indeed the case that works of art do not have value 'in themselves', then it makes no sense to invoke any metaphysical account of value in terms of the kind of objective intrinsic value often talked about by realist philosophers.[11]

In denying that art works have objective intrinsic value, I am denying that they have intrinsic value in the sense that they possess qualities which would guarantee a favourable assessment by anybody with the 'capacity' or 'intuition' to realize their 'true worth'. The value of an art work is not somehow fixed or built in to the work itself, existing all along for us to find out. It is not the case that works of art possess some kind of in-built core of value which ought to be intuited by any attentive observer, from any cultural or artistic background. As I have stressed already, an art work is good because it possesses features which we happen to hold to be valuable, not because it possesses features which are valuable 'in themselves', independent of human judgement. That this is so, however, does not force a radical 'anything goes' subjectivism, where any judgement is held to be as good as any other.

Although I wish to assert that works of art do not possess properties which are intrinsically merit-conferring, in the sense that these properties generate an aesthetic *ought*, and as it were *demand* an honorific assessment, it is not contradictory to hold that the value of an art work is objective in the sense that we value it on account of features exhibited by the work itself, and not just on account of our own subjective experience of the work. When we judge that a play by Shakespeare is an excellent work of art, for example, we can give as our reason for esteeming its value the shrewd and masterful characterization, or the eloquent and witty dialogue, say. The 'goodness' of Shakespeare's play can be seen to be objective insofar as our reason for valuing the work stems from the good-making features

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11. See for example the value theory articulated by Richard Sylvan in *On The Value Core of Deep-Green Theory.*

of the work itself (the features on account of which we value it). The goodness of the play is not objective, however, in the sense that the features on account of which we value it ought to *guarantee* an honorific assessment. On the contrary, the way is fully open for somebody else to come along and find the work to be objectionable on account of these very same features. What we would expect, however, is that when someone wishes to contradict our judgement that a particular characterization or portrayal is especially good, they would be prepared to somehow justify or defend their opposing evaluation.

To reiterate, a work of art is objectively valuable only in the sense that it possesses certain features which we hold to be valuable. It may exhibit, for example, a subtle and shrewd insight into human psychology, or a strikingly beautiful representation of a familiar landscape. These features are only valuable, however, because we value them. In the absence of a class of valuers, they cease to have artistic value at all. To give an illustration of another class of entities whose value is contingent upon a class of valuers, consider medicines. Medicine, like art, only has value with respect to a class of people who benefit from its effects. Although the value of a medical drug is objective in the sense that its healing qualities derive from the chemical constitution of the drug itself, we needn't claim that the drug has *intrinsic* value. Although the chemical constitution of an asthma drug would remain unchanged, and a Shakespearian play would retain its subtle characterization and shrewd insights into human behaviour, neither of these entities could be said to remain valuable in the absence of a class of valuers. Evaluation is to be construed as an inescapably human activity. We value art works on account of the things that they do.

The aim of a functionalist account of evaluation is to specify the various ways in which art can have value to its audience. The following quote from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, although referring to the division of words into kinds, captures the essential flavour of the 'functionalist' account of the assessment of art presented in this thesis.

> how we group words into kinds will depend on the aim of classification, and on our own inclination. (Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 17)

In summary, the purpose of this thesis is to present a 'functionalist' interpretation of the assessment of art. As I have explained in this chapter, a functionalist framework of evaluation concentrates upon the various aesthetic and non-aesthetic functions which we perceive art works to be performing, in virtue of which we award artistic merit.

In the following chapters I shall outline what I see to be six important functions of art, and discuss how the performance of each of these functions can contribute to the value of an art work. In chapter two, I will discuss the concept of representation, according to which it is a defining function of art to represent or depict features of the world around us. Although I will not agree entirely with the presuppositions that often underlie the concept of representation, I will show that the presentation in art of familiar aspects of the world and of aspects of human experience can indeed be an important function of artistic value. In chapter three, I shall concentrate upon the way in which the reflection of *cultural* and *spiritual* beliefs and values can contribute to the value of a work of art. In chapter four, I will concentrate on the way in which art can function to reflect and express *social* and *political* insights and concerns. In chapter five, I will focus on the way in which art can be the vehicle for the presentation of ideas and situations of *moral* significance, and in chapter six, I will illustrate how the expression of *emotion* can contribute to the value of art. Finally, in chapter seven, I shall demonstrate how the capacity to provide *aesthetic stimulation* is a central dimension of the value of a work of art.

CHAPTER TWO

Representation and Reality

The stepping off point for this chapter is the concept of representation in the arts. This concept raises many important questions for the philosopher of art. In coming to consider representation, we are forced to examine the way in which aesthetics intersects with other important areas of philosophy, including metaphysics and epistemology. The questions raised by representation are primarily centred around the relationship between 'art' and 'reality'. An examination of representation puts pressure on us to confront a number of important philosophical concerns, including for example the nature of the relationship between art and reality, and the nature of reality itself. Also of relevance to this discussion is the 'epistemic status' of art. Is for example art a legitimate vehicle for the disclosure of truth and knowledge? And can the ideas presented in art contribute to our understanding in the same way that the concepts presented in science, religion, and language can? As will become apparent, these and other questions are raised in an analysis of the idea that it is a defining function of art to 'represent reality'.

The idea that it is indeed the central defining function of art to somehow imitate or set forth aspects of reality is a concept with a history as long as philosophy itself. Unsurprisingly, the first philosopher to put representation firmly on the philosophical map was Plato. Because Plato's treatment of this concept has had such a significant impact on all subsequent discussion and thinking, I shall introduce this chapter with an overview of Plato's ideas on representation with respect to art. For expository purposes I shall identify two central theses in Plato's theory of representation; the 'first thesis' being the idea that the essential purpose of art is to *represent reality*, and the 'second thesis' being the idea that art is by nature fundamentally *distanced from* and *inferior to* reality.

The first thesis of Plato's concept of representation is that art is essentially *mimetic*. According to Plato, the defining function of art is to represent or imitate reality. Plato believed that the purpose of artistic creation as a whole (and painting in particular) is to copy or imitate the objects of the actual world. A central articulation of this idea is found in book ten of the *Republic*, at 596b-e:

> 'Well now, I wonder what you would call a craftsman of the following kind.'
>
> 'Describe him.'
>
> 'One who can make all the objects produced by other particular crafts. '
>
> 'He would be a wonderfully clever man.'
>
> 'Just a minute, and you'll be more surprised still. For this same craftsman can not only make all artificial objects, but also create all plants and animals, himself included, and, in addition, earth and sky and gods, the heavenly bodies and everything in the underworld.'
>
> 'An astonishing exhibition of skill!' he exclaimed.
>
> 'You don't believe me?' I asked. 'Tell me, do you think that a craftsman of this sort couldn't exist, or (in one sense, if not another) create all kinds of things? Do you know that there's a sense in which you could create them yourself?'
>
> 'What sense?'
>
> 'It's not difficult, and can be done in various ways quite quickly. The quickest way is to take a mirror and turn it round in all directions; before long you will create sun and stars and earth, yourself and all other animals and plants, and furniture and the other objects we mentioned just now.'
>
> 'Yes, but they would only be reflections,' he said, 'not real things.'
>
> 'Quite right,' I replied, 'and very much to the point. For a painter is a craftsman of just this kind, I think. Do you agree?' (Lee, 1974, p. 423)

Although Plato talks specifically of painting in this extract, it seems fair to assume that he considers representation to be a defining function of art in general. This is supported by his reference in the subsequent discussion to representation in other art forms, including tragic poetry and music.

As indicated above, the second thesis of Plato's concept of representation is his idea that art, being but a reflection of the actual world, is fundamentally distanced from and inferior to reality. This thesis is also illustrated in book ten of the *Republic:*

'We have seen that there are three kinds of bed. The first exists in nature, and we would say, I suppose, that it was made by god. No one else could have made it, could they?'

'I think not.'

'The second is made by the carpenter.'

'Yes.'

'And the third by the painter?'

'Granted' . . .

'And what about the artist? Does he make or manufacture?'

'No.'

'Then what does he do?'

'I think we may fairly claim that he represents what the other two make.'

'Good,' said I. 'Then you say that the artist's representation stands at third remove from reality?'

'I do.'

'So the tragic poet, if his art is representation, is by nature at third remove from the throne of truth; and the same is true of all other representative artists.'

'So it seems.' . . .

'The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance.' (597b-598c: Lee, 1955, p. 425-426)

In order to understand the full significance of these ideas it is necessary to consider how they stand in relation to Plato's notorious Theory of Forms. As we know, Plato believed that all of the properties and kinds of our 'lower' and 'actual' world are what they are in virtue of the fact that they *participate* in the eternal and transmutable 'Forms' of the 'Upper World'. The Forms, according to Plato, are what *cause* the objects and properties of the actual world to have the natures and properties (and indeed existence) that they do. For Plato, an object is yellow because (and only because) it *participates* in the Form of Yellowness. And a landscape is beautiful, according to Plato, because it *participates* in the Form of Beauty. The Forms represent perfection. They are the ontological cause and model for each of the imperfect properties, qualities, and kinds of the actual world. An object stands to a Form as a reflection stands to an actual object. It possesses neither the perfection nor the ontological solidity of its model. The objects of the actual world can

thus be nothing more than inferior copies of the Forms themselves. The Lower World is for Plato in an important sense ontologically inferior to the Upper World of Forms. Its objects are indeed *less real* than the eternal and transcendent Forms.

By this stage it should be evident what Plato's two-world ontology signifies for his theory of art. As we have seen, Plato conceived of the objects of our actual world as being inferior copies of the Forms of the Upper World. And as we have seen, Plato believed that works of art are essentially images and reflections of the objects of the actual world. Thus for Plato, art works stand *twice* removed from reality. They are images of images, and as such, inhabit what Plato designates to be the lowest realm of being. It is this ontological picture which justified for Plato the dismissal of art as no better than a vehicle of illusion and deceit. For Plato, an awareness of the objects of art is the lowest kind of awareness. He believed that art could never be a source of true understanding or knowledge, since knowledge, in Plato's epistemology, can only be gained by an acquaintance of the Forms themselves. In terms of Plato's four levels of cognition, as represented by the divided line (*Rep.* 509-511), art for Plato belongs at the bottom. As Iris Murdoch states in *The Fire and the Sun*, "Art and the artist are condemned by Plato to exhibit the lowest and most irrational form of awareness, *eikasia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion" (Murdoch 1977, p. 5).

By classifying art works in the lowest category of being, and claiming that they are as objects of knowledge inferior to the objects of the actual world (which are of course in turn inferior to the Forms themselves), Plato contributed greatly to the idea that there is a fundamental division between *art* and *reality*. For Plato, art works are necessarily inferior to reality. They are at best poor copies of the *real* world, which may imitate and comment upon reality, but never be a part of it.

Plato's ideas about representation have had a profound influence on the history of Western thinking regarding the nature and function of art, and to a large extent remain as part of the common sense conception of art that is current today. We still find, for example, that it is widely considered that the defining function of art is to simply imitate or copy familiar objects. (Indeed many people are

suspicious of any abstract or expressionistic art that *does not* directly represent.) And we also find that it is still commonly believed that works of art are not really part of the 'real world', in the sense that although they may comment upon reality, what they offer must always be derivative, or 'second hand'. So while art works may be satisfying to look at, and may offer an interesting or even 'original' interpretation of some familiar object, such as a landscape or a face, they cannot really be considered to be an appropriate source of knowledge or understanding. If we want knowledge or understanding, it is commonly believed, we ought to turn to the hard empirical enquiry of the sciences, but not to art. In what follows, I wish to show that we needn't accept either of Plato's theses about representation. I will argue against the first thesis that the representation of reality is *not* the sole function of art, and against the second thesis that the claim that art works cannot contribute importantly to our understanding is quite unjustified.

The objections to Plato's ideas about representation, and to the philosophy of art in which they are embedded, run deep. In challenging Plato's ideas on representation we must challenge the entire Platonic package. Not only must we reject the idea that art is essentially *mimetic*, and along with it the associated idea that art works must be constantly measured against some sort of external yardstick, namely transcendent reality, but we must also reject Plato's idea about what reality *itself* is. Perhaps what is most contentious about Plato's theory of art, as far as this thesis is concerned, is the idea that because art is fundamentally opposed to reality, it can never be a legitimate source of knowledge and understanding.

Arguments Against Plato's Concept of Representation

At least two significant arguments can be deployed against the first Platonic thesis as outlined above (namely that the essential function of art is to represent reality). Although these arguments are significantly different, each attacking Plato's thesis from a different direction, each gives us strong reason to resist the temptation to think that the essential function of art is simply to represent the

objects of reality. The first argument, which has its strongest statement in the art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is by now well established and accepted amongst artists and thinkers about art. According to this argument, it is simply incorrect to claim that the representation of reality is the *essential* or *defining* function of art. To see that this is so we need only observe that there are many valued art works which can not be seen in any recognizable sense to represent or depict familiar objects at all, and many more still which although they may be seen to be in some sense representational, deserve our appreciation and praise on account of the fulfilment of quite non-representational functions.

The strongest momentum against representation has come from the various abstract movements of modern art, which stress form over content, and encourage the viewer to pay close attention to the formal and compositional elements of the art work itself. These movements have demonstrated that an art work can be both aesthetically stimulating and intriguing to the intellect, despite its failure to demonstrate any representational relation to any external entity at all. The twentieth century has seen a gradual move away from the tradition in western art according to which a work of art should represent in a fairly direct fashion the objects of everyday reality. This trend, which has seen various art movements including impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, fauvism, and cubism subverting traditional methods of representing familiar objects (often admittedly with the intention of revealing aspects of the world 'as they really are'), has culminated in the completely non-representational works of such artists as Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. When we consider how significant the move away from representation has been in the last one hundred years, it is difficult not to conclude that the notion that the defining function of art is to *represent* the objects of reality is simply too circumscribed, and should be dismissed as an overly restrictive conception of what art can be.

It is also significant that we do not have any reason to accept the related normative claim that art works *should* attempt to represent reality. As we have repeatedly been reminded by contemporary movements in art, which have persistently challenged traditional

definitions and conceptions of what art should be, we have no reason to accept that art works *ought* to represent reality, or that they are necessarily better when they do so. At best, representation can be thought of as but one function out of a number of other equally important functions of art. It is certainly not satisfactory as a single concept characterization of the 'essential function' of art.

Although many opponents of the Platonic notion of representation would be quite willing to accept that art works *can* represent familiar aspects of reality, and be deserving of commendation when they do so in ways which are particularly interesting or stimulating, they would rightly contend that there is absolutely nothing about the nature of art which makes it essential for art works to represent.

The second argument against the idea that the purpose of art is to represent reality is orientated towards the metaphysical and epistemological implications of the Platonic notion of representation. This argument takes issue with the Platonic notion that it is the purpose of art to represent reality (and thus that the yardstick against which art should be measured is reality itself), by throwing into confusion the whole idea that there is a unique and determinate reality for art to represent in the first place. The idea that we ought to conceive of art as something which represents but is subordinate to reality itself is to be rejected not because it is believed that art is *incapable* of expressing or revealing the truths of reality, as Plato argued, but because of a justified scepticism regarding the Platonic idea that it is sensible to talk of there being a unique and determinate reality, which it is the function of art to imitate, to begin with.

To advance a characteristic antirepresentationalist thesis, even if there were a unique and fixed reality, whether it be a Platonic world of Forms, or some other external realm of being, we would have no way of knowing whether our various representations of this reality, in science, art, religion, or language, were accurate.[12] Given that as human beings we have no way of finally verifying the veridity

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12. See particularly Richard Rorty's *Objectivism, Relativism, and Truth.*

of our own phenomenal experience, or of the various hypotheses we put forward to make sense of the world in which we live, the notion of the world *as it really is* has no place or purpose. 'Reality' in the Platonic sense, construed as a transcendent and determinate realm which lies beyond the grasp of our perception or understanding, is to be discarded as a redundant ideal.

As Richard Rorty argues in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, the idea that our various attempts to explain or come to terms with the world in which we live 'represent' or 'correspond' to some kind *transcendent reality* plays no useful role in philosophy. According to the antirepresentationalist, we should abandon the idea that in offering a description of some aspect of the world, either in science, in art, or in any other area in which we attempt to express our understanding, we aim to describe 'determinate reality', or 'the world as it really is'.[13]

Another consideration which it is important to keep in mind is that if representation is to be rejected on account of the belief that it is inappropriate to conceive of reality as a unique and determinate realm of being, we must also reject the Correspondence Theory of Truth. For if it makes no sense to conceive of reality as a realm of being which is determinate and transcendent, then neither does it make any sense to conceive of truth as consisting in *correspondence* to determinate reality. In other words, we must reject the time honoured view that the truth of a belief simply consists in the correspondence of that belief to the world *as it really is*. As far as the antirepresentationalist is concerned, knowledge ought not be thought of as a matter of getting reality right, 'but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality' (Rorty, p. 1).

After kicking the carpet out from under the feet of the idea that truth is somehow *absolute*, or 'built into the concrete of the universe', we are left with a very different conception of truth. The idea that truth is anchored in an antecedent and transcendent reality

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13. The idea that reality is in an important sense a function of our understanding, and that our perception and experience of the world is shaped by our conceptualization of it, can of course be attributed to Kant.

comes to be replaced by the idea that a belief or non linguistic exemplification of our understanding (such as may be found in certain forms of artistic expression), is true to the extent that it plays a useful pragmatic role in making sense of some aspect of our lives and experience, and also to the extent that it coheres with our existing established set of coherent and considered beliefs.

The rejection of the idea that the search for understanding aims at a perfect representation of reality is not unique to aesthetics. In other disciplines, including philosophy of science, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind, there is a growing discontent with the idea that the models and representations which are put forward to explain phenomena should be thought of as representations of the world 'as it *really* is'.

The contemporary attack against the presuppositions underpining Plato's conception of representation has been fuelled by recent thinking in a number of disciplines, including aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology. The rejection of the notion that our understanding is a representation of some authoritative and unique reality is a central tenet of the postmodernist movement. According to a dominant strand of postmodernist thought, reality is not something 'out there', or given, which we passively receive. On the contrary, 'reality' is a picture which is in a sense actively constructed by human beings, both as individuals and as collective society.

Having shown that there is serious difficulty with the idea that reality is something fixed and unique, which stands to be accurately (or approximately) represented by models in art, science, or language, it is appropriate to challenge the second Platonic thesis as outlined above; namely that art, being opposed to reality, cannot be a valuable source of understanding and knowledge. As we have seen, Plato believed that art, being twice removed from reality, could never be a vehicle in which to express truths. So as far as Plato was concerned, the idea that we could ever learn anything significant from art was quite mistaken and unacceptable.

Given that we have reason to consider the Platonic conception of reality quite mistaken, however, and that it is indeed more appropriate to conceive of reality as a 'horizontal' (as opposed to two

world) patchwork of autonomous conceptual schemes, whose shape is determined by human efforts to understand reality, rather than by the elusive 'reality itself', it seems that we no longer have reason to distance art from reality in the fundamental way that Plato did. To say that art is twice removed from reality, and that art is radically epistemically inferior to other parts of our understanding, can thus be seen to be quite unfair.

One possible objection to the rejection of the Platonic idea that art and reality are in some way opposed is that although it may indeed be false to say that art is *twice* removed from reality, we can nevertheless correctly assert that art is *once* removed from reality. Because art works are based on, and imitate our various perceptions and experiences as human beings, they are still, according to the objection, once removed from 'life' or 'reality'. The obvious reply to this objection is that insofar as the presentations made in art are a reflection of life, in the sense that they are based upon and attempt to make sense of our phenomenal experience, they are no different from the nominalizations we make in science and language. Any attempt to distance art from the world *as it really is* can also be deployed against science and other conceptualizations. Art is thus no more vulnerable to the claim that it stands apart from reality than other complimentary ways of construing the world in which we live.

If reality is indeed in one sense a construct of our various conceptualizations, it seems plausible to accept that art works can share in this reality by presenting unique conceptions of our understanding. In this sense art is importantly on par with the other various conceptualizations and nominalizations under which we formalize and express our ways of understanding our collective phenomenal experience.

Nelson Goodman: Ways of Worldmaking

One philosopher who has said much that is subversive to the ideas that characterize Plato's philosophy of art, and in particular to the idea that art is something that stands apart from and subordinate to a transcendent reality, is Nelson Goodman. Goodman has firmly rejected the idea that reality is something unique or given, which stands waiting to be 'discovered' by human enquiry. According to Goodman, reality is not to be thought of as a fixed and independent yardstick, to which our various conceptions are subordinate, and to which they correspond in varying degrees of accuracy.

The central explication of Goodman's ideas about the nature of reality is to be found in his 1978 work *Ways of Worldmaking*. In this book Goodman undermines the idea that it is intelligible to speak of the world 'as it really is' by pointing out that our universe is in a very important sense confined to the various systems with which we describe the world. As Goodman points out, beyond our various ways of describing the world, we have no way of articulating or conceiving how the world *really* is, *'in itself'*. We are in a very real sense confined to the various systems of description under which we describe the world as we see it.

> Frames of reference, though, seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description: . . . If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds. (Goodman, 1978, p. 3)

For Goodman, there is not one world, but many worlds. And each world, according to Goodman, consists of a 'version' of reality, or a system of description.

That there are many versions of the world is hardly in question. We only need to consider for a moment the different conceptions postulated by physics, by chemistry, by psychology, by the traditional Maori metaphysical view of the world, or indeed by works of art themselves, to realize the diversity of world versions that are on offer.

> With false hope of a firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions, with substance dissolved into function, and with the given acknowledged as taken, we face the questions how worlds are made, tested, and known. (Goodman, 1978, p. 7)

Perhaps what is most significant about Goodman's philosophical contribution is that he provides a conception of reality under which a diverse range of conceptualizations, including those provided by art works themselves, can be seen as legitimate descriptions of reality, and as a legitimate source of knowledge and understanding. While it may well be appropriate to recognize cultural and sociological differences between the various ways of conceptualizing reality, we have no need to assume that there are fundamental epistemological differences (of the kind described by Plato). Competing conceptualizations are in an important sense equally legitimate ways of describing the world. Goodman is quick to point out that no particular conception has a monopoly on the truth. While the natural sciences have become revered in our western society on account of their special ability to explain and predict phenomena in the natural world, these sciences are inherently no closer to 'the truth' than other conceptualizations. Art is thus in principle no more distanced from reality than science, language, or religion. In other words, there is an important sense in which science, art, and other conceptualizations are conceptually 'on par' as ways of describing the world.

Art and the Revelation of Truth: Martin Heidegger

German existentialist Martin Heidegger was another philosopher who strongly objected to the view that art and reality are fundamentally opposed. According to Heidegger, ordinary ordered verbal discourse suffers from an inability to overcome metaphysical constraints and 'pierce to the core of things'. It is just this piercing, however, which seems to characterize great, authentic art (Steiner, p. 132). Heidegger believed that as a medium of expression, art has an enhanced potential to convey truth. In his long essay entitled "The Origin of the Work of Art", Heidegger claims that 'art is the creative

preserving of truth in the work. *Art then is the becoming and happening of truth'* (Heidegger, p. 71).

In direct contrast to the Platonic view, by which it is understood that a work of art stands twice removed from reality, Heidegger argues that a work of art can actually be *more real* than our experience of everyday reality. This is because art has the capacity to make us view something in a new light, from a different perspective. Art has the potential to encourage us see things which we would not otherwise have seen. An artist employs imagination in the hope of evoking reality. To illustrate how a work of art can uncover the 'concealedness of being', Heidegger alludes to Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes. At face value, this painting appears to convey nothing more than a pair of old and worn shoes. Under closer inspection however, we find that the painting has much more to reveal:

> From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of once more having to withstand want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. (Heidegger, p. 33-34)

Heidegger emphasizes in this passage how art can enhance our perception and understanding of everyday 'reality'. A work of art is able to alert us to aspects of reality which we may have otherwise overlooked. 'The art work let us know what shoes are in truth' (Heidegger, p. 35).

Although we may do well to acknowledge Heidegger's point that art can help to reveal aspects of reality which we may have otherwise failed to recognize, and help us come to a better understanding of various aspects of the world in which we live, we should be wary of the implication that art is 'more real', or somehow has a *greater access to truth* than the other various ways of construing the world.

While we may certainly wish to assert that art is 'up there' with science and other conceptualizations as a legitimate and important source of understanding, which can provide us with new and valuable ways of perceiving the world, it would be inconsistent to claim that art is inherently privy to truth in a way that other conceptualizations are not. For as the anti-representationalist argues, we have no way of determining ultimately that one conceptualization is any closer to the truth than any other.

Perhaps what might have tempted Heidegger to claim that art is an especially powerful medium in which to convey truth is that art has a capacity to be used as a vehicle to express aspects of our understanding in ways that are unavailable to other modes of expression. Art has the capacity to draw our imagination and attention to aspects of reality in ways that other forms of conceptualization cannot. Where language is limited to *describing* and *explaining*, for example, art is able to *show*, and demonstrate in a more direct fashion the insights that the artist is attempting to convey.

Art as 'Presentation'

Having accepted the antirepresentationalist's argument that it is inappropriate to conceive of the concepts expressed in art, science, or language as representations of 'the world as it is', we need to find a replacement for the concept that it is the function of art to *represent* or *imitate* reality. In what follows I wish to outline the form that such a replacement concept might take. Drawing upon themes expounded by Heidegger, Goodman, and Rorty (in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth)*, I wish to propose a new way of conceiving of the way in which art acts as a vehicle which can help us to understand 'reality'.

My proposal is that we replace the idea that it is a function of art to offer *representations* of an external and determinate reality with the idea that it is a function of art to offer *presentations* of our understanding of reality, as reality is construed by the antirepresentationalist. These presentations are to be seen as being

equivalent to Goodman's 'versions of the world'. In the context of Goodman's idea that reality is a function of the various conceptualizations that have been put forward to describe phenomena, we can say that the conceptualizations expressed in art can offer unique and legitimate world versions. In the sphere of understanding the presentations expressed in art are to be seen as being on par with the presentations or conceptualizations found explicitly in the sciences and implicitly in language. The presentations found in art works can thus be seen as a legitimate source of knowledge, which are capable of making an important contribution to the collective human construction of reality.

In replacing the idea that it can be a function of art to represent a reality from which art is fundamentally separated, with the idea that it can be a function of art to offer presentations of a reality which is partially constituted by the very presentations themselves, we are abandoning the idea that art works ought to *imitate* reality. Consequently, in evaluating a work of art, we must abandon the idea that it is a criterion of a work's value for that work to be a 'good imitation' or 'close approximation' of some aspect of determinate reality. (For as we have seen, the notion of 'approximating a determinate reality' has no meaning or place in the antirepresentationalist ontology.) The onus thus falls on the 'presentationalist' to provide a set of criteria by which to explain the effectiveness of a particular presentation, and by which to evaluate the contribution that that presentation makes to the overall value of a work of art.

What are arguably the two most important criteria for assessing the value of a particular presentation are as follows. Firstly, to be successful, a presentation must clearly elucidate some familiar (or unfamiliar) aspect of our phenomenal experience. It must provide some new insight into, or new way of understanding or looking at, some aspect of our experience as human beings. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the subject matter of this presentation must be presented in a manner which is somehow imaginatively creative or striking. To be an excellent presentation, a presentation must in some way draw attention to itself by using the artistic medium in which it is expressed to render its subject matter in a

way that is particularly artistically noteworthy or effective. An obvious example would be the expression of an intense emotion in music. To be an effective presentation, we would not only require that the music clearly evoked a particular emotion, but we would also consider it important that the artist had 'harnessed' the medium in such a way that the *music* in which the emotion was expressed *drew attention* to the emotion.

In being a vehicle for the presentation of ideas and experiences, art has the ability to encourage us to see familiar things from a fresh perspective. Not only can art alert us to aspects of reality which we had previously overlooked, but it can also present us with entirely new ways of looking at the familiar, or indeed with entirely new realities. By focussing and holding our attention on a presentation, art can offer new and unique conceptualizations of our experience. In an important sense, art can offer new ways of seeing our world.

We often find that what is notable about a presentation is its *deviation* from ordinary ways of seeing and interpreting phenomenon. Having broken away from the representationalist idea that it is the function of art to *imitate* reality, the presentationalist openly embraces the opposing idea that art can legitimately *transform* the familiar, creating new and unique interpretations.

In summary, the purpose of this chapter has been to challenge the age old assumption that the defining function of art is to 'represent reality'. Two arguments have been deployed with a view to toppling representation from its supposed position as the central and characteristic function of art. Firstly, I have shown that the centrality of representation is challenged by the wealth of non-representational art, which demonstrates that it is not at all necessary for art works to imitate or represent the objects of reality. Secondly (and more fundamentally), I have shown that the very notion of representation rests upon certain presuppositions which we are better off rejecting. The problem with representation, according to my second argument, is that it presupposes that art, along with other human attempts to construe the world in which we live, stands fundamentally distanced from 'reality', or the world *as it*

really is. Representation is based upon the presumption that reality is transcendent, and that human attempts to explain or construe the world are always fundamentally distanced from and subordinate to *reality itself.* I have argued however, along with the antirepresentationalist, that transcendent metaphysics should be rejected, because they play no useful role in philosophy.

I have proposed that rather than conceiving of art as a vehicle which attempts to *represent* a transcendent reality which is forever beyond our grasp, we should conceive of art as a vehicle which aims at the *presentation* of ideas and experiences, which can in a very real sense contribute to our communal and inter-subjective construal of reality.

In the following chapters, I shall outline in detail several of the ways in which art works can contribute to our understanding of the world in which we live. In chapter three, I shall demonstrate how presentations in art can promote understanding of cultural and spiritual values. In chapter four, I shall demonstrate how presentations in art can encapsulate and contribute to our understanding of social and political issues. In chapter five, I shall demonstrate how presentations in art can contribute to our understanding of the moral life, and in chapter six, I shall demonstrate how presentations in art can further our understanding and awareness of the human emotional life. In each chapter, I shall argue that the presentation of these aspects of our understanding contributes importantly to the value which we ascribe to works of art.

CHAPTER THREE

The Cultural Function of Art

In this chapter I wish to argue that an important dimension of the value of art is its ability to function as a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. We do not need to look particularly hard at historical or contemporary art to realize that the art of a particular societal group will often strongly reflect the form of life of that group. It is invariably the case that the values and beliefs of a society or culture will be reflected in its art. The discussion of this chapter falls into two significant parts. In the first part I shall provide and discuss examples of art works from two different cultural groups which can be seen to express cultural beliefs and values; the first example being Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki* (reflecting the values and beliefs of the Maori world-view), and the second example being the graphic art of the Australian Aborigine. In the second part of the chapter, I shall discuss the way in which such expression of cultural beliefs and values can relate to the value of art.

First example: Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*

Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki* is a prime example of a work of art whose function it is to express the cultural and spiritual beliefs and values that define the world-view of a particular group of people. *Potiki* not only shows and describes the beliefs and values of the Maori way of life, but it also reinforces and celebrates them. *Potiki* is in an important sense an affirmation of things Maori.

Potiki is the story of a small coastal community whose way of life is threatened by the determination of a Pakeha developer to oust the community from its land. Convinced that he needs the community's land as the key to the completion of his dream development, it seems that the developer will stop at nothing to fulfil his will. In *Potiki* we are presented with a detailed insight into the way of life of this community. By revealing the values and beliefs that characterize

the way of life and world-view of a particular group of people, *Potiki* effectively acts as a window which helps to reveal the cultural identity of the Maori people as a whole. *Potiki* thus has an educative function. An important purpose of this novel is to promote understanding and tolerance of a distinct and unique way of life with its associated set of beliefs and values. Through learning about the cultural and spiritual values and beliefs of the community described within *Potiki*, we gain an understanding of the seriousness of the threat posed by the developer to their way of life; and, on a wider perspective, we gain an understanding of what it would mean for any Maori community to be deprived of its land.

In what follows I will proceed to articulate some of the values and beliefs which define the world-view of the community as depicted by this novel. Although *Potiki* reflects a great many of the values and beliefs which characterize the Maori world-view, I shall restrict my discussion to the expression of two primary values; namely the importance of *land* and the importance of *people* to the Maori identity and way of life. The affinity of the people of this community to their land is undoubtedly presented as one of the central defining values of a Maori world-view. We see that the entire way of life, and even the very *identity* of these people is tied extremely closely to their loving relationship with their own ancestral land. This relationship is spiritual, imaginative and perpetual. In order to understand its full significance, however, we must acknowledge several important metaphysical beliefs which are implicit within the text.

The first such metaphysical belief presented within this novel is the belief that the land is the home of one's ancestors. In a very real sense, the land is seen to be alive, containing the ancestors of all things, human and non-human, past and present. The bond of the people to the land is a strong spiritual bond, based upon the belief that one's ancestors have a perpetual spiritual presence. This belief is alluded to in *Potiki* by Hemi's satisfaction at being able to live upon the piece of land which is the home of his people's ancestors:

> Now at least, the family was still here, on the ancestral land. (p. 60)

> At last they had a place to put their feet, and it was there own place, their own ancestral place, after all the years and trouble. (p. 84)

Here and elsewhere in the novel Grace stresses the importance to the Maori people of the spiritual bond that ties people to their ancestral land.

The second belief on account of which the people bear such a strong bond to the land (and to all aspects of the environment) is the belief that the land, and all things contained within it, possesses a *mauri* or 'life force'. *Mauri* is seen to be an energy possessed by both animate and inanimate things, which must at all times be respected and preserved. One scene in *Potiki* which could be seen to illustrate a belief in *mauri* is the scene in which Mary (who is working in the ancestral house), and a carving, are described as 'putting their arms round each other holding each other closely, listening to the beating and throbbing and quiet of their hearts' (p. 22). What Grace may well be alluding to here is the belief that the carving possesses a *mauri*, and so is in a very important sense alive.[14]

The third metaphysical belief contributing to the affinity of the people to their land is the belief that there is an important sense in which the people actually *belong* to the land. This belief can be seen to derive from the Maori creation myth. According to the Maori story of creation, not only human beings, but birds, insects, trees, and indeed all living creatures, are descendants of Tane, the god of the forest, or one of his brothers. Tane, in turn, is the child of Papa-tu-a-nuku, the earth mother, and Rangi-nui, the sky father. So all living people, and all living creatures, are seen in a Maori world-view to be direct descendants of the Earth itself. The feeling that one belongs to the earth, can be understood in terms of the belief that one's *whakapapa* (one's ancestry) can be traced back to the earth itself. A person is seen, under a Maori world-view, to be in a very real sense a *part* of the Earth. This belief is reflected in the following passage, in which Hemi speaks of the sense of belonging which his people feel

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14. Admittedly the passage lends itself to another interpretation; namely that Mary's closeness to the carving reflects an acknowledgement of the ancestor which the carving represents

for the land. He also refers to the sense in which the very identity of his people is contingent upon their relationship to their land:

> And people were looking to their land again. They knew that they belonged to the land, had known all along that there had to be a foothold otherwise you were dust blowing here and there and everywhere. (p. 61)

Deprived of their ancestral land, the people of the community described in *Potiki* would lose a vital part of their identity:

> Our *whanau* is the land and sea. Destroy the land and sea, we destroy ourselves. We might as well crack open our heads, take the seed, and throw it on the flame. (pp. 98-99)[15]

As we have seen, the relationship that a Maori community has with its ancestral land (its *turangawaewae*) is dependent in no small part upon the belief that one's ancestors are present within the land. The importance of a closeness to one's ancestors also explains the devastation felt by the community after the deliberate flooding of their *urupa* (burial ground), and the deliberate burning of the *wharenui* (ancestral house).

> Our bodies moved, our hands moved, doing the familiar things, but our thoughts, our spirits, were in ruin, fallen to broken earth. (p. 139)

The ancestral house had been a symbolic focus of the community's spiritual and cultural identity. This 'house of genealogies, of living and dying and dreams', contained the living carvings which recorded the histories and whakapapa of the people. Because the house had been a vital symbol of the community's identity, they felt spiritually bereft without it.

> they knew what it meant to the spirit and upliftment of a people to be housed in a house which expressed and defined them. (p. 153)

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15. *Whanau* means, amongst other things, extended family. In its context above, the use of the word *whanau* indicates that the land and sea are thought, by virtue of the fact that they are the home of one's ancestors, to be in a strong sense constitutive of one's extended family.

> They understood that the house of the people is a great *taonga* and a great strength.[16] (p. 143)

A second important aspect of Maoritanga which is reflected in *Potiki* is the value placed upon kinship. Throughout the novel we see an emphasis placed upon the importance of family values. These values are characterized by mutual support, generosity, love, loyalty, and sharing. Perhaps the most explicit mouthpiece of the importance of family values is Hemi, who explains that in his ethic, people take the highest value:

> People were the most important thing in life, he believed. (p. 147)

Throughout the novel, we see that the values of love *(aroha)*, loyalty, and mutual support are stressed as an integral part of family life.

This concern for people is extended not only to one's immediate family or community. There are several occasions in *Potiki* where we see neighbouring communities giving extremely generous support to one another in times of difficulty. Having been helped themselves in their time of need, the people of the Te Ope community, for example, do not hesitate to show their *aroha* by providing food, blankets, and physical labour when the people of the community centrally described in *Potiki* suffer the imposed misfortunes of flooding, arson, and murder.

In summary, there is an important sense in which *Potiki* is a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual values. Two aspects of Maoritanga which are shown to have central importance in *Potiki* are the values attached to one's land and to one's people. We are shown by this novel that the Maori world-view is dominated by an affinity to land which is both spiritual and habitual, and also by a closeness to family. These values are given their central expression by Hemi in the following passage:

> His story was of the ground, the earth, and how the earth was a strength, how earth strengthened them all. 'Care for it and it cares for you,' he said, 'Give to it and it gives. Through it you shoulder your pain.'

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16. *Taonga* means 'treasure'.

> 'People are a strength too. Care for people and you are cared for, give strength to people and you are strong. It's land and people that are a person's self, and to give to the land and to give to the people is the best taonga of all. Giving is strength. We've always known it'. (p. 176)

Potiki, as we have seen, is a work of art which has a strong emphasis upon the expression of the cultural and spiritual values and beliefs which characterize the world-view of the Maori people. This cultural dimension is an important part of what makes *Potiki* the interesting, rich, thought provoking, and fulfilling novel that it is. A recognition of the cultural significance of *Potiki* must enter importantly into our appreciation of the novel as a whole. For many people, the cultural and spiritual dimension of this novel is a central facet of its value as a work of art.

Second Example: Aboriginal Graphic Art

The second example of art whose function it is to express the defining values and beliefs of a group of people upon which I shall focus in this chapter is the graphic art of the Australian Aborigine. Aboriginal art provides an excellent example of the 'cultural' function of art, for it is heavily infused with the myths, beliefs, values, and rituals which combine to make up the Aboriginal world-view.

The central underlying theme of Aboriginal graphic art is the depiction of the religious philosophy of Dreaming, or Dreamtime. The Dreaming plays a very important part in the Aboriginal world-view, for it explains the origins of the Aboriginal known world. According to the Dreaming, the world was formed when a number of Ancestral Beings, in both human and animal form, arose from inanimate earth. These beings proceeded to roam the countryside, creating various aspects of the natural world, and handing down the various rituals and social norms which are seen to be necessary for maintaining order, sustaining life, and transferring knowledge and ownership of the land (West, 1988). Many paintings portray the powerful Ancestral Beings of the Dreamtime. They depict the journeys these beings undertook, the places where they performed certain acts, the rituals which they instigated and the ritual objects

which they created. The belief in Ancestral Beings plays an important part in the various traditional rituals of the Aboriginal people. These rituals, which celebrate and re-enact the activities of the Ancestral Beings, are also regularly depicted in Aboriginal art.

Another common feature of Aboriginal art is the depiction of the various aspects of the natural environment which are significant to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Aboriginal people. We see reflected in Aboriginal art many of the plants and animals for example, which are a familiar feature of the Aboriginal environment, and which form the staple diet of the Aboriginal people. This depiction of the natural environment also reflects the affinity of the Aboriginal people to the harsh land of Australia, and to its living creatures.

Because there is such a vast amount and diversity of 'culturally expressive' Aboriginal art, I have chosen more or less at random two examples which can be seen to express particularly clearly aspects of the Aboriginal world-view. The first example, by Curly Bardagubu, of Northern Territory, is entitled 'Yingarna', and depicts Yingarna, the original and most powerful Rainbow Snake.[17] Yingarna is held to be the originator of all Ancestral Beings. According to the myth as interpreted by the artist, Yingarna took offence at the odd half animal-half human shapes of the creatures around her. She swallowed these creatures, and then regurgitated them in the shapes that are familiar today. The circular shapes surrounding the Rainbow Serpent represent Yingarna's eggs, from which she gave birth to Ngalyod, the other Rainbow serpent, and Ngalgunburijami, a daughter.

The second example of Aboriginal art that is expressive of cultural values is a series of works (consisting of two bark paintings, two Morning Star poles, and a carving), by Northern Territory artist Manjuwi, entitled 'Wulumumu, Morning Star story'.[18] This series of works depicts the myth associated with the traditional Morning Star

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17. See plate 2.

18. See plate 1, for a reproduction of one of the paintings from this set.

mortuary ceremony. Manjuwi's bark painting illustrates the traditional myth according to which the soul of a dead person is guided during the mortuary ceremony to the Land of the Dead, by a feathered string that is attached to Barnumbirr, the Morning Star. At the base of the painting we can see people performing the mortuary ceremony. And in the centre is a morning star pole (traditionally held by those performing the ceremony), on top of which is Barnumbirr, the Morning Star itself. The carving is of Wulumumu, the Ancestral Being associated with the Morning Star story. In the carving, Barnumbirr is represented by feathered strings on Wulumumu's arms and head.

The painting and re-painting of the myths associated with the Ancestral Beings, and of the stories associated with particular Ancestral sites, plays a major part in Aboriginal ritual. During a traditional mortuary ceremony, for example, various scenes and events relating to the mortuary myth will be painted by the artists of the tribe. As indicated above, the purpose of the mortuary ceremony is to ensure that the dead person's spirit is safely guided to the land of the dead. It is believed that by ensuring a safe journey, the spiritual power of the deceased person is preserved, so that the spiritual resources of the clan are not diminished (Morphy, p. 32). The painting of different scenes from the mortuary myth play different functions in the ceremony. In painting the coffin lid, for example, tribe members are summoning up the powers of the Ancestral Being, which will come and take the soul of the dead person to the next stage of its journey to the land of the dead. (Ibid., p. 32)[19]

For the Aborigine, the function of art is clearly not limited to aesthetic stimulation. Art enters into the lives of Aboriginal people in important and fundamental ways. While it can be seen to be at one level a detached reflection of the cultural and spiritual beliefs and values of the Aboriginal people, it is at a much more important level an integral and defining part of those beliefs and values. In an important sense, art is the primary repository of many of the values and beliefs that define the world-view of the Aborigine people. It not

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19. Although it was traditional to paint the body of the dead person, today it is more common to decorate the lid of the coffin.

only reflects the unique world-view of the Aborigine, but it also shapes and defines it.

Cultural Expression and Artistic Value

To rehearse and build upon what has already been said, an important function of art is to express and embody the important cultural and spiritual beliefs and values that underlie the world-view of particular cultural groups. In the light of what was said in chapter two, we can say that it is thus one function of art to *present* the different 'world versions' or 'ways of understanding' that are held by different cultural groups. In reflecting the presuppositions and values that are central to different ways of life, art can present realities that are radically different from our own. Art can show 'how the world is', according to a particular group of people, or to the perspective of a particular individual.

There are at least two important ways in which the performance of this function can be seen to relate to the value of art. The first way in which art has value by reflecting cultural values and beliefs is by reinforcing those values and beliefs which a particular group of people hold to be central to their form of life. In other words, art has value to a particular group of people because it embodies and reaffirms their particular way of looking at the world. By objectifying in art the particular beliefs, values, and myths that constitute a unique way of looking at the world, a cultural group can ensure that this world-view is shared and understood by all members of the community. Furthermore, art can play an indispensable part in the preservation of cultural knowledge, by maintaining a culture's way of understanding over time, and playing an important role in educating future generations. That this is felt to be true of Aboriginal art by Aboriginal artists is reflected in the following statement by a Western Desert artist: "I learnt these drawings, these stories from my father; he has passed away. I teach my stories, my pictures to my son so, when I pass away he too can paint them for his children." (Artist quoted in Megaw, p. 290). This educational dimension of the value of art is also alluded to in *Potiki*. In *Potiki*, Grace stresses how a great deal of important tribal knowledge and history is recorded in the art

of the people, and especially in the carvings. The importance of carving and carvings to Maori culture and identity is referred to on page eight:

> When the carver dies he leaves behind him a house for the people... He has given the people himself, and he has given the people his ancestors and their own.... In this way the ancestors are known and remembered.

The second important way in which the culturally expressive function of art can contribute to the value of an art work is that art, by presenting conceptualizations of the world which are not our own, can act as a 'window', which enables people of other cultures to gain a better understanding of the motivating values and beliefs which drive a particular cultural group. Art can thus function as a point of entry which can help us to see the how the people of other cultural groups view the world. By encouraging us to sympathize, empathize, and even identify with alternative ways of seeing the world, art can in an important sense bring the sensitive and interested viewer into direct contact with these alternative realities. As Luke Taylor states in West: 'Bark painting brings the viewer face to face with the Dreaming; the power of the figure is exposed through the aesthetic force and intellectual complexity of the image' (Taylor, p. 26).

To the extent that it can reveal alternative world versions, art can be a source of knowledge, which can give insights into the psyche of different cultural minds, and encourage us to gain a sensitivity to the presuppositions and values which differentiate the world-view of another culture from that of our own.

In promoting a greater awareness of how the people of other cultures view reality, art can encourage greater cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. There is a definite sense in which art, by encouraging us to acknowledge the different presuppositions and values which underlie different world versions, can promote a greater understanding of different cultural groups, and help us to understand the ontology and value system that motivates people to act and think in the ways that they do. Many Aboriginal artists are aware that in exhibiting their works to the outside world, they are encouraging others to understand the religious basis of the Aboriginal world-view.

> For the Aborigines of Western Arnhem Land, bark painting represents a means of educating both an art buying public and the younger generation of Aboriginal children in a distinctive way of looking at the world. (Taylor, p. 26)

Another significant consideration is that art can have the affect of challenging the assumption that our own culture has a monopoly on truth. By showing us that there exist *many* alternative conceptions of reality, art can help to prize apart the presumption that the way in which reality is viewed by the culture with which we identify is the only legitimate or correct way to view reality.

In order to understand why art is so important and so heavily valued as a repository of cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, it is important that we realize that a significant number of the beliefs and values that are expressed in art have no other equivalent form of expression. To many cultural groups, art does not merely function as a detached mirror that reflects and expresses important values that have their primary source of expression elsewhere; it is rather the place where those important beliefs and values receive their *primary* and most important source of expression.

As we have seen, it is certainly the case that Aboriginal painting is considered in the Aboriginal tradition to be an important source of Ancestral knowledge. It is to the painting which one must turn, for example, if one wants to learn of the religious philosophy of the Dreamtime, or of the stories of the various Ancestral Beings which shaped the world as we know it today.[20]

It is also the case in the Maori tradition that art is seen to be a primary source of cultural knowledge. If one wishes to learn of one's ancestral history and identity, for example, one can go to the meeting house, in which one will find the carvings which record the stories of one's ancestors. The carvings of a tribe are considered to be an important source of knowledge regarding the history and

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20. While it is true that art works can be an important source of Ancestral knowledge, it is important to point out that not all ancestral knowledge is to be passed on through art. There are certain sacred truths which it is considered inappropriate to reveal in art. Aboriginal artists are thus careful not to reveal 'too much' in their paintings. (see *The Inspired Dream* p. 37)

deeds of one's ancestors. The importance of the carvings which record the genealogy of a people is heightened by the belief that in order to know where and who we are in the present, we must look to our past (to our ancestry). According to Maori belief, our identity is determined by our ancestry. That this is so is reflected by the fact that in the Maori language, the word for 'in front' *(mua)* is the same as the word for 'the past'.

As we have seen, an important function of art is to express or embody the values and beliefs that define the world-view of a particular cultural group. In reflecting our values and beliefs, art has the potential to reaffirm our spiritual or cultural identity, by expressing and promoting the values which we hold most central to our form of life.

In expressing the values and beliefs of a particular culture, art can function to portray the thought world or mind frame of that cultural group. Art thus functions as a window into how a particular society views the world. Through art we can come to have a better understanding of the values and metaphysical presuppositions that define the world-view of a cultural group. In promoting a greater understanding of how a particular group views the world, art assumes an edifying function. And in encouraging people to understand more fully the cultural and religious significance of the art of a particular cultural group, there is always the possibility that such art will promote greater tolerance and understanding of that cultural group.[21]

Although we have only looked in any specific detail at the way in which the art of Maori and Aboriginal cultures can be seen to reflect

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21. Whether or not we *agree* with the presuppositions of another culture that are expressed in its art is another issue. What matters is that art can enable us to gain an understanding of what these presuppositions are, so that we are able to better understand the motivating beliefs and values which cause the people of that culture to think and act as they do.

important beliefs and values, it seems fair to generalize and make the wider claim that it can be the function of the art of *any* culturally distinct group to reflect the beliefs and values that mark that group off as the group that it is. In saying this one is not of course committed to the related claim that *all* art is expressive of cultural values, or that all of those art works which *can* be seen to be expressive of culturally specific beliefs and values present at all accurately the beliefs and values of the cultural group to which those works can be seen to belong. Nor would it be to make the claim that expressing cultural and spiritual values and beliefs is a prerequisite of being a 'good work of art'. It is merely to say that this is one important function of art, and that the performance of this function can contribute importantly to the value of an art work.

CHAPTER FOUR

Art and Society

In this chapter I wish to discuss the way in which art can function to reflect and comment upon society. This function of art, which could be referred to as the 'social and political' function of art, can be seen to encompass on the one hand art which aims to *reflect* the conditions of society, with the purpose of presenting or exposing certain aspects of society for what they are, and on the other hand more directly politicized art, which aims to comment upon or *criticize* various aspects of society. Art of the latter description includes both subversive art and protest art, whose purpose it is to expose and undermine certain institutions, ideas, forms of behaviour and so on. Such art aims to challenge the images and stereotypes we are fed by society, and to question our trust and belief in existing ideologies, policies, and institutions.[22]

Art has been used as a vehicle with which to reflect and expose the conditions of society for centuries. To give an introductory example of an artistic genre closely associated with the expression of social and political ideas, the literary art of satire has a history dating back thousands of years. Often written from a conservative standpoint, satire synthesizes humour and invective to expose and deride the moral corruption and vice of society. In ancient Rome, the satiric poetry of Juvenal was renowned for its cutting and witty attacks on the folly, corruption, and decadence of city life. In the 'Augustan

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22. Another form of art which could appropriately be included under the banner of social and political art is political propaganda. The kind of art I have in mind includes the posters, paintings, and even nationalistic music that have been used, especially in times of warfare and political upheaval. Such art works are used by political and other institutions to run smear campaigns, and to attempt to win support and allegiance, by persuading people to accept certain viewpoints or social conditions. Although the artistic value of various forms of political propaganda would be an interesting subject for philosophical discussion, it is not within the scope of this chapter. (For a comprehensive introduction to the art of political propaganda, see Igor Golomstock's *Totalitarian Art.*)

Period' of English literature, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope were two writers who employed satire to ridicule public figures and institutions.[23] In *A Modest Proposal*, for example, Swift expresses his indignance at the treatment of the Irish by the English government. In this pamphlet, whose full title is *A Modest Proposal for Preventing Children of Poor People from being a Burden to their Parents or the Country*, Swift calmly proposes that it would be more humane to breed up their children as food for the rich. A 20th century variant of the satiric tradition has been the fictional creation of imaginary worlds designed to criticize actual political developments. Notable examples have been Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*. To provide an example from New Zealand literature, A.R.D. Fairburn's *I'm Older than You Please Listen* is a scathing criticism of those New Zealanders who continued to look to England as the 'motherland', and source of all culture and cultural identity, rather than acknowledge and encourage the developing sense of cultural identity in our own country.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the social and political function of art is art's ability to challenge people into thinking about the society in which they live. In its role as a mouthpiece for social commentary, art can raise political awareness, and remind people of political dangers and realities. In challenging ideas and institutions, art can stimulate discussion and debate, and in doing so become a catalyst for learning and change. When its effectiveness is being felt most strongly, art can shake people from their obliviousness and mediocrity, and perhaps even encourage them to actually go out and *do* something about the social and political evils of society.

In this chapter I will explore how the fulfilment of the function of being a 'vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas' relates to the evaluation of works of art. Specific reference will be made to the paintings of Colin McCahon and Nigel Brown, and again to Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*.

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23. The Augustan period (c.1660-1760), defined retrospectively by literary critics, earned its name from the way in which much its poetry resembles the classical style of the poetry of ancient Rome (during the reign of Augustus). (Wynne-Davies, p. 330)

First Example: The Protest Art of Colin McCahon

To introduce this discussion I shall turn first to the second *Gate* series of paintings by Colin McCahon. In these paintings we see McCahon's thematic focus change from a general concern for the human condition, which is the characteristic theme of nearly all of his work, to a more specific focus on the issue of nuclear disarmament. Although these paintings could also be interpreted and evaluated in terms of their moral and spiritual messages, I shall be concentrating in this discussion on the way in which they function as a vehicle for the expression of a specifically social and political message. For it is in *these* paintings that McCahon becomes most openly a 'protest artist', making explicit his opposition to nuclear weapons, and to the proliferation of the arms race.

What I intend to establish in the following discussion is that the artistic value of McCahon's *Gate* series is importantly dependent upon the way in which they act as a vehicle for the expression of a specifically anti-nuclear message. In other words, their fulfilment of the function of being a 'vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas' plays an important part in an assessment of their value as works of art.

Interpretation of the *Gate* series is made more complicated (and more interesting), by the fact that their central message is conveyed via two different 'media' simultaneously. As well as the more obvious verbal message that is conveyed by these paintings, there is also an important symbolic significance, arising from the formal arrangement of the visual shapes. Thus if we are to fully appreciate the potential that these paintings have to offer, we must pay close attention to both the literary and symbolic dimensions of these works. I shall focus first however, on the 'literary' dimension of the second *Gate* series. It is this feature which reveals most clearly, to someone encountering these paintings for the first time, that their central concern is to make a statement about the artist's condemnation and fear of the nuclear threat. These textual passages, which dominate the first five panels of the *Gate* series, deliver a dramatic and apocalyptic message. What makes this message so

effective, is that the text (chosen by McCahon's friend John Caselberg), is based directly upon the dramatic language of the Old Testament. The language is powerful, and the images evoked are of carnage and devastation:

> How is the hammer of the whole Earth cut asunder and broken?
>
> Yea. It shall be in an instant suddenly. There shall be a visitation with thunder, and with earthquake and with great noise, with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a devouring fire.
>
> The Earth shall stagger like a drunken man then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed. (Panels one and five).[24]

In using the language of Armageddon, complete with the characteristic imagery of brimstone, fire, and destruction, McCahon was warning us that the nuclear threat facing mankind could very well herald the 'end of the world'.

That this message is a political message, designed to challenge the public who will view these works, is revealed most clearly by the inscription on the third panel:

> Is it nothing to you, ye that pass by?[25]

In this passage McCahon comes as close as he will come to actually confronting the viewer, and challenging him or her directly to face up to the dangers of the nuclear threat. This message can also quite easily be interpreted as a moral condemnation of those who do not take an active political role in opposing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It is important to note that the significance of this message is compounded by its biblical meaning. McCahon's use of this phrase echoes the lamentation by Jeremiah in *Lamentations* 1.12 over the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.. In this passage Jeremiah expresses sorrow for the suffering and destruction that has been caused by the

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24. See plates 4 and 5.

25. See plate 5.

overthrow of the city, and also for the *impending* devastation that is likely to be inflicted upon surrounding areas, now that they lie largely undefended. We thus see a strong parallel between the plight of the people of Jerusalem and the plight of mankind in the twentieth century, facing possible destruction by nuclear weapons.[26]

As I indicated above, to fully appreciate what these paintings have to offer, we must pay attention to the other important dimension of these works; namely the significance of the visual symbolism that is developed throughout the earlier and later *Gate* paintings. This symbolism, despite its unfortunate obscurity, plays an important role in expressing the political message of the *Gate* paintings, and also in achieving the continuity of the message throughout the series as a whole.

The basic idea behind the symbolism of the *Gate* series is that the two dark oblong shapes that can be seen to approach each other from either side of the painting, represent the opposing forces that threaten to destroy each other, taking the rest of humanity down in the process.[27] Humanity, which is symbolically represented as being caught between the opposing forces, has increasingly less room to manoeuvre. The only 'way out' for the future of humanity is through

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26. Verses twelve and thirteen of *Lamentations* are as follows:

> Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?
> Look and see
> if there is any sorrow like my sorrow
> which was brought upon me,
> which the LORD inflicted
> on the day of his fierce anger.
>
> From on high he sent fire;
> into my bones he made it descend;
> he spread a net for my feet
> he turned me back;
> he has left me stunned,
> faint all the day long. (May and Metzger, p. 992)

27. In the context of the 1960s cold war time frame during which the *Gate* series was painted, it would be safe to assume that these shapes represented the two 'superpowers', USA and USSR.

the symbolic 'gate' which exists between the two shapes, and leads to the freedom of the pictorial space beyond. As the *Gate* series progresses, we see that the visual field becomes increasingly cluttered. Instead of two 'rival forces', we see that there are three or four opposing shapes, each vying for domination of the visual field. At a symbolic level, the additional shapes represent the additional forces which have become nuclear armed. With three or four independent forces involved in a stand off, the 'way out' for humanity is becoming increasingly complicated and obscure. (Brown, p. 122)[28]

Hopefully by now my analysis will have made clear that almost every aspect of McCahon's *Gate* series is tailored towards the expression of its central human message, which is, as I have stated, its protest against the existence and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Admittedly it would be possible to disregard this message, and evaluate the *Gate* series without reference to its political dimension, focussing exclusively on formal and stylistic features. Such an interpretation would seem rather peculiar, however, when we consider that any unity and structure that the formal features do exhibit is designed specifically to contribute to the effective presentation of the central political message.

The idea that we could do justice to these paintings as art works by attending only to their formal features is quite untenable. In order to appreciate the full potential that these paintings have to offer, we must take into consideration the meaning conveyed by the words and sentences that dominate many of the panels of the second *Gate* series, as well as the significance of the visual symbolism that is the characteristic motif of these works. In other words we cannot fully appreciate McCahon's *Gate* series unless we acknowledge its status as a vehicle for the expression of its political statement. To do justice to these paintings, we must acknowledge and consider *what they have to say.* That this is so is certainly supported by the belief of the artist:

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28. See plate 3.

> What has been communicated is now of primary importance, indeed, this is the only importance a work of art has. (McCahon, quoted in Brown p. 200)

Accessibility and Assessment

As we have seen, when we learn about the significance of the visual symbolism of the *Gate* series, we are introduced to an important further dimension of meaning and depth. Our understanding of the complexity and profundity of these art works is enhanced, and this greater understanding must inevitably contribute importantly to our final assessment of the stature of these works. One cannot help thinking, however, that had the symbolism been more accessible, these paintings would have communicated their central message more clearly, and would have been more powerful and successful as works of art. As they stand, these paintings are only fully accessible to those who are 'in the know', and who have a special understanding of the significance of McCahon's enigmatic symbolism. To the vast majority of people, however, who are coming at these paintings for the first time, the symbolism will remain obscure, and an important aspect of the meaning of these works will remain hidden.

This raises an important philosophical question about art, which is pertinent to a great deal of McCahon's paintings. The question is: to what extent should the 'meaning' or 'potential' of a work of art be immediately explicit? On the one hand, we want the painting to communicate its message effectively and clearly, but on the other hand, we do not want the message to be so explicit that the work smacks of didacticism or propaganda, or to be so transparent that the meaning is rendered up *too* easily, so that the work will not hold interest. This is a question whose relevance McCahon himself was well aware of. He indicates in the following quote that he is wary of art whose message is stated too explicitly or bluntly:

> What must be avoided are the excesses of an over moralistic religious art or an overt indulgence in art for the sake of self expression. Art should be contemplated not as an end but as a means of enhancing, with imaginative awareness, the relevance of the human condition. (McCahon, quoted in Brown, p. 2)

McCahon's collaborator, John Caselberg, who chose the text for the *Gate* paintings, also had reservations about art whose message is too transparent:

> Caselberg knew that while the text must be concerned with the 'destiny of man', it had to escape any suggestion of outright propaganda proclaiming the cause for nuclear disarmament. (Brown, p. 127)

The suggestion implicit in both quotes is that art that offers up its meaning too bluntly or didactically is often *inferior* art. Art whose meaning is expressed more subtly or ambiguously, on the contrary, is often considered to be of greater stature and profundity. This idea certainly has an initial degree of plausibility. It is often the case that art whose meaning is not immediately clear, which requires a high degree of intellectual effort to interpret its meaning, is the art that we will find ultimately most profound and rewarding. This could certainly be said of many of McCahon's paintings or of many of Shakespeare's plays. Further support is given to the idea that it is better for an art work to exhibit a degree of ambiguity and complexity, than have its meaning expressed explicitly and superficially, by the consideration that an art work should in some way challenge or provoke the viewer. We often find that explicit, didactic, or straightforwardly propagandist art offers no challenge or interest. Art which possesses a degree of complexity and ambiguity, however, stimulates a response from the viewer, and encourages us to reflect about the various possibilities suggested by the work.

Another consideration which helps to shed light upon our tendency to place a higher value upon those works which are more subtle, and which require a greater degree of effort to understand, is that we generally like to think that to be any good, a work of art must be *difficult to produce.* To produce an art work with a glib message is relatively easy. To produce a subtle work, however, whose meaning is still clear, is much harder to achieve, and involves a much greater degree of artistic insight and skill.

While it is often to an art work's credit that its meaning is not offered up too bluntly, and that in possessing a degree of complexity or ambiguity the work may stimulate reflection, it is important to be aware that this degree of 'complexity' or 'depth', which we often call

profundity, can act as a double edged sword. For as we have seen in the *Gate* series, when the meaning of a work of art is partially concealed, there is a danger that this meaning will be lost on the viewer entirely.[29]

It is unlikely that we would find any comprehensive guide-lines or criteria by which to determine which art works will be successful and which will be simply too obscure. Whether a particular art work 'works', and is effective in communicating its message, or whether the meaning of that work is overly concealed, will of course depend on the work in question, and on the kind of audience to which it is being shown. There is one rule of thumb, however, which may be of use in a number of cases. A work of art, whose meaning is not immediately explicit, can only be fully successful as an art work if its meaning will be delivered by a reasonable amount of contemplation by a person of average intelligence. If no amount of contemplation or engagement is likely to deliver the meaning to someone who is confronting the work for the first time, the work cannot be considered to be fully successful. This can however, only be considered to be a rule of thumb. What it is for a person to be of 'average intelligence' is of course extremely vague. And it is easy to think of counter-examples. Many works make reference to things, situations, and even people which require an element of prior knowledge which a person of 'average intelligence' may not possess.

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29. One thinker who strongly believed that an important criterion of the value of a work of art is its universal accessibility was Tolstoy. According to Tolstoy, good art appeals to feelings which are common to all of us. Art that is inaccessible to the common person must always be a failure.

> Nothing is more common than to hear it said of reputed works of art that they are very good but very difficult to understand. We are quite used to such assertions, and yet to say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men, is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but most people can't eat it. (Tolstoy, 1930, p.176)

The difficulty with this assertion, however, is that it implies that any art which makes a genuine demand on the audience's intelligence or learning should be dismissed as inaccessible and thus as no good. In one fell swoop, Tolstoy would, with this criterion, dismiss a great deal of what is considered to be excellent art.

Second Example: The Paintings of Nigel Brown

The painting of New Zealand artist Nigel Brown is the second example of art which functions as a vehicle for the expression of social and political concerns upon which I shall focus in this chapter. Although Brown's paintings could be evaluated from a variety of perspectives, including the ways in which they function as objects for the expression of aesthetic, moral, spiritual, or cultural ideas, I shall focus, in the following discussion, on their role as vehicles for the expression of specifically social and political concerns.

Influenced by Colin McCahon, Brown's paintings explore the spectrum of human concerns that confront us as New Zealanders. Like McCahon, Brown uses a variety of symbols throughout his work to help reinforce his visual commentary on life in this country. Unlike McCahon however, the symbols used by Brown are easily accessible, being drawn from the images and experiences that characterize our life, experience, and identity as New Zealanders. His position as a symbolic artist is well summed up in the following autobiographical statement:

> I am interested in painting as a vehicle to explore and express ideas. When you're working on paintings that will influence people over a long time, you've got to deal with archetypes rather than superficial fashions. Enduring symbols are the ones that have got some sort of tie-up with your life. Ones that you feel for. It's no good if you haven't got some long-term feeling and association. (*Art New Zealand* No. 67 p. 73)

As this quote suggests, Brown is an artist with a strong sense of social purpose. His paintings are concerned both with personal human issues, such as sexuality, loneliness, guilt, and the need for human dignity, and also, on a wider perspective, the issues that face humanity at large, such as the abuse of the environment, and the nuclear threat.

In an important sense, Nigel Brown's art is a pictorial reflection of the social and historical conditions of life in New Zealand. His art reflects and comments upon what he sees to be the underlying images, character traits, beliefs, and ideas that define the social parameters of life in this country. Brown's art traverses a broad range

of social themes. His work is strongly humanistic, reflecting both positive and negative aspects of New Zealand society. We see throughout his work a preoccupation with the themes of both land and people. Brown stresses the interplay of individual, family, community, and environment. In paintings such as *Dominion Bitter* and *The Man is Stronger than the Land*, Brown reveals an uglier side to the macho working ethos that has seen the land tamed and the forests razed for farm land.[30] These works depict certain tensions in society. We see both a sense of guilt arising from the devastation of the land, and a basic failure of communication between individuals (husband and wife in particular). In *Dominion Bitter* Brown seems to be suggesting that a dependence upon alcohol in our society plays an important part in the failure to confront such social problems.

Also reflected in Brown's works are the need for love and compassion between people *(Aroha)*, a desire for a more bicultural society *(Marae in the City)*, and a recognition of the difficulty to find identity in a materialistic and increasingly secular society.[31] In *The Need to Belong, The Need to Stand Alone*, for example Brown stresses the tension between the individual's need to find identity in a larger social group that includes one's friends and family, and the at times conflicting need to define and maintain one's own personal space and identity as an individual.[32] Not all of Brown's paintings are as heavily serious and gloomy as this overview would suggest, however. In the 'Home Gardener' series of 1989, for example, Brown reflects some of the more pleasant aspects of domestic suburban existence. Many of the icons that characterize Brown's vision of life in New Zealand are captured and summarized in his painting *Kiwi Life Style: 1990*.

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30. See plates 6 and 7.

31. Brown seems to suggest that a sense of identity is something which Pakeha New Zealand is lacking. To Maori, on the contrary, identity is found in tribal affinity and in a rich cultural heritage. Perhaps Brown is suggesting that in the future New Zealanders will draw their identity from an increasingly bicultural tradition.

32. See plate 9.

To return once again to an idea discussed in chapter two (namely that by presenting interpretations of the world art can importantly contribute to understanding), we find that an important dimension of the value of Brown's work is its capacity to teach us about the world in which we live. One of the special qualities of Brown's art is the way in which it reveals a unique vision of life in this country. By presenting in his paintings a particular conceptualization of New Zealand society, Brown is able to provide insights into the fundamental social and ideological conditions of this society, and also challenge us to question prevailing myths and beliefs about the reality of life in New Zealand. The idea that art can function to provide unique and valuable 'world-versions' is certainly not new to the artist himself:

> I believe in painting as myth-making, world-making, visionary enlightenment which meets the challenges of paint on a rectangle. (Brown, quoted in Martin, p. 33)

As critic William Millet suggests, the force of Brown's vision is liable to confront the viewer in such a way that he or she is stimulated to contemplate and challenge prevailing conceptions of New Zealand society:

> This metaphoric honesty of Nigel's gaze confronts the viewer like an offensive weapon as it counteracts our myth making about reality. (Millet, quoted in Martin, p. 33)

Another significant observation about the artistic value of the social and political function of Brown's work is that the most highly politicized works, which directly advocate some political cause, seem to be the least successful of Brown's paintings. It is generally the case that the paintings which are satisfied to present the artist's interpretation of some aspect of the 'social and political domain', without explicitly forcing or advocating a particular idea, are more successful as works of art. We find that those protest works which most blatantly express a political message have little to offer as works of art. In the peak of his protest phase, during the mid 1980s, Brown produced many anti-nuclear works. Sometimes using a ball point pen and felt tips, Brown would scrawl such messages as: NO FRENCH TESTS, THE ARMS RACE IS A WASTE OF THE WORLD, DONT BE GUTLESS NEW ZEALAND, OPPOSE THE NUCLEAR INSANITY (O'Brien, p. 43). It is in these works that the 'social and political' function of art takes over almost exclusively.

Unfortunately, however, once stripped of their blunt political message, these works have very little else to offer. Smacking strongly of didacticism and propaganda, these works exhibit a shallowness which is most uncharacteristic of Brown's work. To be fair to Brown however, it is only a very small proportion of his work that has such an overpowering element of social didacticism.[33]

Third Example: Patricia Grace's *Potiki* Again

As a third example of an art work which has an explicit political function, I shall turn once again to Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*. *Potiki* not only functions as a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual values, as we have seen above, but it also has a strong political function. That its political statement is so blatant is importantly due to the allegorical significance of the novel. For although *Potiki* is at one level a fictional story of the struggle of a small New Zealand coastal community, it is at another level a representation of the struggle that faces the whole of the Maori people in New Zealand today. It is by virtue of this allegorical significance that Grace can use *Potiki* so effectively as a vehicle for the expression of social and political concerns.

One of the central such messages of *Potiki* is that the attitudes of the Pakeha majority show a serious insensitivity and lack of understanding towards Maori values and beliefs. As we have seen, tribal land to the Maori is not simply an asset to be bought and sold. It is the place in which one's ancestors are buried, and the source from which one draws one's sustenance and an important part of one's identity. The Pakeha insensitivity to the value of Maori land is reflected in the following passage, in which Dolman, the Pakeha land developer, is seen attempting to persuade the people of the community to sell their land:

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33. Plate 8 is an example of one of Brown's more political (and less sophistocated) works. Although this work is visually effective, and conveys its message clearly, it is superficial in comparison to the majority of his work, and would not sustain any lasting contemplation.

'We're not getting very far with this are we? I mean you invite me here and . . . I must say I expected you people to be a little more accommodating . . . .'

'Not so accommodating as to allow the removal of our wharenui, which is our meeting place, our identity, our security. Not so accommodating as to allow the displacement of the dead and the disruption of a sacred site . . . .'

'I didn't say And I wasn't . . . And you're looking back, looking back all the time.'

'Wrong. We're looking to the future. If we sold out to you what would we be in the future?'

'You'd be better off. You could develop land, do anything you want'

'I tell you if we sold to you we would be dust. Blowing in the wind.'

'Well I must say I find it difficult to talk sense . . .'

(We notice. . .). (p. 93)

This passage indicates a basic inability in the Pakeha developer to view the situation from the perspective of the beleaguered community. We see that there is a conflict of values, which is fuelled by an ignorance of and reluctance to understand Maori values and beliefs. At an allegorical level, Grace is clearly pointing to a problem facing Maori in contemporary New Zealand.

What is perhaps the most important political message of *Potiki*, however, is that because Maori people are not being heard or understood by the Pakeha majority, there is sometimes a justification for taking direct action to protect one's land. In order to be heard it is sometimes necessary to stand up in defiance of one's oppressor. In *Potiki*, this defiance culminates when some of the younger members of the community strike out against the developers, by razing the buildings that they had begun to erect, by destroying their roads, and by driving their earth-moving machinery into the sea. Implicit support is given to this action by Hemi and Roimata and other members of the community, when they quietly hide traces of the night's activity, by hosing down the muddy verandah, and washing the mud from the clothes and boots of those involved in the action. The most explicit statement in support of the kind of active defiance shown by the young members of the community, however, is given by Hemi in the following:

> I didn't think I would ever support any action. But good has come of it, and I think it was right. If it wasn't, time will show. (p. 176)

Hemi's statement can be seen, at an allegorical level, to assert that in cases where one's very way of life and identity are threatened, and when there seems to be no peaceful alternative, direct and even violent action can be a legitimate form of self defence. This is, perhaps, the central message of the novel.

Having shown how *Potiki* functions as a vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas, it is appropriate to consider how the fulfilment of this function contributes to our evaluation of the novel as a whole. The first thing to point out will be that although this function constitutes an integral part of the total effectiveness of the novel, *Potiki* would nevertheless stand as a successful and rewarding work of art even if this dimension were not considered. For *Potiki* is a novel that has many strengths, and can be appreciated in a number of ways. Not only is *Potiki* written in language which evokes images which are aesthetically pleasing, but also, as we have seen, *Potiki* has value on account of its function as a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual beliefs and values, as well as for the role it plays in stimulating reflection about various aspects of the moral life. So although the fulfilment of the function of being a vehicle for the expression of social or political issues may not be a *necessary* component of the value of *Potiki*, I believe that this function nevertheless plays an important contributory role in the overall worth of the novel. Most obviously, the fulfilment of this function enriches the novel by offering an additional source of stimulation, and thus an extra dimension in which to explore the potential of *Potiki* as an art work. More importantly, however, in expressing the particular political statement that it does, *Potiki* demands to be taken seriously. The subversive message that direct violent action is sometimes a legitimate option reinforces the importance of what the novel has to say as a whole.[34] In particular, it highlights the danger of an arrogant Pakeha culture that refuses to

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34 By violent I mean violence against property. This novel does not legitimize violence against persons.

accommodate or understand Maori values or beliefs, especially in regard to land. In short, the social and political dimension of *Potiki* reinforces the impact of the novel as a whole.

In this chapter, we have seen that the fulfilment of the function of being a vehicle for the expression of social and political insights and ideas can be an important component of the value of a work of art. We have seen that an important dimension of the artistic value of the paintings of Colin McCahon and Nigel Brown, and of Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*, can be attributed to their social and political significance. Together the works looked at in this chapter show that art can have value not only for the way in which it can reflect the social realities of life, but also for the way in which it can comment upon and criticize aspects of society in a more directly political fashion. As we have seen, art can contribute to our understanding of issues of social and political significance, by reflecting various aspects of society, and focussing our attention upon socially important issues, ideas, and occurrences.

Although the works examined in this chapter certainly derive an important part of their value from their social and political significance, it is by no means the case that being 'socially or politically significant' is a necessary component of the value of a work of art. As we have seen in chapters two and three, and as we will see in chapters five, six, and seven, their are a host of other variables on account of which an art work can be considered to be a good work of art. It is also important to point out that the social and political dimension of an art work, when evident, is no guarantee of artistic worth. As was observed with some of the more politicized protest art of Nigel Brown, the social or political significance of a work of art can even detract from the value of an art work. The most important thing to recognize, however, as far as the framework for assessment presented in this thesis is concerned, is that the social or political significance of a work of art can be a significant component of the value of a work of art.

CHAPTER FIVE

Art and the Moral Life

The relationship between art and morality has been a subject of philosophical discussion for over 2000 years. Many of the significant participants in this discussion have argued that the moral function of a work of art is its most important function. It has generally been the case that the thinkers who have left the biggest impression on the development of thought concerning the 'moral' function of art have had a particularly *moralistic* or *normative* conception of what it is for a work of art to be morally significant. They have argued that the purpose of art is to promote accepted morality, and that the only acceptable criteria by which to determine the *value* of an art work is the degree to which that art work promotes the accepted morality. Plato, for example, argued in books two and three of the *Republic* that only those works which can be seen to foster the virtues should be permitted in the ideal state. Many forms of art, according to Plato, are insidious and harmful, and ought to be banned altogether. Tolstoy, in his well known work on aesthetics *What is Art?*, argued that the only relevant function of art is to promote accepted religion and morality. He believed that other dimensions of art, such as the capacity to provoke aesthetic stimulation or enjoyment should always come second to the proper moral function of art.

The arguments of both philosophers have had a significant impact on the history of thinking about the relation between art and morality. It is often assumed, when we talk about the 'moral' dimension of art, that we have in mind *moralistic* art; or in other words art whose express purpose it is to persuade us of a particular moral point of view. In what follows I wish to show that it is possible to provide an account of the moral value of art which is neither moralistic, nor limiting to the potential of what art can be. As I will demonstrate, it is not at all necessary to accept the conception of the moral purpose of art advocated by such philosophers as Plato and Tolstoy. The position forwarded in this chapter differs from their moralistic conception in two important respects. The first is that the

conception presented here contains no suggestion that the moral purpose of art is *normative*, in the sense that it aims to advocate a body of accepted morality. As I will demonstrate, there are many ways in which art can be morally significant without being directly moralistic. Secondly (contrary to Plato and Tolstoy), I do not suggest here that we ought to conceive of the moral function of art as the *most important* or *only important* dimension of the value of a work of art. At best, the moral function of art is one of many functions which works of art can perform. Although it is certainly the case that the moral significance or profundity of a work of art *can* contribute importantly to the value of that art work, it is not true that this 'moral dimension' is a *necessary* feature of being a good work of art. As is demonstrated in chapters two, three, four, six, and seven, a great many works of art can be considered to be artistically worthy on account of their fulfilment of quite different artistic functions.

In order to begin this discussion, it is useful to consider the following quote from Percy Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*. Shelley articulates here particularly well the danger of art which is overly moralistic:

> A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but perfectly, he would resign the glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves to have abdicated this throne of their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetic faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose. (Shelley, Quoted in Bloom, pp. 750-751)

The thrust of Shelley's argument is that morally didactic art tends to be inferior art. In attempting to persuade the reader of a particular point of view, the author actually *diminishes* the moral influence and profundity of the work, by limiting the scope for the activity of the reader's imagination. In good art, on the contrary, the author refrains from attempting to enforce a particular interpretation, and simply presents the characters and situations as convincingly as possible,

allowing the reader free reign to draw his or her own conclusions from the strength of the characterization and other information provided. As John Dewey argues in *Art as Experience*, 'poetry teaches as friends and life teach, by being, and not by express intent.' (Dewey, pp. 346-347)

In keeping with the antirepresentational rejection of two-world metaphysics discussed in chapter two, I shall develop an account of the moral value of art that does not presuppose any kind of transcendent basis or metaphysical objectivity to moral value. My comments on the moral value of art are most at home with the view that attempts to find objective moral truth are misconceived and bound to be futile. I acknowledge that existing moral frameworks do not always point to a clear course of action. Because we are not always in a position to *know* what course of action is right, we must exercise considered judgement, or 'practical wisdom' *(phronesis)* to the best of our ability.

What I propose in the following is that an important dimension of the moral value of art is the ability of art to heighten our awareness and understanding of various aspects of the moral life. It is my contention that what we can learn by paying close attention to moral situations portrayed in art can deepen in various respects our understanding of morality, and perhaps even better equip us to exercise practical judgement when making genuine moral decisions.

The main thrust of the following discussion will be that much art, and especially literature, has a capacity to teach us in important ways about various aspects of morality and the 'moral life'. My aim is to show that art can help us come to a better understanding of what morality and moral awareness are all about. I wish to show not only that art *can* teach us about morality, but that it does it particularly well. Art, I will argue, is able to express what is morally significant about human situations with a directness that is unavailable to other more literal forms of expression. The idea that many aspects of morality have no better form of expression than in art is certainly not new. Two particularly strong advocates of this idea are Jean-Paul Sartre and Martha Nussbaum. In the following discussion I will draw upon ideas from both philosophers.

There are many ways in which art works can contribute to our understanding of the moral life. In the first and most significant section of this chapter I shall outline four ways in which works of art can make such a contribution to our understanding. Following this I will briefly discuss what makes art such a morally significant vehicle, and finally, I shall contend that the ability to promote an understanding of various facets of morality can be an important function of the value of a work of art.

1. Art can stimulate moral thinking

What is undoubtedly one of the most important ways in which art can stimulate thinking about and contribute to our understanding of morality is by encouraging us to respond imaginatively to the plight of fictional characters as depicted in art. While most art forms have at least to some extent the capacity to depict stimulating moral situations, it is the literary arts in particular which can most effectively challenge us to contemplate the moral predicaments faced by fictional characters. By presenting characters as autonomous moral agents, who face situations of moral conflict or crisis, literature can stimulate the reader into thinking independently about the implications of a moral act or situation. We see characters having to make and act upon important moral decisions, and we wonder how we would respond in the same situation.

As Shelley effectively argued in *A Defense of Poetry*, it is our faculty of imagination which enables literature to be such an effective vehicle for the stimulation of moral thinking:

> A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the

> same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. (Shelley, Quoted in Bloom, p. 750)

Shelley's point is that literature is able to stimulate and feed the imagination, provoking fresh thought and insight into the various aspects of human experience which are reflected in fictional situations. By engaging imaginatively with a work of fiction we can empathize and identify with the characters involved, and come to see the significance of a character's situation from his or her perspective. A similar point is argued by David Novitz in his article "Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion", where he contends that our ability to comprehend fully the emotional life of a character in a work of fiction is contingent upon our ability to imaginatively identify with their situation. By engaging with the thought world presented by the author, we can put ourselves in the shoes of the characters presented, and identify with their thoughts and emotions. In doing so, we can get a feel for what it is like to be in the 'hot seat' so to speak, when making moral decisions. To this extent literature can act as a moral stimulant for the individual. By encouraging us to identify imaginatively with fictional characters, literature can provoke us to examine our own views about the appropriateness of actions and attitudes, and prompt us to reflect about what we would do if placed in the position we see a fictional character placed in. Literature can thus function to encourage autonomous moral thinking, by stimulating the reader to contemplate the implications of moral situations as expressed in fiction.

As we have seen, one art form which is particularly effective at provoking moral thinking is serious literary art. In tragic drama for example, we are frequently presented with characters who are placed in almost impossibly difficult positions. In seeing a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, we come face to face with the protagonist's burden of having to choose between conflicting moral demands. Once engaged in Antigone's plight, we see that she is torn between on the one hand her duty to honour her conscience and her family (by providing a fitting burial for her brother), and on the other hand her duty to honour the state (by allowing the authorities to bury her brother as a rebel, in disgrace). We cannot help but wonder what we would do if caught in Antigone's predicament. Would we have the metal to stand up to the state, in order to give our brother a fitting

burial, knowing that we would face almost certain death? Or would we submit to the decree of the state, and avoid execution, even though the consequence may be that we would be unable to live with ourselves, or reconcile our action in future years?

2. Teaching by *showing*

A second way in which art can contribute to our moral understanding is by actively demonstrating just what is at stake in moral behaviour. Art has a special capacity to *show* what morality consists in, by portraying in fine detail morally relevant aspects of human interaction. Art can show, for example, exactly why certain forms of behaviour are morally harmful. Art has the ability to demonstrate exactly where the disvalue lies in a certain act or form of behaviour. What can be shown in art, which cannot be conveyed as effectively in a criminology or philosophy textbook, are the subtleties of human interaction, and the precise psychological and emotional effects which morally significant deeds can have on those involved.

As Martha Nussbaum argues in *Love's Knowledge*, much contemporary moral philosophy is limited because it is confined to forms of writing which can only describe in an abstract and detached manner what morality is all about.

> In confining itself to certain types of writing of abstract and emotionless character, it is unable to explore all of the available conceptions of human personal and social life; most notably those reflected in literature. (Nussbaum,1990, p. 290)

Certain forms of literature, however, can show in a more direct fashion exactly what is at stake in moral behaviour. Art works can show with particular directness the various ways in which people can be harmed (or helped) by morally significant actions. Art, for example, can put on display in life-like detail the way in which an act of physical violation could stand to harm its victim, in terms of personal violation, emotional trauma, loss of dignity, humiliation, and often betrayal of trust. Art has a distinct advantage in that it can be used to orchestrate situations in which the morally relevant

dimensions of an action or exchange are exposed with an especial clarity.

To illustrate the way in which art can show what is morally at stake in certain forms of behaviour, I shall return to Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*. As we have seen, *Potiki* tells of a small Maori coastal community whose way of life is threatened when a Pakeha developer from the city decides that he needs the community's land as a site for a tourist resort. One of the important functions of *Potiki* as a novel is to show what is morally wrong with the attempt of a few greedy individuals to deprive the community of its land. *Potiki* attempts to show, by presenting in detail the values and way of life of the people of this community, exactly how the members of the community stand to be harmed by the developer's plans. (There is a strong sense in which *Potiki* functions as a *parable* with a *moral*.)

To a certain extent, we are as readers left to decide for ourselves that the actions of the land developer are morally wrong. Our response is certainly guided however, by the fact that Grace goes to great pains to show just what would be at stake for the community if it lost its land. Throughout the novel, Grace emphasizes that life on the land has been good for this community. After years of struggle and hard work, its members have reached a degree of self-sufficiency that has enabled them to take a high degree of pride in their home and their achievements, and to live happy and fulfilling lives. This well-being (which is cultural and spiritual as well as economic), is clearly to no small extent tied to the close relation that these people share with their land.

By showing in detail how important the relationship to land is to both the way of life and identity of the people of this community, Grace shows that to deprive the people of their land would have extremely detrimental effects. Not only would it deprive them of their economic livelihood (as well as their autonomy and their opportunity to self-determination), but it would also undermine their spiritual and cultural identity, by uprooting them from the site which they believe to be the spiritual home of their ancestors. To take away the land from this community would be to take from its people a central source of their well-being and identity. It would in an important sense be to take away the things that *matter most* to these

people. To this extent the developer's attempt to deprive them of their land by any means possible (purely for the sake of material advancement) can be seen to be morally wrong.

One of Nussbaum's central claims in *Love's Knowledge* is that the moral conception contained in certain works of literature can be the best account available of the matters it discusses. Literature, in other words, is able to reveal aspects of morality in ways that no other form of expression can. According to Nussbaum, certain novels are irreplaceably works of moral philosophy, and can be considered to be major candidates for truth. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum suggests that the moral significance of literature is importantly due to the way in which literature can record the experiences of beings committed to value. That this is so is certainly supported by the moral dimension of *Potiki*. In *Potiki*, Grace presents in intimate detail the value structure of the Maori community. This presentation is central to our understanding of the novel as a whole, for only by learning about the values to which the members of this community are committed, can we properly understand the significance of the threat posed by Dolman and his cohorts.

If *Potiki* has any claim to the ability to reveal the significant features of moral exchanges in ways that other forms of expression cannot, it lies in the way in which Grace was able to make full use of the literary medium by creating a world in which the values of the community could be 'thrown into relief', as it were, and given a centrality of place which is perhaps not so evident in ordinary life. What makes *Potiki* such an effective device with which to persuade us that what the developers were attempting to do was *wrong* is that the novel is able to *show* or *demonstrate* just what was at stake for the people of this community, in terms of happiness, economic self-sufficiency, spiritual fulfilment, and identity.

3. Art and the Virtues

A third important way in which art can contribute to our understanding of 'the moral life' is by demonstrating in action the various moral virtues and vices which we take to be such an integral

part of being a moral person. In doing so, art can contribute to our understanding of what moral virtues are, and thereby enable us to better understand what morally virtuous behaviour consists in. In observing the various virtues which are exhibited by characters described in works of fiction, we gain a greater sensitivity to what it is about certain virtues that is admirable and worthy of praise, or alternatively contemptible and worthy of condemnation. The result can be that we gain a greater awareness of which virtues we would like to cultivate (or eliminate) in ourselves.

To maintain a degree of consistency between examples, I shall once again return to Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*. There is no doubt that in this novel, the moral dimension of characterization contributes importantly to the effectiveness of the moral function of the novel as a whole. Our feeling that the community has been treated unfairly, and that the developers have been behaving in a morally unacceptable way, is importantly due to the kind of moral virtues (and vices) which we see exhibited by the respective parties.

The two community members whose moral profiles are drawn most explicitly are Hemi and Roimata. Both of these characters are depicted as being peace-loving and gentle. They are compassionate, and are seen to extend a loving respect to all members of their extended family. They are both courageous in the face of the threat posed by the developer's attempt to oust them from their land, and they show a determination and resilience when faced with such adversities of the flooding of the *urupa*, the arson of the meeting house, and the murder of Toko. Hemi is shown to be a hard working stoic who is able to bury his anger by working the land.

While Hemi and Roimata epitomize the familiar moral virtues; Dolman, the chief developer, on the contrary, epitomizes moral vice. Dolman is portrayed as a selfish and materialistic megalomaniac who is driven exclusively by personal greed and the desire for money. He is seen to have a culpable ignorance of the beliefs and values which underlie the way of life of the community, and he makes no effort whatsoever to understand the situation from the community's perspective. He is a covetous and power-hungry individual who seems to be devoid of any moral scruples at all.

In reading *Potiki* we cannot help but be aware of the way in which different characters exhibit different moral virtues and vices. This dimension of the novel can contribute to our moral awareness by showing us what it is to possess certain moral qualities, and provoking us to think about why it would be good to promote or eliminate these qualities in ourselves. It must be acknowledged, however, that in its attempt to make different characters epitomize certain moral character traits, *Potiki* comes dangerously close to presenting characters which are unrealistically limited, and which are simply too good (or too bad) to be true.

4. Art and our Sense of Moral Responsibility

A fourth way in which art can contribute to our understanding of the moral life is by developing our understanding of the way in which the burden of the selection of the 'right' course of action is very much something which individuals have to bear for themselves. As we are shown in *Antigone*, and in other tragic dramas such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, moral decision-making is not always easy. It is often a process in which we are torn by competing values, and in which we are forced to make hard decisions that will have 'hard' outcomes. Although there may be various moral guide-lines which can help us in simple situations to decide which course of action is morally appropriate, there is a strong sense in which one must fend for oneself in one's moral decision-making, and take responsibility for the consequences of one's own decisions.

The idea that the individual is morally 'on his own', and that he or she must *choose* the course of action which seems to be the most appropriate is given what is perhaps its most famous illustration in Jean-Paul Sartre's well known essay *The Humanism of Existence*. In this work Sartre narrates the story of a young soldier who is struggling to decide what he ought morally to do. The soldier is torn between staying at home to help his mother, to whom he is 'her only consolation', or leaving for England to join the Free French Forces, in order to avenge the death of his brother, who was killed in the German offensive of 1940. Wherever the young man turns, however, he can find no clear guidance as to what course of action he ought to

follow. Christian doctrine suggests that one ought to 'love one's neighbour'. But who is his neighbour? His mother or the fighting men in England? And how is he to calculate which action would lead to the greater good, when the values involved are so general, and the outcome of his action so difficult to foresee? The moral directives of Kantian ethics offer little help either, for they too are vague, and are open to too many conflicting interpretations to offer any clear guidance. Even when the soldier attempts to rely upon instinct, he is faced with the problem that he cannot be totally sure that his feelings are genuine until he has acted upon and thus confirmed them. All that is left for the soldier to do is thus *choose* in a seemingly arbitrary manner from a selection of alternatives, and in doing so *create* or *invent* his own fate.

What I wish to propose in this section is that not only is literature able to convey the sense in which morality is very much up to the individual, but it is also able to encourage a degree of autonomy in our moral thinking which may be able to help us to make our way where established moral frameworks fall short. By urging us to reflect about unique and particularized moral cases, literature can help to give us a sense of the particularity of genuine cases. In a convincingly portrayed fictional situation, there will be many moral variables which will be specific to the case at hand. In fiction, as in life, appropriateness of action will depend upon many features which are context dependant. By focusing our attention on moral cases in literature we can thus gain a feel for the necessity to assess every moral case on its own terms, taking into consideration the context dependant features which characterize each case as the case that it is.

In encouraging us to respond to particular cases, literature can provoke us to pay close attention to the specific details of moral situations, and to derive our *own* interpretation of what moral action is called for by each situation.[35] Literature has the effect of helping us

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35. Not all literature is equally morally significant. The kind of 'morally relevant' literature referred to in this chapter is primarily the type of serious literature that aims to reflect the realities of human interaction and relationships. This does not suggest, however, that less serious forms of art and literature cannot be morally significant, and cannot be assessed in terms of the morally relevant situations or

to become more autonomous in our thinking about morality. We are encouraged, when reading literature, to realize the burden which is placed upon the individual to make and take responsibility for his or her own decisions. We are also reminded of the complexity and particularity of actual moral situations. An appreciation of literature thus has the potential to make us more aware of our position and responsibility as a moral agent.

What we can gain from the 'education' that comes from the thoughtful reading of good literature is an autonomy of thinking, which *may* enable us to make our way where external moral frameworks (such as those offered by the utilitarian or deontologist), fall short. In saying this, I do not want to deny the value of utilitarian or deontological approaches to morality. I do, however, wish to emphasize that we often have considerable difficulty knowing how to apply the highly generalized principles of the utilitarian or deontologist to the unique and particularized moral cases we have to confront in our moral lives. The task, for example, of choosing the course of action which promises to give the most positive (or least harmful) outcome, is often extremely difficult. Even when attempting to follow the basic utilitarian maxim, the moral agent must exercise his or her own judgement, weighing and considering a diverse range of variables.

Art is able to challenge conventional theories of morality, and show us that a clear-cut course of action is seldom easy to find. One art work which can be seen to highlight the difficulties of traditional deontological theories of morality is Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It could be argued that Cordelia's action in *King Lear* demonstrates how a strict adherence to absolutist or black-and-white moral codes is not always wise or morally appropriate. In refusing to pander to Lear with the flattery he desires, by telling him that she loves him no more

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ideas that they deliberately or inadvertently depict. We often find for example, that 'popular' art forms, such as comic strips and television serials, have a significant moral dimension. Such art works, which belong to what have been referred to as 'low' or 'popular' arts (see David Novitz, 1992, chapter two), are often particularly morally relevant when we consider the stereotypical characterizations and values that they reinforce and portray.

than she will love her husband, Cordelia upsets and alienates her foolish father. In his rage, Lear orders Cordelia gone, and cuts her entitlement to a third of his kingdom. We are as observers of this predicament left wondering whether Cordelia's uncompromising and brutal honesty was totally appropriate. We cannot help but wonder whether it would have been better for Cordelia to have embroidered or softened the truth a little, in order to appease at least in part her father's selfish need for praise. By doing so Cordelia may have achieved a greater total good; namely the continued happiness of her father, and the maintenance of a much greater degree of family harmony.[36] Cordelia's predicament leaves us questioning the deontologist's belief that it is appropriate to conceive of morality as a set of rules or maxims which one is always duty bound to obey.

Having explained several of the ways in which art works can contribute to our moral understanding, I shall now proceed to outline what it is that makes art (and particularly the literary arts) such an effective vehicle for the promotion and stimulation of moral awareness.

One obvious reason on account of which the literary arts in particular are especially effective at stimulating moral thinking and understanding is that literature is able to reflect and accentuate the *depth* and *complexity* of the moral life. When we make the effort required to understand the wider moral implications of the moral situations faced by characters in literature, we can gain a sensitivity to the kind of complexity that is exhibited by the moral situations we face or may come to face in real life.

Admittedly much serious literature places characters in situations which are implausibly complex. We see repeatedly in both Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, for example, that the protagonist is placed in an almost impossibly difficult position. The protagonist will be expected to make a moral decision, but whichever decision is made, there will be unhappy consequences, which the protagonist (and others) will have to bear. What such literature achieves however

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36. Whether this would have been possible however, given the extreme selfishness of her sisters, admittedly complicates the situation.

is to impress upon us the existence of conflicting values and variables in moral decision-making, and to encourage us to take ultimate responsibility for the consequences of our decisions and actions.

Another particularly important reason for the effectiveness of art as stimulant for moral understanding, to which I have already alluded in the discussion above, is that art has the capacity to *show* what the moral life consists in, in ways that purely descriptive non-fictional forms of expression cannot. Art has the capacity to communicate moral insights in ways that are distinctive to artistic forms of expression. Art is not limited to *explaining* or *describing* what morality is all about; art can also *show* us what it is all about.

The idea that art can show things that cannot be said in ordinary verbal discourse was a recurring theme in Wittgenstein's writing. According to Wittgenstein, 'Art is a kind of expression,' and 'good art is complete expression' (Wittgenstein, 1961a, p. 83e). As was made clear in the *Tractatus* however, the propositions of the philosopher can express nothing of what is higher. (Wittgenstein, 1961b, 6.42) Wittgenstein's idea that art is especially suited for providing the kind of ethical insights that cannot be articulated by the philosopher, is reflected when he says 'when Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader' (Malcolm, p. 38).[37]

A third virtue of art as a promoter of moral awareness is that art has the ability to provoke responses to fictional situations which are themselves moral. When engaged imaginatively with the plight of a character in a work of art, it will be natural to feel certain characteristic moral responses to the moral dealings of the protagonist. It is likely that we will feel anger and righteous indignation for example, when the protagonist (the good guy) is unfairly treated (eg. is tortured by the enemy). And it is likely that we will feel compassion when we read that the protagonist has suffered horribly at the hands of his or her captors.

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37. For additional references regarding Wittgenstein's thoughts on this topic see Hallett, pp. 26-27.

Such moral responses to the plight of fictional characters help to stimulate thinking about why certain forms of action and behaviour are morally intolerable. In pausing to think about what it is about a certain act that causes our particular moral response, we focus our awareness, and become more sensitive to the reasons for which we would condemn an action as morally wrong, or praise an action as morally commendable. Art thus has the ability to make us more self-aware of our own intuitive moral responses to morally significant acts and situations.

A fourth reason for which art is particularly effective as an instrument for stimulating moral understanding is that it allows us to consider the implications of moral situations without the partiality or heat of personal involvement. We are able to adopt a viewpoint which is relatively free from personal involvement or concern. As far as it is possible, our response to the moral behaviour of characters in art is 'objective':

> the novel guarantees by its fictionality that we will be free of jealous possessiveness and 'vulgar heat' towards its characters. So it offers us, by the very fact that it is a novel, training in a tender and loving objectivity that we can cultivate in life. (Nussbaum, 1985, p. 527)

Literary works, including novels, plays, and poetry, allow us to empathize with the plight of characters, and acknowledge the significance of their situation, without the stress, anxiety or intensity of personal involvement, or the partiality that is so difficult to avoid when confronting moral situations in real life.

As we have seen, an important dimension of the value of a work of art can be the way in which it functions to provoke thought about and provide insight into various aspects of morality. And as we have seen, there are a number of ways in which works of art can be morally significant. To briefly reiterate, the four ways in which works of art can be morally significant which have been discussed in this chapter are as follows. Firstly, works of art can provoke us to contemplate the moral predicaments of fictional characters (thus

encouraging us to test and examine our own intuitions about what we would do in comparable real-life situations). Secondly, works of art can *show* us what is morally relevant about certain acts, attitudes, and situations. Thirdly, art works can teach us about the moral virtues, and fourthly, art works can heighten our awareness of what it is to be a moral agent who must take responsibility for his or her own actions and decisions.

One important dimension of the moral value of art which has been stressed in this chapter is the way in which art can teach us about morality. Art, and especially literature, has the ability to teach us about what it is to be morally aware, and what it is to live as a moral person. The idea that literature can offer invaluable insights into various aspects of human experience is an idea expressed particularly strongly by Martha Nussbaum: 'If philosophy is the search for wisdom about ourselves, philosophy needs to turn to literature' (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 290). Literature, as we have seen, can heighten our awareness and understanding of morality in a number of important ways.

Improving our understanding of morality however, is not the *only* important and perhaps not the *most* important moral function of literature. What could be seen as an even more important moral function of literature is the potential of literature to encourage us to actually *be more moral.* By furnishing us with an understanding of and sensitivity to moral situations, literature can enable us to be better people, and to act with greater moral care and awareness.

As has been the case with the functions of art discussed in previous chapters, we have found that there is no *necessary* link between fulfilment of the moral function of art and artistic value. While it is certainly true that the moral significance of a work of art can contribute importantly to the value of that art work, there is no sense in which the moral function of art is a necessary feature of favourable evaluation. A great many art works are considered to have considerable artistic merit despite their complete lack of moral significance. It is also important that we are aware that the moral component of a work of art can actually *detract* from its artistic value. This is often the case with overly moralistic art, which is more

concerned with converting us to a particular moral way of thinking than providing artistic or intellectual stimulation.

Despite the contingency of the moral function of art as a criterion of assessment, it is undeniably the case that the fulfilment of this function can be an important component of the value of an art work. For some art works (such as Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki*, for example), the moral function acts as one out of a number of components which contribute to the overall value of the work. For other art works however, the moral component occupies a more important place, and can be seen to be a function which contributes directly to the greatness of the work of art. Many would agree, for example, that serious works of literature such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, are made to be great by their moral significance. Works such as these present with great insight the plight of characters who are attempting to come to terms with the moral significance of their actions and predicaments.

CHAPTER SIX

Art and Emotion

In this chapter, which I have broadly titled 'Art and Emotion', I wish to demonstrate and discuss several of the various ways in which works of art can be emotionally significant. I will provide examples which demonstrate the emotional importance of works from several different artistic forms, and show that the emotional content or profundity of a work of art can often contribute importantly to our assessment of the value of that work of art. Works of art from a great many artistic forms and genres can be appreciated in terms of the degree to which they express and evoke emotional feeling and depth. While the expression of emotion is often associated particularly strongly with musical works, which of all art forms seem to many to have the strongest connections with our affective states, it is also true that works representing many other art forms, including poetry, prose, the visual arts, sculpture, theatre, and film, can be appreciated for their capacity to express and evoke emotion. As I have suggested, works of art can be seen not only to *express* particular emotions, but they also have the potential to directly influence our mood. It is not uncommon to find that we will be swept away by the emotional depth of the powerful performance of a play or a symphony. And when this is the case, such a response will often mean that we will consider the work in question to be of high quality.[38]

Our appreciation of the emotional dimension of art is reflected in the language with which we describe art. Our evaluative vocabulary has a rich range of adjectives which we use to attribute various emotional qualities to art works. We often find ourselves speaking of

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38. This is not to say, however, that the ability or potential of a work of art to influence our mood is an appropriate criterion of artistic value. It is not uncommon to find that we will be moved emotionally by cheap and nasty tear-jerkers, which play upon and cheapen our emotional responses. It is seldom the case that we find *these* works to be of any considerable artistic merit.

art works as uplifting, joyful, exalting, or jubilant, or conversely as sorrowful, melancholy, disturbing or despondent.

In the following section I shall refer to several works which have a clearly identifiable emotional dimension, and show that for each, we have good reason to agree that this emotional dimension does indeed contribute to the work's standing and effectiveness as a work of art. This, I believe, is the most direct way to demonstrate that the emotional dimension of a work of art can be an important function of its artistic value.

The Expression of Emotion by Music

It has often been considered that the art form which is most naturally suited to the expression of emotion is music. One particularly promising explanation of the phenomenon of how an inanimate art form such as music can be expressive of emotion is provided by Malcolm Budd, in his paper "Music and the Communication of Emotion". Although Budd focuses specifically on the expression of emotion by *music*, his insights can be extended to help explain how it is that works from many other art forms can be seen to express emotion as well. The phenomenon with which Budd is primarily concerned in this paper is the way in which musical works are felt to be expressive of human emotions such as triumph, joy, anguish, loneliness, sadness, loss, and so on. Budd's intention is to provide some account of how it can be that non-sentient and non-linguistic works of music art can communicate so clearly human emotion. As the paper develops, Budd rehearses several possible solutions to the problem, demonstrating as he goes the inadequacy of each. I shall not repeat these attempts at explanation here, but will rather focus exclusively on the *final* account which Budd presents, which he considers to be an adequate account of our experiencing musical works as expressing emotion.

The central notion upon which Budd's explanation turns is the idea of *make-believe*.[39] According to Budd, when we hear a musical work as expressive of an emotion, such as loneliness, we 'make believe' that an imaginary persona within the music is undergoing as experience of loneliness. To paraphrase Budd's rather technical analysis of the phenomenon, the characteristic effect of certain emotionally charged pieces of music is to cause us to make-believe that a particular emotion is being experienced. According to Budd's interpretation, emotionally expressive music has the effect of encouraging the listener to imagine the occurrence of experiences of emotion.

Budd's interpretation of the phenomenon that certain works of art can be appropriately said to be expressive of emotion is based upon the assumption that these works are such that they will appear, to the majority of attentive listeners from an appropriate cultural background, who allow their imaginations to be open to the subtleties of the music, to express a particular emotion or group of emotions. That this assumption is correct is certainly supported by the observation that there is in actual fact widespread agreement over which works of art are expressive of emotion, and over which emotions they actually express. There is for example, widespread agreement, amongst those who are familiar with Elgar's Cello Concerto, that the opening section of the first movement of this work is strongly expressive of an impassioned sense of grief or loss.

There are, I believe, at least three important reasons for which we value the emotional content of music. Firstly, we may value the emotional content of music when we find it to be particularly satisfying or beautiful. Often we will be struck by the subtelty or lyrical beauty of a particular emotionally significant passage. Emotionally significant music which we value aesthetically, need not be soft or subtle, however. It is often the case that we find dramatic and emotionally forceful music to be satisfying also.

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39. Budd acknowledges here Kendal Walton's article "Pictures and Make-Believe", as an important source for this idea. For a more recent articulation of Walton's ideas on make-believe with respect to artistic expression, see his 1990 book *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts.*

The second reason for which we value music for its emotional content is that we often find that emotionally significant music meets a particular emotional need in ourselves. Listening to music can be therapeutic, and can contribute importantly to our emotional well being. Aristotle attributed the therapeutic value of music to the release of emotion (*kartharsis*) which music can effect. We observe that certain people are

> affected by religious melodies; and when they come under the influence of melodies which fill the soul with religious excitement they are calmed and restored as if they had undergone a medical treatment and purging (*kartharsis*). The same sort of effect will also be produced (eg, by appropriate music) on those who are specially subject to feelings of fear and pity, or to feelings of any kind. (*Politics* VIII, vii; trans. Barker, p. 350)

The therapeutic effect of emotionally significant music can be seen not just of the kind of music commonly referred to as classical music, but also of rock music, blues, jazz, and so on. Indeed, examples of music from any musical genre can be emotionally significant, and can meet important emotional needs in the listener.

The third way in which we value musical works for their emotional significance is when we recognize that they somehow express certain *truths* about our emotional life and experience. Works of emotional profundity can reflect and illuminate certain aspects of our emotional experience, and in doing so contribute to our understanding of the emotions and their role in our lives. One recurring theme in emotionally significant music is the idea of an emotional journey. As was mentioned above, Elgar's Cello Concerto opens with the expression of a devastating sense of grief and loss. The mood of this concerto does not remain on this sorrowful and vulnerable note, however. In this work we see the imaginary persona moving *through* the emotional uncertainty, and progressing from an initial state of despondency to a stronger and more confident emotional state. We see a similar kind of emotional journey in Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, and in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, and also in his opera *Fidelio*. Such works can be illuminating for the way in which they remind us of the constant human potential to regenerate from our darker experiences and states, and for the way

in which they remind us that our emotional experiences, both positive and negative, are common to all of humanity.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam*

The second example of an art work of great emotional depth upon which I shall focus is Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. This mighty poem is a masterpiece in terms of the strength of expression of emotional feeling that it demonstrates. Dealing with his devastation at the loss of his closest friend, and also with the contemporary fear that society was losing sight of traditional values, Tennyson confronts the spectrum of human emotional experience, moving from an initial expression of doubt, fear, frustration, loneliness, and misery, to a final coming to terms with the grieving process, and the expression of hope, optimism, happiness, and finally triumph.

At the most direct level, the emotional dimension of *In Memoriam* is a literal description of the persona's mood. Stanza XXX, for example, is a straightforward description of the sadness felt by the persona and his family:

> With trembling fingers did we weave
> The holly round the Christmas hearth;
> A rainy cloud possessed the earth,
> And sadly fell our Christmas-eve.
>
> At our old pastimes in the hall
> We gambol'd, making vain pretence
> Of gladness, with an awful sense
> Of one mute shadow watching all.

By entering into the thought world described by such passages, and identifying imaginatively with the emotional life of the persona, we gain access to an integral dimension of *In Memoriam*. It is only through such identification (as David Novitz argues in "Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion"), that we can comprehend the inner life or 'qualia' of the emotional psychology of the persona. The poem

provides us with a strong sense of what it is like actually to experience these powerful and painful emotions.

There is also, however, a further level to the emotional dimension of this poem. Not only does *In Memoriam describe* and *reflect* the persona's emotional state, but it also can be seen to *express* it. In the same way that we can imaginatively intuit the emotional mood of a piece of music, we can also intuit the mood of *In Memoriam*. For like music, this poem does not communicate exclusively at a literal level. That the persona is experiencing powerful emotions is revealed not only by literal description, (such as that seen in XXX above), but also by various non-literal, stylistic, and formal features. Consider the following:

Dark house, by which once more I stand,
  Here in the long unlovely street,
  Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more--
  Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
  And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
  The noise of life begins again,
  And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
    On the bald street breaks the blank day.

This stanza can, I believe, be seen to be actually *expressive* of the persona's gloomy mood in several important respects. One noticeable feature is the way in which several of the objective items referred to by the persona are described in a way that heavily reflects the persona's subdued subjective state. The street, we are told, is 'long and unlovely', and the house 'dark'. The new day is 'blank', and 'ghastly thro' drizzling rain'. This technique, of heavily saturating description with consciousness, was referred to by T.S. Eliot as the

'objective correlative'.[40] The effect is to intensify the distinctively heavy mood of the poem, by giving us an additional perspective or insight into the persona's consciousness, and showing us the extent to which his perception of day to day life is coloured by his heavy depression. Other more familiar literary techniques also help contribute to the expression of the persona's gloomy mood. The rhythm of this stanza for example, is characteristically slow and forceful, giving the feeling of an elegiac chant. Furthermore, alliteration in the second and final lines also reinforces the bleak feeling of the passage, by linking and emphasizing emotionally relevant words.

In summary, *In Memoriam* is a work of great emotional significance. In this poem Tennyson expresses and reflects with great eloquence and subtlety a broad range of human emotions. Its value as a work of art is importantly due to the way in which it captures so effectively what it is to feel such emotions as intense joy, or what it is to feel the total devastation at the loss of a close friend. The strength and beauty of the emotion expressed by this poem is not the only facet of its value as a work of emotional significance, however. *In Memoriam* is also valuable for the insights it provides into the human grieving process, and into the poet's own experience of coping with loss. On one level, *In Memoriam* can be seen as a symbol for the possibility of human regeneration. Starting from a point of complete misery and despair, *In Memoriam* documents the persona's journey through and beyond his emotional devastation, to an ultimate regeneration, and a coming to terms with his life and his loss. The 'emotional dimension' of *In Memoriam* is thus valuable not only for its artistic beauty, but also for what it contributes to our understanding of the emotions, and their role in our lives.

Whatever one may think of *In Memoriam* as an art work, it is undeniable that this poem has a strong emotional dimension. One common mistake, when referring to the emotional dimension of such a work, is to confuse or conflate the *expression* of emotion by the work with the *arousal* of emotion by the work. Although there

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40. For a more thorough account of Eliot's coinage and use of this term see Abrams, p. 123.

may be important connections between expression and arousal, it is important that we keep these two ideas conceptually distinct. Perhaps the most important distinction between the expression and the arousal of emotion by an art work is that there is no necessary connection between an art work being expressive of a particular emotion, and of that emotion being aroused in the audience.[41] It is not at all necessary that the viewer *experience* the emotion being expressed in order to fully understand or appreciate the emotional dimension of the art work. It is quite usual that we will acknowledge and appreciate the emotionally expressive facet of an art work at a purely intellectual level. We can imagine how the persona in *In Memoriam* must feel, for instance, to be grieving the loss of his closest friend, without actually having to experience the relevant emotions ourselves.

This is not to say, of course, that the arousal of emotion is not ever a feature of our experience or appreciation of art. As most of us will be fully aware, art works have the potential to stimulate emotional responses that compass a significant spectrum of emotions. When we do find ourselves moved by a work of art, the emotional response will generally be of two kinds. Firstly, the emotion aroused may *match* the emotion expressed by a work of art. In this case, if an art work expresses sadness, we will find that the work evokes a feeling of sadness in ourselves. And secondly, the emotion aroused may be a *response* or *reaction* to the emotion expressed by a work of art. When this is the case, we may find, for example, that the expression of sadness or loss by an art work arouses not sadness, but pity or compassion.

It is important to point out at this stage that there is no fixed relation between either the expression or arousal of emotion by a work of art and its artistic value. While it is certainly the case that either the expression or arousal of emotion by a work of art *can* contribute importantly to its value, there is no guarantee that they will do so. Indeed, we often find the expression or arousal of emotion

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41. Indeed it is quite possible, and quite common, for an art work to arouse emotions that are not in any sense expressed by the work. An art work that infuriates or embarrasses, for instance, need not express fury or embarrassment.

can count *against* the artistic merit of a thing. Think for example of the kind of sentimental and banal 'poems' that we find on commiseration cards, or the endless stream of tiresome love songs that we hear on our commercial radio stations.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

The third example of a work whose effectiveness and value is enhanced by its emotional profundity is Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment.* Due to the size of this novel, and the fact that a great deal of the narrative can be seen to be emotionally significant, I shall restrict my focus to a particular episode. The passage upon which I shall focus tells of the protagonist's emotional state as he is attempting to leave the 'scene of the crime' after murdering the Ivanovna sisters. The passage is as follows:

> Dark agonizing ideas rose in his mind - the idea that he was mad and at that moment he was incapable of reasoning, of protecting himself, that he ought perhaps to be doing something utterly different from what he was now doing. 'Good God!' he muttered, 'I must fly, fly,' and he rushed into the entry. But here a shock of terror awaited him such as he had never known before.
>
> He stood and gazed and could not believe his eyes: the door, the outer door from the stairs, at which he had not long before waited and rung, was standing unfastened at least six inches open. No lock, no bolt, all the time, all that time! The old woman had shut it after him perhaps as a precaution. But good God! Why, he had seen Lizaveta afterwards! And how could he, how could he have failed to reflect that she must have come in somehow? She could not have come through the wall!
>
> He dashed to the door and fastened the latch.
>
> But no, the wrong thing again! I must get away, get away...
>
> He unfastened the latch, opened the door and began listening on the staircase.....
>
> As soon as the tin bell tinkled, Raskolnikov seemed to be aware of something moving in the room. For some seconds he listened quite seriously. The unknown rang again, waited and suddenly tugged violently and impatiently at the handle

> of the door. Raskolnikov gazed in horror at the hook shaking in its fastening, and in blank terror expected every minute that the fastening would be pulled out. It certainly did seem possible, so violently was he shaking it. He was tempted to hold the fastening, but *he* might be aware of it. A giddiness came over him again. 'I shall fall down!' flashed through his mind, but the unknown began to speak and he recovered himself at once. (*Crime and Punishment* pp. 80-82)

What is particularly notable about this passage as far as its *emotional* content is concerned, is that it portrays with exceptional vividness a particular set of human emotions. In this description of Raskolnikov's response to just having committed double murder, Dostoevsky encapsulates particularly effectively the protagonist's emotional state. The passage strongly conveys the intense feelings of guilt, anxiety, and paralysing fear that threaten to overcome Raskolnikov as he attempts to leave the building. What we are presented with is effectively a window into the emotional psychology of the protagonist. Dostoevsky has managed to record, in literary form, what it can be like to *experience* the feelings associated with intense anxiety, panic, and fear.

The emotional dimension of this passage contributes to our appreciation and evaluation of *Crime and Punishment* in several important respects. Most obviously, we value the passage because it is an eloquent and convincing presentation of the above-mentioned emotions. In this respect, *Crime and Punishment* offers a valuable and succinct reflection of a certain slice of human experience. What we recognize and admire in Dostoevsky's description is its truth to human nature. When we imaginatively identify with Raskolnikov's plight we can actually get a strongly life-like feel for what it is like emotionally to be in his position.

Perhaps more important however, is the role that this emotional dimension plays in our understanding of the novel as a whole. As David Novitz points out in "Fiction, Imagination, and Emotion", it is often the case that an understanding of the emotional life of the characters of a work of fiction is essential to an adequate understanding of that work as a whole. This is certainly the case in *Crime and Punishment*. It is only because we are provided with such a rich understanding of the emotional psychology of the protagonist

that we are able to come to some level of understanding of his motives and actions. The insights into the emotional life of Raskolnikov constitute an integral dimension of the narrative. It is these insights into human psychology and emotion that make *Crime and Punishment* such a unique and fascinating work of art.

Munch's *The Scream*

The fourth example of an art work of emotional significance to which I shall refer is Edvard Munch's well known painting *'The Scream'*. This painting, like the passage from *Crime and Punishment* described above, derives its emotional effect by depicting a character who is clearly experiencing a strong negative emotion. *The Scream* presents a person who stands motionless on a bridge, paralysed by some kind of overwhelming fear or anxiety. Everything about this painting seems to point towards the unfortunate character's emotional state. It is certainly the central focus of the painting, with even the surrounding landscape seeming to participate in the state of fear that grips this figure. (In this respect *The Scream*, like *In Memoriam*, aims to illustrate how perception can be influenced by emotion.) Like the above-mentioned passage from *Crime and Punishment*, this painting is memorable because it captures with unnerving realism the intensely uncomfortable emotional state of the character depicted. What makes *The Scream* so successful as an art work is that it expresses so convincingly the emotions of fear and intense anxiety.

Pieta statues

My fifth example of art that is emotionally significant is a genre of Christian sculpture known as pieta statues. These statues, which are characteristic of the emotionalism of Gothic sculpture, depict the Virgin grieving over the dead body of Christ. Like much Gothic sculpture, the pieta statue reflects a desire to endow the traditional themes of Christian art with even greater emotional appeal. Pieta statues became a familiar motif in medieval Europe, invented as a

tragic counterpart to the more familiar motif of the Madonna and child. An Italian word, pieta signifies both pity and piety.

The pieta statue is characteristically a moving representation of the grief of the Virgin as she cradles the dead body of Christ. The grief-stricken faces and gestures, and the slumped over posture of the grieving Virgin, strongly reflect the emotional devastation felt over the death of Christ. Unlike the second and third examples of emotionally significant art looked at above, whose primary effect is achieved by the *representation* of emotion, the central emotional effect of pieta statues generally comes from the emotional response which they are designed to *arouse.* What is so notable about the emotional content of a pieta statue is that it has the power to evoke so strongly a sense of compassion and pity for the suffering of Christ and for the grief of the Virgin. That it does so is certainly no mistake. These statues were designed to play on the consciences' of fourteenth century Christians. Their function is clearly to arouse an overwhelming sense of horror and pity. One particularly effective pieta statue is the early fourteenth century work held in the Provinzialmuseum, Bonn.[42] We see that the wounds of Christ, for example, are grotesquely exaggerated, and his body is emaciated through hunger and suffering. Although the impact of this work would clearly be stronger in the context of the kind of Christian understanding associated with fourteenth century Europe, it is nevertheless highly unlikely that the emotional power of this pieta statue would be lost on an atheist in the twentieth century. This timeless ability to confront its audience emotionally with the depiction of intense human suffering is indeed an indispensable part of what makes this particular pieta statue to be such a great work of art.

I shall now dispense with one common objection to the idea that being an object for the expression of *emotion* can contribute to an art work's standing *as a work of art.* According to this objection (which could be seen to arise from the formalist camp), when we say that an art work is better as an art work *because* it expresses emotion well,

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42. See plate 10.

we are under a confusion. What we really should be saying, when we admire the emotionally expressive dimension of an art work, is that this art work is good *as an expressor of emotion*, and not that it is a good *as an art work*. For emotion, according to the objection, is not an artistically relevant dimension of an art work at all.

In order to show where this objection is likely to be mistaken, I shall draw an analogy with a similar case: To make the mistake in the above objection would be the same as to make the mistake of saying, when we call someone a good person *because* they have just given money to charity, that they have not been good 'as a person', but that they have been good 'as a giver of money to charity'. Our mistake would be to operate with an overly circumscribed notion of what art, or a person, could be. It would be as if we had assumed that these concepts had clearly defined boundaries, but there are no clearly defined boundaries to what it is to be a person, *or* what it is to be an art work. To determine which aspects of an art work are relevant to its value 'as an art work', we must use common sense and intelligence. Given that it is the case that emotional expressiveness is often a clearly identifiable component of the identity of a work of art, it would seem reasonable to assume that we should be looking for reasons why *not* to include emotional expressiveness as a criterion for artistic value, rather than attempting to justify why we *should* include it as a possible dimension of an art works worth.

To reiterate, the purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate and discuss the way in which the emotional significance of a work of art can contribute to its merit as an art work. We have seen that although the emotional content of a work of art is no guarantee of its value, there are a diverse range of works for which their emotional significance is a central component of their value. As we have seen, this can be so not only for those works whose primary emotional significance can be characterized by the way in which they *express* emotion (such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam*), but also for those works whose primary emotional significance can be characterized by the way in which they *arouse* emotion (such as the

religious sculpture the *Pieta*). What is perhaps most important about the emotional significance of art with respect to assessment is that many great works of art are *made to be great* by their emotional significance. As we have seen, this can be true not only of musical works, but also of sculpture, painting, prose, and poetry. In short, the emotional significance of a work of art can be a central component of its artistic value.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Aesthetic Dimension of Art

One of the central tenets of the modernist movement was the belief that the work of art is an autonomous and unified entity. Proponents of modernism argued that when interpreting or evaluating a work of art, we must focus on the aesthetic experience itself. What is of central importance, according to the modernist, is that we appreciate an art work *as an aesthetic object*, without regard to any non-aesthetic function it may happen to perform. Modernism rejected outright the idea that a theory of evaluation should be concerned with such considerations as the degree to which an art work acts as a vehicle for the expression of human concerns, or the degree to which an art work can be seen to represent, reflect, or otherwise illuminate the familiar. To an extent this focus of attention upon the aesthetic dimension of the art work was a liberating influence in thinking about art, for it paved the way for new and exciting forms of abstract artistic expression. The modernist movement saw the introduction of many new challenging and innovative artistic genre, which tested accepted boundaries of the nature of art. The danger however, of such a dominating focus on the aesthetic facet of the art work, was that the modernist tended to neglect other legitimate forms of expression through art. In circumscribing the focus of evaluation, the modernist limited what art could be.

The postmodernist movement is in part a reaction to that aspect of modernism which stresses (in the Kantian tradition) the importance of the aesthetic dimension of art. Postmodernism correctly rejects the circumscription of artistic value to the aesthetic, and acknowledges that art works have a great deal more to offer. Rather than stressing the autonomy and unity of art, postmodernism stresses the hybridity and context-dependence of art. According to the postmodernist, there is a host of variables which may contribute to the value of an art work. Unlike the

modernist, for example, the postmodernist willingly accepts that art is a legitimate vehicle for the expression of social and political ideas:

> Characteristic of much postmodernist art and theory is an impatience with the separation of art and its effects from the social and political world which is effected in modernism. (Connor, p. 292)

As we have seen in chapters two to six, there are a variety of non-aesthetic functions which can contribute to the value of an art work. It seems reasonable to agree, in light of the significance of these non-aesthetic functions to the assessment of art, that postmodernism is indeed a justified reaction to that aspect of modernism which would delimit the interpretation and assessment of art works to aesthetic features only. Art works perform a variety of non-aesthetic functions which can contribute in important ways to their value. These include expressing emotion, expressing ideas, and representing in various degrees of abstraction familiar objects, people, and qualities. What I wish to stress now, however, is that it is important that we do not let this sympathy for the diversity allowed by postmodernism undermine the importance of aesthetic considerations in an account of interpretation and assessment. For while it is important that we allow the kind of non-aesthetic considerations such as those covered in chapters two to six to play a significant part in an account of artistic value, it is equally important that we realize that it is generally the case that unless an art work *also* exhibits some degree of *aesthetic* merit, it is not even a contender for a favourable evaluation. In this chapter I shall focus on the aesthetic function of art. My contention is that although we must acknowledge that art works fulfil a variety of important *non-aesthetic* functions, which can contribute in important ways to their artistic value, it is the nevertheless the *aesthetic* function which so often holds the key to evaluation. For although we may find an art work to be culturally, politically, or emotionally significant, it is generally the case that it is not unless the work's cultural, political or emotional dimension is portrayed in a manner which somehow grabs us *aesthetically* that we will consider the work to be a good art work, deserving of our praise. The purpose of this chapter is thus to reclaim a central position for the aesthetic dimension of art in an account of evaluation.

What I wish to propose in this chapter is that the ability to function as an object which can inspire aesthetic appreciation is a particularly important dimension of the value of an art work. It is my contention that a central dimension of the value of art is the ability of art works to provoke aesthetic contemplation or stimulation by being immediately striking or satisfying upon perception by the senses alone.[43] The idea that art works should provide stimulation to the senses upon perception and consideration of the surface aspects only is often considered to be the sole criterion of artistic merit, especially, as we have seen, by those influenced by the 'art for art's sake' movement and the formalist school of thought. Although I have no intention in this thesis to make the aesthetic function of art the *exclusive* criterion of artistic value, I do wish to demonstrate that it must play a particularly important part in a framework of evaluation.

One promising way to explain the importance of the aesthetic function of art in relation to the non-aesthetic functions which have been discussed in previous chapters, would be to claim that the fulfilment of the 'aesthetic function of art' is a *necessary condition* for favourable evaluation. According to the concept of a necessary condition, to say that aesthetic merit is a necessary condition of favourable assessment would be to say that you will never find a good work of art that does not possess a degree of aesthetic merit. It would be to say, in other words, that if an art work was not in some respect *aesthetically* inspiring, that that art work would not 'have what it takes' to be a good work of art. In this respect the aesthetic function of art could be contrasted with the non-aesthetic functions which have been discussed in chapters two to six. For while the non-aesthetic functions looked at in these chapters can certainly be seen to augment and deepen the value of works of art, it is not the case (as was discovered in the above-mentioned chapters) that it is *necessary* for art works to fulfil these functions before they can be considered to be good works of art.

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43. In the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Anthony Quinton defines aesthetic appreciation as 'a style of perception concerned neither with the factual information to be gained from the things perceived, nor with their practical uses, but rather with the immediate qualities of the contemplative experience itself' (p.13).

Remaining within the conceptual framework provided by the language of necessary and sufficient conditions, we might also argue that the fulfilment of the function of being an object for the stimulation of aesthetic appreciation is a *sufficient* condition for being a good work of art. According to the concept of a sufficient condition, if X is a sufficient condition of Y, then if you have X, you will also have Y. If having aesthetic merit is a sufficient condition of being a good work of art, then whenever you have a work of art that has aesthetic merit, you will also have a good work of art.

Having suggested that it may be useful to employ the conceptual framework provided by the idea that the aesthetic merit of a work of art is a necessary condition of artistic worth (in contrast with the various non-aesthetic functions, which as we have seen are not necessary to being a good work of art), I now wish to partially back away from this idea, by asserting that we should not take this formalization of the functions of art as gospel. Although the conceptual structure suggested above has the virtue of being a useful classificatory system, which can be seen to reflect reasonably accurately the relative importance of *aesthetic* considerations in the assessment of artistic value in relation to the importance of *non-aesthetic* considerations in the assessment of artistic value, we must be wary of any system which proposes an artificial rigidity to the importance of the various functions served by works of art. The difficulty with the proposed system is that it is doubtful that artistic phenomena will live up to its nominalization one hundred percent. In other words, although we will find in a great majority of cases that aesthetic considerations will feature importantly in our assessment that a particular work of art is especially good, there are inevitably going to be exceptions to this trend. In such cases, where aesthetic considerations pale into insignificance, we will find that our favourable assessment of a work of art will be based upon its exceptional performance of one of the non-aesthetic functions of art.[44] An example of an art work whose value is based primarily upon its non-aesthetic merit, and for which aesthetic considerations are of

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44. It should be noted that in such cases, the non-aesthetic merit of a work of art *can* be considered to provide a sufficient condition for favourable assessment.

relative unimportance, would be Jonathan Swift's satiric tract *A Modest Proposal.* The value of this work can be seen to be more a function of the wit and cleverness of its scathing attack on the policies and attitudes of the English government, than of any aesthetic merit it may have.

In short, the idea that the aesthetic function of art is a *necessary* condition of favourable evaluation should be abandoned as an unnecessarily stringent statement of the importance of aesthetic considerations to the assessment of art. Instead, we should think of the aesthetic function of art as one particularly important function out of a wider group of functions which are relevant to assessment.

The Search for Criteria of Aesthetic Assessment.

Before proceeding to examine a number of examples which support my contention that the aesthetic dimension of art should take a particularly important place in a functionalist framework of evaluation, I shall first proceed to consider in some detail the problem of how we are to go about *assessing* the aesthetic value of a work of art. Granted that it is an important function of art to provide aesthetic stimulation, we are faced with the problem of determining means by which to *evaluate* the aesthetic dimension of the value of works of art. One important tool which can be employed in an appraisal of the aesthetic value of a work of art is the significant vocabulary of terms which are commonly used to describe aesthetic qualities. We have at our disposal a comprehensive palette of concepts which can be used to identify the various formal properties of works of art. The surface aspects which are relevant to appreciation vary of course from art form to art form. In the visual arts, for example, the degree to which a painting has potential to offer direct stimulation or fascination could be expressed in terms of such formal qualities as vividness, intensity, harmony, beauty, balance, strength, unity, subtlety, texture, elegance, vibrancy, or composition. Many of these properties are also relevant to the description of the surface qualities of music; to which we might add

sweetness of sound, atmosphere, stridency, delicacy, and depth, to name but a few.[45]

The role that the concepts referred to by these terms play in the evaluation of the aesthetic dimension of art is to enable us better to identify and appreciate the significant and notable aesthetic qualities exhibited by individual works of art. It would be a mistake, however, to consider that the properties referred to by these terms could act as criteria for the assessment of the aesthetic dimension of art. What would be wrong with such a supposition is that there are no aesthetic properties which are universally aesthetically merit-conferring (or aesthetically harmful) when exhibited by works of art. There is no guarantee that the exhibition of a particular aesthetic property in a particular work of art will be aesthetically successful. Properties such as intensity or vividness, for example, will work well in some works but not in others. Other works may call for an element of subtlety or restraint. We admire the opening sequence of Elgar's piano concerto for example for its delicate and evocative tonal qualities. To find harsh or strident tonal qualities in this passage would seriously detract from the aesthetic quality of the work.

While some works which we consider to be successful exhibit one set of aesthetic properties, other successful works will often exhibit a completely different set of aesthetic properties. Also significant is the observation that the very same aesthetic properties which succeed in one art work will be the qualities which may be inappropriate or unsuccessful in another. It thus seems that no particular aesthetic property can be said to be a *necessary* part of being a good work of art.

Because there is no uniformity to the way in which aesthetic qualities contribute to the value of works of art, it is inappropriate to think that these properties could function as criteria for the assessment of the aesthetic merit of art works. In order for any

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45. The surface qualities relevant to evaluation of art needn't be pleasant or satisfying. Think of Penderetski's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima.* We can admire the surface qualities of this work and the contribution which they make to the purpose of the work despite their harshness and stridency.

aesthetic property to be made a criterion for assessment, one would have to be able to generalize and say that the possession of this or that property is universally merit-conferring. Given the lack of generality in the way in which the various aesthetic properties contribute to the value of works of art, however, this seems highly implausible.

Clive Bell and Significant Form

One thinker who clung firmly to the idea that there could be a universally merit-conferring aesthetic property was Clive Bell. According to Bell, the enjoyment and stimulation provided by visual art is characterized by the experience of a particular aesthetic emotion, which can only be aroused by art works themselves. In order to explain what stimulates this emotion, Bell posited the abstract aesthetic quality 'significant form', which he was convinced is present in all works of any standing.[46] Although Bell was rather vague about exactly what kind of property significant form is, he suggested, in his 'metaphysical hypothesis', that significant form is a property which alerts us to the 'ultimate reality' of things:

> Instead of recognizing its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm. Call it by what name you will, the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things - that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality. (Bell, pp. 69-70)

Those who are wary of such vague and lofty metaphysical speculation will naturally be suspicious of Bell's theory. That we indeed have good reason to be suspicious is the conclusion that Beryl Lake comes to in her paper "A Study of the Irrefutability of Two Aesthetic Theories". As Lake points out, an important problem with Bell's theory is that its central hypothesis is not open to any kind of empirical

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46. Indeed for Bell, the descriptions 'work of art' and 'object which possesses significant form' are virtually synonymous. As far as Bell was concerned, an object is not a work of art *unless* it exhibits significant form.

confirmation or falsification. Without arguing for it, Bell simply asserts that what is common to all works of art which arouse aesthetic emotion is the property of 'significant form'.

As we have learnt from the philosophy of science, an unfalsifiable hypothesis is an hypothesis for which there could be no possible set of observation statements which could be seen to refute it. The statement 'either it is raining or it is not raining', for example, is unfalsifiable, because there can be no possible observation statement which would prove it to be false. What is wrong with an unfalsifiable hypothesis is that it fails to tell us anything informative about the world. Because it does not in any informative way circumscribe or limit the possible behaviour of the phenomena it refers to, 'the world can have any properties whatsoever, can behave in any way whatsoever, without conflicting with the statement' (Chalmers, p. 40-41). As Alan Chalmers points out in *What is this Thing Called Science*, a law or theory should tell us something about how a certain group of phenomena do in fact behave, thereby ruling out ways in which the phenomena might (logically) behave but in actual fact do not (*Ibid.*, p. 41). The theory that 'the primary source of energy for life on earth is the sun' is informative, for example, because by telling us one thing, it rules out possible alternatives. We are able to infer from this statement that it is *not* the case that the primary energy source for life on the planet is the energy stored in water, or in rocks, or from bolts of lightning from the sky. In order to be informative, a statement or theory must actually make a definite claim about the world, and in doing so open itself to falsification.

When we examine the theory of significant form, we find that it is indeed an unfalsifiable theory. Bell's thesis is unfalsifiable because we are left with no foreseeable means by which to determine whether an art work could be a good art work but yet not possess significant form. Whenever we found a 'work of art' which lacked the property significant form, Bell could simply deny that what we had before us was a work of art. As Lake points out, 'Any painting then, which someone might try to point out as an example of art which does not have significant form, would be denied to be a work of art for this very reason' (Lake, p. 109). Because Bell has stipulated that anything that is a work of art *has significant form*, we have no way

empirically of proving him wrong. No evidence could be produced to establish that we had found a work of art that did not possess significant form.

If having 'significant form' simply means 'being a work of art', then Bell has failed to tell us anything at all useful about art or its assessment. We are no closer to being able to identify what precise quality differentiates those 'works of art' which possess significant form from those 'objects' which do not. In short, Bell has failed to provide an all-embracing aesthetic merit-conferring property that stands up to scrutiny. Along with the more concrete aesthetic properties, such as vividness, balance, and visual intensity, significant form should be rejected as a one concept criterion with which we might assess the aesthetic value of a work of art.

At this stage it is appropriate to ask whether the observation that the possession of various aesthetic properties is not directly related to aesthetic value suggests that the search for *criteria* of aesthetic value is misconceived, and should be abandoned altogether. Because works of art comprise such a diverse and multifarious class of entities, it might appear that the prospect of extracting out some common quality or set of qualities of aesthetic excellence, which would supposedly be present in all works of any merit, seems doomed to failure. Two writers who have suggested that the search for criteria of aesthetic value is indeed misconceived are Stuart Hampshire and Peter Strawson.

Hampshire and Strawson: Against Aesthetic Criteria

In his 1954 paper 'Logic and Appreciation', Hampshire argues that the reason that there can be no general criteria for aesthetic appraisal is that there is a logical distinction between appraisal in the moral sphere and appraisal in the aesthetic sphere. According to Hampshire, when we are confronted with a moral situation, we have no choice but to respond to it. In order to develop a consistent policy regarding how we are to respond to the various human predicaments which confront us, we must generalize a set of principles by which to determine what kind of action would be most appropriate to each

situation. When we are confronted with a situation in which we are required to make an *aesthetic* appraisal however, we have no need to generalize or find grounds of preference, because according to Hampshire, works of art are 'gratuitous', and do not demand comparative assessment in the way that moral matters do. Hampshire asserts that in making an assessment of a work of art, it is misconceived to attempt to find common principles of assessment. What we ought to do is to treat each work as a unique entity, and assess it according to its own merits. His position is best summed up in the following passage:

> There is no reason why some object is ugly in the sense that there are reasons why some action is wrong. . . There is no point in arguing that the object is good because it possesses these qualities, if this involves the generalization that all objects similar in this respect are good; for if one generalizes in this manner, one looks away from the particular qualities of the particular thing, and is left with some general formula or recipe, useless alike to artist and spectator. (Hampshire, p. 167)

In response to Hampshire's proposal I would first like to say that it is simply false to claim that works of art are 'gratuitous', per se, and thus that they do not call for comparative assessment in the way that moral acts do. In many respects, works of art can and must be assessed by the same kind of criteria by which we assess moral acts. As we have seen in previous chapters, there can be much more to a work of art than its aesthetic surface. Works of art can function to express ideas, depict cultural or spiritual beliefs, voice moral opinions, support political action, and so on. In these respects, works of art can make claims and state opinions about the world which are subject to the same kind of comparison and scrutiny which moral acts are subject to. Works of art are entities which we can object to or agree with on a number of levels. We may strongly agree or disagree for example, with the moral, spiritual, political, or factual claims that are made by a work of art. Works of art, like moral acts, can be morally praiseworthy or contemptible. To this extent,

Hampshire is incorrect in asserting that works of art are gratuitous entities which do not call for comparative assessment.[47]

If, however, we circumscribe Hampshire's argument to just the *aesthetic* dimension of art, it is easier to make sense of his claim that there is a significant and important distinction between works of art and moral acts. As aesthetic objects, works of art are relatively autonomous and self-contained. Because *as aesthetic objects* they do not make any factual, political, or moral claims about the world, we are under no obligation to respond to works of art in these regards. In respect of their aesthetic qualities, there are no overriding normative reasons why one work of art is in any way better or worse than another, in the same sense that a moral act may be better or worse than another moral act.

In a similar manner, it is possible to make sense of Hampshire's claim that works of art are gratuitous. If we are focussing exclusively upon the aesthetic dimension of a work of art, we will be under no obligation to respond to and evaluate that work of art, in the same sense that we are under an obligation to respond to and evaluate a moral act. In respect of their aesthetic qualities, it may be said, works of art do nothing but provide aesthetic pleasure and stimulation. Because they are not serving any other overriding purpose, they can indeed in this sense be seen to be gratuitous.

Although there are clearly several respects in which I am in agreement with Hampshire's argument, I cannot agree with his central conclusion, which is that it is simply a mistake to look for criteria by which to assess the aesthetic value of works of art. Hampshire has failed to establish that there can be no such criteria. Although he may have shown that there are differences between assessment in the moral sphere and assessment in the aesthetic sphere, insofar as we are under certain normative obligations to respond in certain ways when assessing moral actions, he has not

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47. It is plausible to assume that Hampshire was working with a strongly formalist conception of the nature and function of art. It is likely that he was only thinking of *visual* art, which he believed should be assessed exclusively in terms of its aesthetic or formal features.

given us any convincing reason to abandon the search for criteria of aesthetic excellence altogether. Hampshire has failed to show that there cannot be criteria by which we can compare and assess different art works in respect of their ability to offer aesthetic stimulation.

Like Hampshire, Strawson also argues that the search for general principles of assessment is misguided. And Like Hampshire, Strawson believes in treating each work of art on its own terms. His reason for holding this position, however, is slightly different from Hampshire's. In his 1966 paper 'Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art', Strawson argues that the reason that there can be no general principles of assessment is closely related to the sense in which works of art are unique entities. Strawson's argument rests on the idea that each work of art is a *logical type*. Because each work of art is unique in itself, and because the criterion of identity of that work is simply the totality of its individual features, we could at most regard each work of art as itself; as a type. And given that each work of art is logically a self-contained entity, bound only by its own individual features, we cannot expect to find paradigm instances or properties by which to compare or assess individual works of art. In making an assessment of a work of art, we must therefore turn to the features of the work itself:

> There are no aesthetic merit-conferring properties with non-evaluative names. When you draw attention to some feature on account of which terms of aesthetic evaluation may be bestowed, you draw attention, not to a property which different individual works of art may share, but to a part or aspect of an individual work of art. (Strawson, p. 152)

Hampshire and Strawson make two significant points which I believe to be largely correct. Firstly, I agree with the claim made by both philosophers that we cannot use aesthetic *properties* as criteria for assessment. As we have seen, it is not possible to generalize and say that if one art work which we consider to be good possesses a particular aesthetic property then *all* art works which possess that aesthetic property are also good. Secondly, I agree that when making assessments, it is important to treat art works as unique entities whose individualizing features require special attention in their own right. I do not agree, however, that either Hampshire or Strawson

has established that the attempt to find some kind of criteria or guide-lines by which to estimate the aesthetic value of individual works of art is misconceived or futile. As I will demonstrate in the following section, there are indeed guide-lines which we can employ to help estimate the value of the aesthetic dimension of a work of art.

Two Criteria for Aesthetic Assessment

In this section I wish to outline and discuss two important criteria which can be of use in an assessment of the ability of the surface qualities of a work of art to provide aesthetic stimulation and satisfaction. These criteria can help us to assess the degree to which formal elements contribute to the overall value of a work of art. Harold Osborne's 1989 paper 'Assessment and Stature' must be acknowledged as an important source of the ideas in this discussion.

The first criterion which is of relevance to an evaluation of the formal qualities of a work of art is *artistic distinction.* A work which exhibits artistic distinction is a work which demonstrates a mastery over medium and technique. In such a work, the artist has used the artistic medium to excellent effect in order to achieve the overall purpose of the work. Artistic distinction is concerned not with *what* is expressed or conveyed by a work of art, but with *how* the purpose of the work is achieved. When we come to consider artistic distinction, we are considering the artistry and skill that are demonstrated in the production of a work of art. Artistic distinction involves not only a mastery of artistic materials, but also a 'capacity for judgement and a sense of appropriateness inherent in skills and accomplishments that are inseparable from mastery of the artistic materials whether they be musical sounds, pigment colours or the finer shades of meaning inherent in the words and traditions of a language'. (Osborne, 1984, p. 5)

In the literary arts, we admire works which exhibit a mastery of language as a medium in which to convey images and ideas. An important aspect of the value of Tennyson's *In Memoriam,* for example, is the masterful use of language throughout the poem. Many would agree that this poem exhibits a consummate and elegant

selection of vocabulary, and an elegance of syntax and diction. Also of relevance to the value of this poem is the creative and imaginative metaphorical language and the associated imagery which we find throughout.[48]

Although artistic distinction can contribute to our assessment of the overall value of a work of art, it is by no means a guarantee of artistic value. It is often the case that a well executed work will be dull and will lack the capacity to offer stimulation that is required of a really good work of art. The repeated images of Campbell's tomato soup cans for example, characteristic of many of Andy Warhol's works, may offer an interesting reflection of mass-consumer society, and indeed exhibit excellence of artistry, but these images nevertheless lack the capacity to offer any prolonged aesthetic stimulation. The same can be said of many of the shallow and repetitive pop songs which are played incessantly on commercial radio. Although many of these songs may be well crafted, and may be catchy at first, they often soon become vapid and dull, lacking the depth or sophistication to remain aesthetically inspiring. At this point we may well wonder just what it is that is lacking in an art work which is artistically excellent but nevertheless fails to be a really good work of art. In order to appreciate what this 'missing ingredient' could be, we must turn to the second criterion of aesthetic appraisal.

The second (and most important) criterion of the value of the aesthetic dimension of a work of art, referred to by Harold Osborne as 'aesthetic satisfaction' concerns the capacity of an art work to support aesthetic stimulation and contemplation. It is this aspect of the 'aesthetic dimension' of a work of art which appears to be the most important component of being a good work of art. As I have indicated above, fulfilment of the non-aesthetic functions alone is seldom enough to guarantee favourable evaluation. In the great

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48. Although the intellectual content of the metaphorical language clearly involves us in non-aesthetic functions of art, we can nevertheless admire the artistry and skill involved in the creation of similes and metaphors from the viewpoint of one concerned with the artist's ability to use language imaginatively.

majority of cases, we find that art works must also function to provide some degree of stimulation at the aesthetic level.

One way of demonstrating the importance of the ability of an art work to provide some level of aesthetic stimulation is to review some of the examples focussed upon in previous chapters, of successful art works whose value was importantly due to the fulfilment of *non-aesthetic* functions. In doing so we can examine the extent to which the value of these works is also due (and indeed dependent upon) the fulfilment of the *aesthetic* function of art.

In chapter three we looked at how fulfilment of the function of being a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual values can augment the value of a work of art. The example from the visual arts which was discussed was the importance of the expression of cultural and spiritual values to Aboriginal painting and sculpture. Although I do not wish to down-play the importance of the fulfilment of this function to the value of these art works, I do wish to show that their value is also importantly dependent upon their success as aesthetic objects. To return once again to the set of works by Manjuwi, which illustrate the Morning Star story, it is difficult to deny that a central dimension of the value of these works derives from their aesthetic strength. Not only are these works excellently crafted, but the artist has used a variety of media to excellent effect to create works which are aesthetically stimulating as well. In the two bark paintings, Manjuwi has used the characteristic cross-hatch technique to create a striking and intricate visual array.[49] With the Morning Star poles and the figurine of the Ancestral Being, Wulumumu, Manjuwi has effectively combined a variety of components to create works which are bold, colourful, elegant, and aesthetically satisfying. Particularly effective is the contrast of textures and colours provided by the use of feathers, fibre, woven basket and paint.

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49. Another characteristic aesthetic feature of Aboriginal paintings, not seen in these particular works, is the use of repeated patterns of colourful dots to create a striking visual surface.

In chapter four we looked at the way in which art can reflect the social and political conditions of society, and act as a mouthpiece for social and political commentary. As we saw, an important dimension of the painting of Nigel Brown is its reflection of what the artist sees to be the significant and characteristic features of life in this country. Brown's works are filled with images which reflect what he sees to be the positive and negative aspects of New Zealand society. While much of his work concentrates on the social ills and underlying tensions that he perceives to characterize New Zealand life, other works portray a more hopeful vision, celebrating the diversity, fecundity, and richness of life in New Zealand.

This social dimension of Brown's paintings is not enough to guarantee their artistic success, however. Again we see that their success is importantly due to their effectiveness as aesthetic objects. Brown's works are characterized by strong images, vibrant colour, and boldness of form, which together combine to create works which are aesthetically powerful and stimulating. Although Brown is an artist who is primarily interested in the capacity of art to confront human issues, he acknowledges in the following that there is an important sense in which the success of his work rests on his ability to produce works which are strong formally, *as well as* thematically.

> I'm less interested in painting as painting. I'm more interested in it as a vehicle to express and explore ideas, but at the same time I realize that painting finally rests on being good *paint* as well. Painting makes paintings - the *doing*. (Brown, quoted in O'Brien, p. 9)

The centrality of the aesthetic strength of Brown's painting was reinforced in chapter four, when we observed that the least successful of Brown's works are the works in which the social and political function takes over almost completely, to the detriment of the aesthetic value of the paintings. As was observed in the above-mentioned discussion, works which function to express social or political concerns, but exhibit little aesthetic merit, tend more towards instructional didacticism and propaganda than good art.

As a third and final example of a work which was seen to be successful on account of its performance of a non-aesthetic function, I shall turn once again to Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. As we saw in

chapter six, an important dimension of the value of this poem is the strength of emotion expressed throughout. Although any claim that poetry or any other literature should be assessed *exclusively* in terms of aesthetic or formal criteria would clearly be absurd, I nevertheless wish to assert that aesthetic considerations contribute importantly to the value of *In Memoriam*. Perhaps what is most significant about the aesthetic dimension of *In Memoriam* is the excellence of artistry displayed throughout the poem. From the beginning to end of this mighty poem, Tennyson maintains an elegance of diction, as well as a tightly structured classical style, in which we see a continuation of strongly developed patterns of rhyme, rhythm, sound, and stanza structure. By sustaining the incessant and almost chant-like rhythm throughout the poem, Tennyson achieves a feeling of sadness and inevitability, which is not only relevant to the elegiac subject, but is also aesthetically satisfying.

To briefly reiterate, the purpose of this chapter has been to discuss the importance of aesthetic considerations to the assessment of art. As we have seen, the capacity to provide aesthetic stimulation is not only *relevant* to the assessment of artistic value, but also *particularly important*, in comparison with the other various functions which art works perform. While it is the case that the performance of non-aesthetic functions alone will not (as a general rule), be sufficient for favourable evaluation, and that those works which are valued for their non-aesthetic merit will generally also be required to exhibit a degree of aesthetic merit; works which are valued for their aesthetic merit, on the contrary, may be valued for their performance of this function alone. Because of the relative importance of aesthetic considerations to the assessment of art works, I have suggested, in chapter seven, that we think of the 'aesthetic function' of art as a *particularly important* function of art, which belongs to a larger group of functions that are relevant to artistic assessment.

CONCLUSION

In chapter one I proposed that the purpose of this thesis is to explore the idea that we can assess the 'value' of works of art in terms of the various *functions* that they serve. As we saw in chapter one, a functionalist framework of assessment goes hand in hand with the rejection of the idea that works of art have intrinsic value. Rather than attempt to posit some kind of queer metaphysical value for art works, which would have to be grasped intuitively, I have suggested that we adopt an instrumentalist framework for assessment; that is, a framework which focuses on the various things that art works can *do* for us. In the subsequent chapters I have developed and explored this idea, by looking in some detail at six of what I have identified to be characteristic functions of art.

In chapter two, I explored the age-old idea that it is a defining function of art to represent the objects of reality. Although I acknowledged that this is indeed a legitimate function of art, I argued that traditional conceptions of representation are based on a metaphysical picture which unfairly distances art from reality, and which suggests that art can never be a source of truth. Rejecting the Platonic idea that it is useful to conceive of reality as a transcendent realm of being which is forever beyond the grasp of our senses, and the corresponding Platonic idea that art is *twice removed* from this transcendent reality, I argued that there is an important sense in which art is conceptually on par with science, language and other frameworks under which we attempt to formulate and express our understanding. Art, I argued, is a perfectly legitimate medium in which to present our conceptions of the world. Not only can the ideas presented in art contribute to our understanding, but they can also contribute importantly to our conception of what reality itself is. In short, I have argued that the 'representation' of objects and ideas is indeed an important function of art. Rather than retain the label representation, however, with its associated conceptual baggage (eg. the idea that art is not able to properly contribute to our understanding), I have suggested that we conceive of art as a

legitimate medium for the *presentation* of ideas and interpretations of the world (or in Goodman's terminology, 'world versions'), which can contribute importantly to our understanding.

In chapter three, I discussed the way in which art can function as a vehicle for the expression of cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. In this chapter, we saw that art can function to reflect and reinforce the beliefs and values that a cultural group holds central to its way of life. This cultural dimension of art was seen to relate to the value of art works in two important ways. The first way in which art works can be seen to have value by expressing cultural and spiritual beliefs and values is that for the cultural group whose values are being expressed, works of art can reflect and reaffirm their particular way of looking at the world. The art of a culture has value because it embodies the world-view of a particular group of people, and helps to ensure that the values and beliefs which are central to the identity of one's people are shared and understood by all members of the community. The second way in which art works can be seen to be valuable by reflecting a culture's beliefs and values is that culturally significant art works can act as a window into the world-view of *other* people. By revealing how the people of other cultural groups view the world, art can encourage greater understanding and tolerance, and help us to see why other people think and act as they do. Culturally significant art thus has an important educative value. One further consideration which helps to explain why art is so heavily valued by certain cultural groups is that it is often the case that certain important values and beliefs have their *primary source of expression* in a culture's art. As we saw in chapter three, this is certainly the case with Maori and Aborigine art.

The subject of chapter four was what I referred to as the 'social and political' function of art. In this chapter I looked at the way in which art can function to comment upon and reflect the conditions of society. As we saw, art works of social and political significance can function not only to reflect what the artist sees in society, but also to directly criticism and expose certain questionable ideas, practises, policies, people, institutions, and so on. Art works which fulfil this artistic function are often valued for the way in which they can challenge the viewer to question certain ideas and practices

which may otherwise be taken for granted, and for the way in which they can contribute to our understanding, by reflecting and exposing the social and political conditions of society.

In chapter five, I looked at the moral significance of art. As we saw, works of art (literature in particular) can function in several important ways to stimulate thinking about morality, and make us more aware of what it is to think and behave as a moral person. To briefly reiterate, I discussed four ways in which works of literary art can contribute to our moral awareness. These ways are as follows. Firstly, by presenting fictional characters as moral agents who must make important moral decisions, literature can encourage us to think for ourselves about the moral implications of the situations faced by characters in fiction. Literature can focus our awareness of the morally significant features of human interaction, and encourage us to wonder what we would do if placed in the position that we see a fictional character placed in. Secondly, literature is able to *show* with particular directness what is morally relevant about a particular situation. A writer can use artistic licence, for example, to throw into relief the morally significant features of an act or exchange. Thirdly, literary art is able to heighten our awareness of the moral virtues. Works of fiction can demonstrate the moral virtues (and vices) in action so to speak, and emphasize what is morally praiseworthy or contemptible about the possession of a certain moral virtue or vice. Fourthly, literature is able to emphasize the way in which each and every individual is a moral agent who must make and take responsibility for his or her moral actions. In short, an important dimension of the value of literature is the way in which it can function to heighten our awareness of morality, encourage autonomous moral thinking, and make us more aware of our responsibility as moral agents.

The sixth chapter of this thesis focussed upon the way in which the value of a work of art work can be related to its emotional significance. As was demonstrated by the various examples examined, not only musical works, but also prose, poetry, sculpture, and painting can be emotionally significant. As we saw in chapter six, there are a number of ways in which the emotional content of a work of art can contribute to its value. The emotional dimension of a work

of art can contribute to its standing not only by *expressing* a particular emotion, but also by *arousing* emotion in the audience. A further way in which a work of art can gain a favourable assessment on account of its emotional significance (to return to an idea discussed in chapter two), is by (re)presenting what it is to experience certain human emotions. In doing so, an art work can contribute to our understanding, by making us more self-aware of what it is to be in a certain emotional state, and contributing to our understanding of how the emotions can influence our actions and behaviour. (This dimension of the emotional value of art is most closely associated with serious literature.)

In chapter seven I discussed the importance of aesthetic considerations in the assessment of works of art. The central argument of the chapter was that aesthetic considerations generally, but not invariably, constitute a central dimension of the value of an art work. I argued that even in art works which we value on account of the performance of the kind of non-aesthetic functions discussed in chapters two to six, we generally find that there will be an important dimension of aesthetic merit. Although I withdrew from making aesthetic merit a *necessary* condition of being a good work of art, I asserted that it can appropriately be considered to be a *particularly important* dimension of artistic value.

Another significant topic of discussion in chapter seven was the search for criteria for the assessment of the aesthetic value of art works. Having shown the inadequacy of the idea that aesthetic properties such as visual intensity or vibrancy could be used as criteria for assessment, I turned to examine Clive Bell's idea that we could assess the aesthetic worth of art works in terms of the degree to which they exhibit the abstract quality 'significant form'. This idea was also found to be inadequate, however. Upon closer examination, Bell's idea was found to be particularly unhelpful. Because the theory of significant form is not subject to any kind of empirical confirmation or falsification, and thus fails to tell us anything of any real use about art works, it can fairly be dismissed as vacuous. Following the dismissal of Bell's attempt to provide a criterion for the assessment of the aesthetic value of art works, I examined the arguments of Stuart Hampshire and Peter Strawson, according to

which we should abandon the search for aesthetic criteria of assessment altogether. Judging these arguments to be unsuccessful in their attempt to prove that it is inappropriate to search for criteria by which to assess the aesthetic value of art works, I persevered with my search, and with a little help from Harold Osborne, finally stumbled across two workable guide-lines by which we can assess the aesthetic value of art works. As was divulged in chapter seven, these criteria are 'artistic distinction' and 'aesthetic satisfaction'. To briefly reiterate, artistic distinction is concerned with the degree to which an art work exhibits excellence of artistry. Aesthetic satisfaction however, which is the more important criterion, is concerned with the degree to which an art work has the capacity to provide extended stimulation when attending to the aesthetic (formal) features of an art work alone.

In chapters two to seven, we have looked at six of the characteristic functions which are regularly served by works of art. As the various examples examined in these chapters have demonstrated, the performance of any one of these six functions can contribute importantly to the value of an art work. As we have seen, an art work can be valued on account of what it reveals about the world (chapter two), on account of its cultural or spiritual significance (chapter three), on account of its social or political significance (chapter four), on account of its moral significance (chapter five), on account of its emotional significance (chapter six), or on account of its ability to stimulate aesthetically (chapter seven). While it is certainly the case that the performance of any of these functions *can* contribute importantly to our assessment of an art work's value, there is of course no guarantee that the performance of one of the 'functions of art' *will* enhance the value of an art work. It may well be the case that the value of an art work will be indifferent with respect to the performance of an artistic function. It may also be the case that the moral, political, or emotional significance of an art work will *detract* from its value.

One significant characteristic of the functions looked at in chapters two to six is that they are all what could be referred to as 'non-aesthetic' functions of art. These functions are non-aesthetic because they would all be excluded by the aesthete from what is

thought to be the proper 'aesthetic' function of art. As we have seen, proponents of aestheticism argue that works of art should be assessed exclusively in terms of their *formal* or *surface* features. That the non-aesthetic functions have been seen to play such an important part in this framework of assessment however, counts heavily against the aesthete's position. The importance of the functions discussed in chapters two to six can be seen as a conclusive refutation of the formalist idea that *only* aesthetic or surface features are relevant to the assessment of art.

Having said this, I wish to do what may appear to be a partial about face by acknowledging that there is an element of sense in the modernist's privileging of the aesthetic dimension of art. Although I would certainly not attempt to make the aesthetic merit of an art work the *exclusive* criterion of an art work's value, it is important to recognize that it is very often the case (but not invariably the case) that aesthetic considerations rate highly in those works which we consider to be particularly good. As I argued in chapter seven, the 'aesthetic function of art' is to be ranked as a particularly important function of art.

I must reiterate that I do not consider to have presented in this thesis a comprehensive or rigid framework for the assessment of art. I have rather provided six out of an indefinite number of functions which can be relevant to the assessment of artistic value. As I pointed out in chapter one, many other functions could be added to a list of the 'functions of art'. This is not to say of course, that 'anything goes', or that any function at all to which an art work may be put is relevant to its assessment. We would not include, for example, the fact that many sculptures would make particularly good door-stops, or that the pages of a Dickens novel could be used particularly effectively to light a fire, as relevant functions of art. Both the question of which particular functions are relevant to assessment, and the question of how we should rank the relevant functions in terms of their relative importance, are open-ended, and thus open to discussion and debate. We needn't assume that the list of 'relevant functions' is completely arbitrary however, and that we can simply make up such lists as we please. In order to determine which functions are relevant to assessment, we must look to the broader roles of art in our

society. My framework of assessment is thus based upon what I see to be six of the characteristically important functions of art in the Western artistic tradition. I am quite willing to allow that in other societies, the functions which are considered to be relevant and important to the assessment of art will differ significantly, and that a 'functionalist framework for assessing art' for that society would differ accordingly.

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