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Aesthetic Judgment, Embodied Rationality,  
and the Truth of Appearances:  
An Introduction to Roger Scruton's Philosophical Anthropology

Abstract:

This paper offers an interpretation of and introduction to the philosophical anthropology of Roger Scruton through an examination of the aesthetic dimension of human rationality. We argue that attending to our aesthetic experience as individuated subjects capable of intersubjective communion offers a helpful corrective to the deracinated and disembodied view of human rationality prevalent in much of our contemporary ethical and scientific discourse. Through a consideration of how embodied rationality is at work in four different forms of art – painting, music, dance, and architecture – our paper develops the rudiments of a more concrete philosophical anthropology, and on the basis of first principles advances a normative claim about the importance of art and beauty to human life.

Keywords:

aesthetics, art, beauty, rationality, subjectivity, Roger Scruton

At the heart of the contemporary understanding of the human is a deep tension between the widespread commitment to individual autonomy and the intellectual authority of scientific reductionism; for the former implies a capacity for rational agency wholly denied by the latter. While our moral discourse depends on ideas of human dignity, individual rights, and personal freedom, the metaphysical assumptions of modern natural science – especially mathematical physics – seem to preclude the possibility of responsible moral action. We seem to inhabit a bifurcated world wherein the presuppositions of our ethical, social, and political discourse are strangely incongruous with the principles of scientific explanation that would dissolve the human difference. Any attempt at a coherent, integrated, and holistic philosophical anthropology seems destined to founder on this apparently insuperable antithesis between our moral and metaphysical assumptions.

Our paper contends, however, that this ostensibly intractable opposition rests on an illicit abstraction from the concrete first-person perspective from which all reasoning about ourselves and the world around us necessarily begins. Drawing on the philosophy of Roger Scruton, we argue that attending to our aesthetic experience as individuated subjects capable of intersubjective communion offers a helpful corrective to the deracinated and disembodied view of human rationality prevalent in much of our contemporary ethical and scientific discourse. Through a consideration of how embodied rationality is at work in four different forms of art – painting, music, dance, and architecture – our paper develops the rudiments of a more concrete philosophical anthropology, and on the basis of first principles advances a normative claim about the importance of art and beauty to human life. We conclude by arguing that our aesthetic experience offers a route toward reconciliation: in accepting the limits of our finitude while striving to ennoble, elevate, and spiritualize our natural condition, art offers us a way to be at home in the world – a way that neither the abstract practical reason of complete moral autonomy nor the abstract theorizing of mathematical physics can provide.

## Introduction: Recovering the Mimetic Dimension of Reason

Aristotle famously defines the human being both as the rational animal and as the political animal. With only slight exaggeration, one could characterize the long tradition of Socratic political philosophy since Aristotle as a sustained meditation on these two definitions: on their mutual co-determination and their reciprocally conditioned interrelation, on the one hand, and on the possible tensions between humanity's rational fulfillment and political fulfillment, on the other. In the latter case, the duality of definitions undergirds a set of canonical polarities that appear to definitively delineate the range of human possibilities: even if it is not wholly necessary to choose either the theoretical life or the political life to the exclusion of the other, the antithesis between theory and praxis provides the requisite coordinates for mapping the conceptual terrain of human aspiration. Presumably, the flourishing human life is to be found somewhere in the conceptual space delineated by the opposition of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this rather familiar story overlooks Aristotle's third definition of the human as "the most mimetic of animals" (*mimetikotaton*).<sup>2</sup> As Aristotle's *Poetics* illustrates, human beings could be neither political nor rational absent their capacity to recognize an image as an image and to delight in the recognition of a likeness as a likeness (i.e., to see what is not in what there is, or, to employ Lessing's evocative formulation, to see absent things as present.)<sup>3</sup> This capacity of image-making and image-recognition, of imitation and replication, depends upon and reveals the Platonic insight into the peculiar power of logos – in the Eleatic Stranger's words, the capacity "to

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1) Consider, for example, Arendt's deployment of this programmatic antithesis in *The Human Condition*.

2) Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b6-7.

3) Lessing, "Laocoön: An Essay," 25.

speak non-being”; for, as the *Sophist* also suggests, speech is a type of image-making and depends on a capacity not only for *eidetic* recognition but also for re-presenting an *eidōs* in a manner that accounts for the perspectival nature of human knowing.<sup>4</sup> As mimetic animals, we see the world from a “point of view,” and in representing the world we attempt to depict how the world seems to us. In Roger Scruton’s terminology, we always begin from the first-person perspective of the individual subject: we can append “I think” to any proposition or statement about the world and, without changing its content, remind ourselves of the distinction between the objects within the world that lack apperceptive self-awareness and the self-conscious subjects that have a view on the world.<sup>5</sup>

We propose, then, that a consideration of our mimetic nature is a necessary component of any fully adequate account of the human. Doing so means giving primacy of place to the first-person perspective of the individual instead of fleeing from such “subjective” viewpoints in favor of the “objective.” Of course, as rational beings, we must seek an objective viewpoint, for reason seeks to be universal. We are drawn to the idea that we might attain, or at least approach, an Archimedean point from which we can view the world as it really is – what Thomas Nagel called “the view from nowhere.”<sup>6</sup> This sometimes leads us to deemphasize the first-person point of view in our understanding of the world. For this reason, mechanistic or naturalistic explanations of the human often appeal to us: we are tempted to believe that explaining human phenomena in positivistic terms allows us to rise above subjective “bias.” The pursuit of objectivity so understood, however, produces an anthropology in which the human appears as a merely material being with merely material interests.

But naturalistic explanation necessarily attempts to derive subjective experience from objective events. This project founders on the incongruity between regressive material causal explanation, whereby one state of affairs is explained by reference to a former, and the teleological account of our motivations, wherein we attempt to justify our actions by appealing to reasons. Whereas the former asks “how?” the latter asks “why?” Accordingly,

There is a cognitive dualism, but not an ontological dualism, underlying our response to the human world. The I-You encounter is precisely not an encounter between objects, and therefore not an encounter between objects of a special and ontologically primitive kind. It is an encounter between subjects, and one that can be understood only if we recognize that the logic of first-person awareness is built into the concepts through which our mutual dealings are shaped.<sup>7</sup>

The scientific perspective “cannot take note of the internal order of our states of mind.”<sup>8</sup> It overlooks the most salient feature of our conscious experience, namely, the intentionality of consciousness – the ineliminable “aboutness” of our mental states. Consciousness is not merely indeterminate but always directed toward something, and it is the content of our thoughts that concerns and interests us when we attempt to understand ourselves.<sup>9</sup> The mechanistic account has no place for the human person as opposed to the human organism. In the terminology of the German philosophy employed by Scruton, the conceptual apparatus of *Naturwissenschaft* cannot comprehend embodied rationality or incarnate subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

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4) On the connection between negation and two types of image-making – *eikastics* and *phantastics* – see Benardete, *Being Beautiful*, II.109-20.

5) See Scruton, *Human Nature*, 32–34, and 41–45.

6) Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*.

7) Scruton, *Soul World*, 48–49.

8) *Ibid.*, 5. Cf. Scruton, *Human Nature*, 34–37.

9) For Scruton’s discussion of the intentionality of consciousness, see *Modern Philosophy*, 212–16.

10) See Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, 237–50.

For all the insight natural science might yield into the operations of matter in motion, it overlooks something that is accessible only from another vantage point:

When we see another's smile we see human flesh moving in obedience to impulses in the nerves. No law of nature is suspended in this process: we smile not in spite of, but because of, nature. Nevertheless, we understand a smile in quite another way: not as flesh, but as spirit, freely revealed. A smile is always more than flesh for us, even if it is only flesh.<sup>11</sup>

A smile is not simply an exercise of muscular dexterity, nor merely an external presentation worn for others out of social obligation – at least not a genuine smile. Like laughter at a good joke, a smile is a rational response to the *Lebenswelt*, and like the capacity for laughter, only rational animals truly smile. In Milton's words, "smiles from reason flow;" they attend and reflect our conscious judgments about the world and are not merely reactions to sensuous stimulus.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, smiles are also not the conscious products of a prior train of discursive reasoning. Whenever one deliberately tries to smile – say for a family photo – the result is more of a grimace. Smiles reflect human freedom, but not freedom in the sense of arbitrarily electing to exercise one's will in order to arrange one's face in some conventionally recognized pattern. Smiles are rather the spontaneous manifestation of our freedom as embodied subjects. Like laughter, smiles occur by means of and with the body. Whether as signs of affirmation, affection, amusement, or approval, smiles appear in moments of intersubjective recognition when the face reveals the person.<sup>13</sup>

When we recognize the free subject in the natural object, we are looking at the world from the first-person perspective. We understand the outward appearance of an object to be indicative of an inward mental process. This is the cognitive posture we adopt when we view works of art. A work of art is a record of another's first-person "point of view." Aesthetic experience presupposes the capacity to see and to hear the world through the eyes and ears of another.

A portrait consists of pigments spread upon a canvas, and from the scientific point of view that is *all* it contains. ... [Yet] we see these colored patches as a face and, seeing them so, gain access to the human reality of the picture. The face is not an additional feature of the portrait, above and beyond the colored patches that make it up. But we do not see the face if we look only at the colored patches. The human reality of these patches is not their scientific reality, because it comes to us mingled with our manner of perception. It is *we* who put the face in the picture; but it is there to stay, and we are obliged, if we can, to understand it.<sup>14</sup>

Such an illustration of the cognitive dualism at work in our capacity to see the world under two parallel but incongruous aspects cautions us against the rational fallacy that Mary Midgley wittily diagnosed as "nothing buttery" – the intellectually lazy habit of dismissing the reality of emergent realities as:

"Nothing but" the things in which we perceive them. The human person is "nothing but" the human animal; law is "nothing but" relations of social power; sexual love is "nothing but" the urge

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11) Scruton, *Principles and Problems*, 9.

12) Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX.239.

13) See Scruton's discussion of "involuntary revelation" in *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation*, 63–68.

14) Scruton, *Politics of Culture*, 223.

to procreation; altruism is “nothing but” the dominant genetic strategy described by Maynard Smith; the *Mona Lisa* is “nothing but” a spread of pigment on a canvas, the Ninth Symphony is “nothing but” a sequence of pitched sounds of varying timbre.<sup>15</sup>

In such reductive reasoning, the experience one initially set out to understand is transformed in the course of one’s inquiry, and rather than “saving the appearances” one dissolves the phenomena into something devoid of human significance. Scruton warns against indulging this debunking instinct, lest the *Lebenswelt* be stripped of its human face and the world of its subjective valence. To explain the high in terms of the low degrades human things. The temptation to dismiss the world as it is given in our experience as epiphenomenal is a kind of barbarism – an inability to distinguish the noble from the base or the beautiful from the ugly. Thus, it is not only a theoretical error to explain away whatever natural science cannot understand, it is a moral, cultural, and existential error as well.<sup>16</sup>

The primacy of the first-person perspective, however, does not imply that we never ascend to objective truth. In fact, in every objective judgment we make a universal claim: asserting that the *world is* such and such a way or that *one ought to do* such and such. According to Scruton, such judgments – whether veridical or normative – evince our desire to transcend the perspectival and to look on the world from no perspective at all (i.e., *sub specie aeternitatis*); while such a God’s eye perspective may be unattainable in our theoretical cognition of the whole, we nevertheless attain to a third-person perspective in our scientific accounts of the natural world.<sup>17</sup>

Our knowledge of the natural world, however, is predicated on a twofold abstraction, from ourselves as subjects and from the *Lebenswelt* we inhabit<sup>18</sup> – that pre-scientific realm constituted by the innumerable dyadic relations between individuals that appear in the world whenever each addresses the other face-to-face or I-to-You. Thus, alongside the world of objects described by natural science from the third person-perspective is the world constituted by “the overreaching intentionality of the interpersonal.”<sup>19</sup> This world of persons is a world of meaning, significance, and evaluation; a world of reasons, intentions, and purposes; a world of rights and duties, privileges and obligations. Any coherent description of ourselves in this world assumes that we are in some way free – capable of taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions, of making plans and executing projects, of acting on and in response to reasons. It is, in short, the world where the self-conscious being can be at home. One might even say it is the subject’s natural habitat. It is this second world, the *Lebenswelt* of culture and tradition, history and politics, religion and community, where we live, love, fight, and die. And it is here that the mimetic dimension of our humanity is most evident. It is our aesthetic experience that reveals this world of appearances to be the real world – the one that in the end actually matters to us.

As Oscar Wilde once remarked, and as Scruton was fond of quoting: “it is only a very shallow person who does not judge by appearances;” for it is on the surface of things where we find their meaning – as noble or base, just or unjust, beautiful or ugly.<sup>20</sup> Every attempt to draw back the curtain and expose the mechanism responsible for the meaning we experience inevitably explains away that which we sought to understand, namely, ourselves.

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15) Scruton, *Soul World*, 39–40.

16) Scruton, *Human Nature*, 48–49. See also Scruton, *Untimely Tracts*, 213–15.

17) Scruton, *Kant*, 23–27.

18) That is, neither the subject nor the world-constituting intelligibility of intersubjective relations can appear in the world under the auspices of the scientific account. But from whence, then, does the scientist give the account – an account which takes no account of himself?

19) Scruton, *Soul World*, 151. Cf. Scruton, *Human Nature*, 50–58, and 66–71.

20) Scruton, *Soul World*, 114.

Attending to the aesthetic experience of human beings discloses a richer anthropology, one adequate to our nature as embodied subjects or incarnate spirit. For this reason Scruton claims that “aesthetics is a central area of philosophy, as central as metaphysics, and as basic to our understanding of the human condition.”<sup>21</sup> Aesthetic experience reminds us that there is something potentially misleading in the stark antithesis of theory and practice, contemplation and action; for in stressing the duality between Aristotle’s two more famous definitions we are apt to think that this doubleness in articulation reflects a duality in reality, and we run the risk of mistaking the human person for a monstrous mind-body composite. This dualistic anthropology is insufficient because it cannot give an account of how a human being is a unified whole; rather, it leaves us in the position of being torn between the material and non-material aspects of our existence. But in our experience of beauty in particular, we discover our unity – not as static self-identical entities – but as dynamically integrated wholes capable of enjoying that “disinterested interest” which Kant thought characteristic of aesthetic contemplation.<sup>22</sup>

Beauty is a property of objects, but it comes to light as a feature of our world when we consider *how* subjects respond to objects. Like normative and veridical judgments, an aesthetic judgment is about the objects that constitute our world; but unlike evaluations of the good and the true, beauty is about the object’s appearing as such *to* a subject. Scruton’s emphasis on our experience of the beautiful reminds us of something peculiar about the subject’s openness to beauty. Aesthetic contemplation requires that we hold ourselves open to being affected and actively direct our attention to the object of contemplation. In such a posture we take an interest in the object not as a means to the fulfillment of some desire, but as an end in itself.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in venturing towards an aesthetic anthropology, we will consider experiences of beauty directly. We offer a set of reflections on forms of artistic practice – painting, music, dance, and architecture – informed and inspired by Scruton’s lifelong reflection on the aesthetic dimension of our being. While discussions of beauty can sound sentimental, Scruton warns that this may reveal less about beauty than about our condition as desensitized cynics, so fearful of being deceived into believing in something more than the quotidian that we preemptively close ourselves off to the radiant dimension of our reality. In unfashionable theological terms, beauty reveals the world to be a gift. If we are open to its grace, we risk awareness of our intractable dependence on something beyond ourselves. As a consequence, we may, however reluctantly, suffer the passion of gratitude and in that moment recognize the contingency of our existence, the vulnerability of all we hold dear, and the absurdity of our pretensions to self-sufficiency.

## Modalities of Aesthetic Rationality

### 1. Painting

Standing before a painting is like standing before a window; we do not focus on the surface before us, but look through it to something that it reveals. The canvas depicts an image which itself “is not an object of attention but rather a mode of attention to other things. It is not so much a thing with properties as a way of envisaging properties of its object.”<sup>24</sup> That the visual arts represent recognizable objects may be a truism, but if Scruton’s claim that images are most essentially a way of envisaging objects is correct, understanding painting requires understanding that basic memetic moment in which we see something *as* something.

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21) Scruton, *Aesthetic Understanding*, vii.

22) Scruton, *Kant*, 104.

23) Cf. Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, 441–49.

24) Scruton, *Politics of Culture*, 66.

But how does an object come into focus in the first place? How do we first pick out an object from the array of stimuli within our visual field? For in order to focus our attention on a particular is an act of differentiation and distinction: to apprehend a particular *this* is to see it against the backdrop of what it is not. Thus, in order for an object to be seen, its appearance must contrast with its surroundings. By peering into a very dark alleyway, one will be met only with blackness, and so will not recognize that perhaps there is a person standing there until they come into the light and are set apart from the darkness that surrounds them. The first requirement for the recognition of an object, then, is that it be contained by boundaries, demarcating its limits and separating it from its surroundings. Yet concomitant to the process of differentiation, objects are also recognized through an act of unification or synthesis whereby disparate elements are grasped as a whole. As in the famous parable about the blind men and the elephant, one must be able to recognize the parts of an object as parts of a whole in order to recognize that whole as a unitary object. This synthetic act of cognition can be a synthesis of the different parts of an object, such as the recognition that a tusk, a trunk, a tail, and so forth, is an elephant, or a synthesis of an object's attributes, such as when we recognize from an object's sweet taste, small size, round shape, and red color that it is an apple.

Object recognition thus moves in two directions: from differentiated attributes to the unified whole and from an undifferentiated unity to distinct wholes separated by boundaries. In order to look "through the window" of a painting to recognize the objects of another world, these two moments must operate in tandem. Consider, for instance, Frans Snyder's *Kitchen Still Life*: the immediate impression is a mess of colors and values. To recognize the objects depicted, the colors and values must be related to each other as parts or attributes of whole objects and as separated from each other by boundaries. Softly textured whites juxtaposed with clearer greys tell us we are looking at the belly and wing of a single bird. We see the similarity in hue between the hands and face in the foreground and understand they belong to a woman who stands out in contrast to the reddish-brown floor. Across the floor, there is a shape that is similarly bent-over but smaller, alerting us to the fact that another woman toils some distance away from the first.

Representational painting, then, is simply one example that illustrates a basic truth about how the world becomes intelligible to human beings – and thus, it reveals a truth about the human itself. Every time we are able to say, "this is *x*," in the same way we are able to look at *Kitchen Still Life* and say, "this is a bird," "this is a woman," and so on, our minds are moving in two directions at once. We are simultaneously differentiating objects from what they are not and unifying the parts of each object in order to recognize it as a unified whole. This is how the world lays itself out to human beings, not just in paintings, but also in "real life": we are able to be rational animals, we are able to say "this is *x*," because we can recognize unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity.

But if the process by which we recognize objects in paintings is the same as the process by which we recognize them in ordinary life, what is special about painting? Is there any significant difference between looking at a painting of a thing and the real thing? What is there about an object represented in paint that differs so completely from its real-life counterpart that Giorgio Morandi could devote himself to depicting the most ordinary domestic objects? What makes his numerous *natura morta* so compelling? The answer must lie not merely in the bottles Morandi painted, but in something that Morandi brought to them; if objects are recognized by their boundaries and attributes, the difference between real objects and painted objects must be that the boundaries and attributes of painted objects are the product of artistic selection. As Scruton explains, "The true work of art is not beautiful in the way an animal, a flower or a stretch of countryside is beautiful. It is a consciously created thing, in which the human need for form triumphs over the randomness of objects."<sup>25</sup> We know of painted objects only what the artist allows us to see.

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25) Scruton, *Confessions*, 14.

In circumscribing our vision, the artist lifts the object out of the realm of contingent possibility and offers the viewer a determinate actuality – an ordered whole. Thus, the importance of painting lies not just in its re-creation of the mental phenomenon of differentiating and synthesizing that makes human thought possible, but also in the way that, by being a product of an artists' intentionality, it creates a *new* world in which objects obey the laws of beauty that guide the painter's artistic choices. As Scruton says, "Beauty reaches to the underlying truth of a human experience, by showing it *under the aspect of necessity*. ... The insight that art provides is available only in the form in which it is presented: it resides in an immediate experience whose consoling power is that it removes the arbitrariness from the human condition."<sup>26</sup> In beautiful paintings, parts are united into wholes harmoniously, that is, according to the non-arbitrary intention of the painter. Here, then, is the difference between looking at *Kitchen Still Life* and looking at a "real" kitchen: in the painting, Franz Snyder has made sure that every line, shape, color, and value are precisely as they should be to make the painting a beautiful whole. Each part of the painting works together with every other part, and as a result, we are left with a unified impression.

Paintings are able to do this because they are painted from a first-person perspective; they represent the world as seen "through the eyes of" the artist. Thus, when we look at a painting, the painting reflects not only the artist's subjectivity but is an intersubjective invitation for us as viewers to see the world along with another. Painting teaches us how our first-person singular perspective may be shared with others and how "I see the world" can become how "We see the world." The ineliminable subjective particularity of great art is not a solipsistic assertion of individuality but an illustration of our capacity for communication.

And yet, it is not precisely true that the viewer of a painting sees "through the eyes of" the artist, nor do we encounter the artist through what they paint in the same way we would encounter them face to face. The artist is present in the painting only as one who can show us something else, as a "finger pointing to the moon" in the Zen proverb that remarks how once you see the moon, the finger is no longer needed. True, in some sense we take on the artist's point of view when we stand in front of their painting; but it may be more accurate to say that by means of the painting, both the artist and the viewer take on a point of view that exists apart from either of them. The painting facilitates not only the perspective of the specific artist that created it, and not only the perspective of the particular observer, but a perspective that, to borrow a phrase from Scruton, "is no one's and therefore everyone's."<sup>27</sup>

Painting, then, provides a locus for us to examine some ways in which human beings peculiarly combine opposites. In their ability to recognize what is represented in a painting, as in their ability to recognize things in general, they must simultaneously differentiate and unify elements. In doing so, human beings must grasp multiplicity in unity and unity in multiplicity; that is, they must recognize how parts come together to form a whole and how a unified whole is composed of parts. In a beautiful painting, however, this process is guided by the intentionality of the painter, who orders the parts of the painting in such a way that they produce a vision of a non-arbitrary world. This world, although it is depicted in the painting from a particular perspective, appeals to the universal aspect of the human being, and thus invites us to step into a universal point of view. This universal point of view, though, unlike the scientist's Archimedean point beyond the world of experience, does not discredit the *Lebenswelt* we inhabit as subjective individuals. It retains our non-material distinctions between high and low, between beautiful and base – and importantly, it emphasizes by way of our "interaction" with the painter that humans are communal beings.

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26) Scruton, *Beauty*, 109.

27) Scruton, *Music*, 124.



## 2. Music

Paintings are still; they capture a particular moment, and show that moment frozen in time. Music, on the other hand, unfolds through time. To hear but one part of a piece of music frustrates rather than satisfies, because a mere portion of a melody conveys incompleteness. If, for instance, a twelve-bar blues never returns to the tonic after the turnaround, listeners will sense that something is missing. Commonly, the twelfth bar is a dominant chord, called the “turnaround.” Somehow, listeners intuit that the dominant should lead to a repetition of the tonic chord of the first bar. If the tonic is played after the dominant, the song is resolved; if not, the listener remains in anticipation of the tonic. How does the listener know that the tonic should come after the dominant? Even those with no musical training have an expectation of resolution and can sense something missing when the anticipated tonic chord is withheld. This experience highlights an important characteristic of music: each note of a piece of music *leads to* the next. Within a few bars, the listener senses that the music is trying to *get* somewhere. A musical ending is also an arrival.

But, of course, music is not traveling anywhere. Scruton is adamant that although motion is often mentioned in discussions about music, music itself does not move. What happens in the unfolding of music is a series of tonal modulations. And yet, to hear music is to hear something in motion, advancing from moment to moment and note to note with definite directionality. But if music is a motion, where is the space in which it moves? It moves in a space apart from this world, “a kind of metaphorical space, but one that is vividly etched on our auditory experience.”<sup>28</sup> We follow music into this otherworldly space, tracking music’s motion towards its destination.

Resolution – the movement from dissonance to consonance – characterizes the Western musical tradition. The music ends when the motion concludes in a satisfying resting place, as when the blues turnaround lands decisively on the tonic. In tracing musical motion, we uncover a logic that transforms a series of discrete auditory sensations into a song. As Scruton puts it, “musical gestures generate their own aura of necessity, so that what follows seems compelled, and seems also in turn to compel its successor.”<sup>29</sup> In this way, each musical note intends the next: the motion of music is governed by its own intentionality. Scruton calls this phenomenon “acousmatic listening.” “The acousmatic way of hearing brings with it the overreaching intentionality of our interpersonal attitudes. We are listening for the subject beyond the object, the point of view that harbours the reason, and not just the cause, for what we hear.”<sup>30</sup> The motion of music occurs in the space constituted by the intentionality of human subjectivity – a realm governed by a logic of its own.

In setting words to music, a composer strives to say more than what the bare words alone could convey. Music’s motion is thus the means by which music conveys meaning, and in great lyric arias, such as Bach’s “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben,” the music serves as commentary and reflection on the meaning of the words. Sound and speech operate in tandem to say more than either could say alone. By the solemn and soft flute floating on the quarter note before flowing into an ethereal melody, we know that this moment contains both tragedy and love, even before the soprano sings the words that mean “out of love is my Savior willing to die.” These words come not as a translation of the flute melody nor as something extraneous to it, but as a sort of consummation of the meaning inherent in it. There is something conveyed by the music that is beyond the words, and yet inseparable from them. Scruton calls this “intransitive expression.” In contrast to “transitive expression,” which expresses a particular content, intransitive expression expresses something that cannot be identified – something ineffable.<sup>31</sup>

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28) Scruton, *Music*, 43.

29) Scruton, *Soul World*, 146.

30) Scruton, *Music*, 120–24.

31) Scruton, *Aesthetic Understanding*, 61.

Any attempt to explain the ineffable meaning of music would be to “eff” the ineffable – to particularize, reduce, or circumscribe that which eludes all such determinations – and thereby to mistake the character of great music.

The purpose of listening is not to decipher messages or to trace the sounds we hear to some generative structure, still less to recuperate the information that is encoded in them. The purpose is for the listener to follow the musical journey, as rhythm, melody and harmony unfold according to their own inner logic so as to make audible patterns linking part to part.<sup>32</sup>

Music’s meaning is not something that can be distilled or extracted from the experience of hearing sounds as movements in an intentional space. Music is meaningful insofar as we inhabit such a space, but its truth is inseparable from its form and cannot be repackaged in propositional logic.

What, then, does music contribute to an aesthetic anthropology? In some ways, music shares characteristics with the human person; it anticipates a future beyond the moment it occupies, it projects goals into that future, and it moves towards them. As Scruton says, “It moves as *we* move, with reasons for what it does and a sense of purpose. ... It has the outward appearance of the inner life.” The result is that music is encountered as we would encounter another person, even though we are encountering no one in particular: “although it is heard and not seen, it is heard as the voice is heard, and understood like the face.”<sup>33</sup> Like painting, then, music invites us into an intersubjective encounter with a universal point of view that is “no one’s and therefore everyone’s.” And because the world of music is governed by intentionality, like painting, music presents a world “under the aspect of necessity,” in which nothing is arbitrary.

Scruton ultimately counts the experience of (good) music as among the moments in life which, “when they occur it is as though, on the winding ill-lit stairway of our life, we suddenly come across a window, through which we catch sight of another and brighter world – a world to which we belong but which we cannot enter.”<sup>34</sup> He sees human beings as being in need of some consolation, and he seems to connect this need with arbitrariness. The opposite of arbitrariness is order; a world in which everything had its proper place, in which nothing was arbitrary, would be a world in which one would feel at home. But we feel that there are parts of ourselves that do not quite fit into the order of things.<sup>35</sup> This making our world necessary rather than arbitrary also has to do with “a making whole, a rejoining of the self to its rightful congregation.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the world in which music moves and in which we encounter an ineffable universal subjectivity points to another feature of the human: one must find a way to be at home in the world.

### 3. Dance

Although music moves in an otherworldly space, its motion finds natural expression in the body’s movement through natural space. Dance is the incarnation of the movement of music. If listening to music is an encounter with a subjectivity that belongs to no one in particular, dancing is the act of taking that subjectivity upon ourselves and embodying its intentionality through our own movements. Dance is the movement of music

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32) Scruton, *Music*, 36.

33) *Ibid.*, 118.

34) Scruton, *Confessions*, 88.

35) Scruton, *Beauty*, 108–109.

36) Scruton, *Intelligent Person’s Guide*, 17.

embodied, and the embodied world is a world shared with others. Hence, we not only “move with” music, we also “move with” other people.<sup>37</sup> From the dances of the choruses in ancient Greek tragedies to the cotillions of the eighteenth century, dance forms individual participants into a common whole – fashioning communities intimate and fleeting as well as public and enduring. For Scruton, dance is a model of the communion underlying civic association:

If you do not understand dancing, then you will never understand politics. Dancing is the paradigm of political fulfillment. People who step together in a dance are at one with themselves and their fellows. Their action is also response, and they move in a collective movement, with no purpose beyond the present pleasure.<sup>38</sup>

In our capacity to move together with others in dance, we manifest a political ideal: free and harmonious common intentionality. We prize such harmony not as a means to an end, but for its own sake. Dancers move together without dominating each other or subsuming each other’s wills. Dancing is an affirmation of a shared freedom. It expresses our capacity to govern ourselves according to an order independent of our whim and caprice. In following a pattern that is not of our own devising, we affirm reason’s sovereignty over the motions of our bodies, and it is this most basic act of self-rule that allows us to commune with others. In its proper form, the activity of dancing inaugurates a community of free, rational beings that cooperate with mutual respect. Describing the forms of dance that give life to such communities – forms now more associated with dancing’s past than its present – Scruton notes that dancing was “not only... a picture of the ideal, in which freedom and order are perfected and reconciled. It was also a form of education, in which people learned to treat each other as free and equal.”<sup>39</sup> By moving with each other in dance, we might learn to live with one another as neighbors.

Scruton bemoans the loss of this older tradition of communal dancing, which has been displaced by an activity focused more on one’s own physical sensations rather than a shared pattern of movement: individual gratification supplanting collective coordination.<sup>40</sup> By contrast, fully human dancing “shows freedom and discipline united in a single gesture, and at the same time made subject to the social order.”<sup>41</sup> To understand what Scruton means by this, observe the example of the Greek *syrtaki* dance, in which a line of people with their hands on each other’s shoulders move together as a unit, beginning slowly and smoothly before building up to a giddy pace, occasionally hopping in the air and ducking low to the ground. The dancers at the end of the line hold their arms in the air, awaiting others to join – for there is no limit to the number or type of people that can join the *syrtaki*, provided they know the steps. Because all of the dancers hold onto each other, if one fails to stay in the pattern of the dance, the line falls apart. The dance ends in a state of exhilaration that expresses not merely pleasure, but joy.<sup>42</sup> The joy of dance and its political attributes stem from the same root: the individual and collective effort to move according to a pattern. Even in dances that are largely improvised, such as salsa or swing dance, the dancers exhibit a shared understanding of what the form of the dance requires. Reason reads the intentionality behind the music and translates sound into intelligible movements – partners communicate through motions which to the initiated serve as signs which speak as clearly as any words.

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37) Scruton, *Confessions*, 58.

38) Scruton, *Untimely Tracts*, 64.

39) Scruton, *Confessions*, 58.

40) *Ibid.*, 52–56.

41) *Ibid.*, 52.

42) *Ibid.*, 55.

As an art form in which the medium consists of human beings themselves, dance is particularly apt to help us understand the human. Since so many dances are done with others, the way in which dance is intersubjective is more obvious than the ways in which music and painting are intersubjective. As Scruton points out, dance is a model for how human beings can live together in general. Thus, dance can help us with the problem of how to be at home in the world by teaching us about the synthesis of freedom and order necessary to “move with” other people. But dance not only harmonizes the dancers with each other; it also makes each individual dancer at one with themselves by harmonizing the “inner world” of intentionality that governs the music with the dancer’s body. If viewing human beings as simply mind-body composites disallows an anthropology in which a human being can be seen as a fully integrated whole, dance can help us overcome that problem by providing an example of an activity in which the human mind and body are unified by their cooperative participation – just as by working together in a dance, dancers show how we might be “at one with [our]selves and our fellows” politically, and how we might form a true community. Dancing is thus “an occupation of the whole person, and a display of the grace and completion of the soul,” expressing the unity of mind and body in a single activity.<sup>43</sup> Dance displays human wholeness by integrating the individual’s subjectivity within a larger whole that is the intersubjective community constituted by the music and the other dancers.

#### 4. Architecture

A song might invite us to dance, but we can decline the invitation and simply listen. The structure of our physical space, on the other hand, imposes demands we cannot avoid. As beings that self-consciously create their habitations, we attain a measure of freedom from the impositions of the natural environment by constructing artificial spaces, but these artificial spaces in turn impose their own constraints. Shelter is one of the most basic and tangible expressions of human ingenuity responding to human need. Architecture is thus the most utilitarian of art forms – buildings have uses in a way that paintings, songs, and dances do not. To think of nothing but utility, however, is to forget the human desire to be at home in the world. Thus, architecture is the art of giving what is intractably a means the form of an end. Rather than expressing the essence of architecture, the oft-quoted dictum “form follows function” overlooks the surface of things and forgets the need for humanity to see itself in its surroundings.

As the painter determines pictorial space, so too does the architect define, delineate, and order human spaces. All building introduces a fundamental division between indoors and outdoors. To enter a building is to enter a space formed by human intentionality. Indoor spaces are further defined by conscious specifications that separate our living spaces from the spaces in which we work, socialize, worship, and govern ourselves. Architecture structures our world by associating space and place with a determinate activity. Yet the fact that many of the world’s best-loved buildings have been repurposed over generations suggests that the criteria for judging architecture are not solely those determined by a building’s function. The Royal Exchange in London, created to house the stock exchange, is now a retail center. Boston’s Old State House, once the seat of government in the colonies, housed up to fifty small businesses – ranging from tailors to insurance companies – before being preserved from destruction and transformed into a museum by the Bostonian Society in 1881. People find new functions for beautiful buildings because the beauty of form is motive enough to discover a fitting function.<sup>44</sup>

And yet, we surely cannot disregard function when judging architecture. A visually stunning but useless building fails in its primary purpose of ordering human space in a manner that meets our basic and enduring

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43) Ibid., 50.

44) Scruton, *Architecture*, 3–9, and 21–37.

needs as embodied creatures. Architectural beauty is so intermeshed with practical concerns that one wonders whether a purposeless building can indeed be beautiful. Le Corbusier's modernist masterwork Villa Savoye, designed in accordance with his "Five Points" theory, soon fell into disrepair and disuse as it failed to shelter its denizens from the elements. But should such quotidian concerns matter in aesthetic judgements? If, as Scruton argues, architecture has its root in the "everyday preoccupation with getting things right," we must attend to the practical needs of forming a place into a home as much as having things look right.<sup>45</sup> Hence, the aesthetics of settlement differs from the aesthetic contemplation operative in attending to a painting or listening to a symphony, where, as members of an audience, we stand at one remove from the work itself. Our concern with architecture may take this form, if as tourists we visit Corbusier's Villa Savoye, but our interest in the architecture that surrounds us in the place we call home can never be wholly "disinterested." As the urban planner Jane Jacobs observed, our surroundings impact us in innumerable ways, and places that do not look "right," places that are in some palpable manner incongruous with established traditions, patterns of behavior, or long-standing customs, have deleterious effects on both individuals and communities.<sup>46</sup> For this very reason, architectural beauty is not found solely in magnificent structures like St. Paul's Cathedral, the Scuola San Rocco, or the Place Vendôme, but often takes a far humbler form as what is harmonious, appropriate, or fitting; the standard for judging the row of houses along a city lane or the layout of a town square resembles the judgment operative in the innumerable little rituals which constitute good manners – the practices by which we cooperatively navigate our shared common world and come "to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves."<sup>47</sup>

For Scruton, the aesthetic dimension of our endeavor to be at home in the world is intimately interwoven with our desire for community and belonging. Our experience of home is informed by an awareness that to belong means to share a standard of judgment and a willingness to conduct oneself according to that standard. The aesthetics of architecture require attending to a thousand little details and subtleties – "the fall of light on a Corinthian capital or the shadow of a campanile on a sloping roof;" facades, cornices, apertures, and doorways all must be attended to if a harmonious street is to emerge from a row of houses.<sup>48</sup> Just as in dance, where we "move with" others, so in architecture do we build with others, working in conjunction with our neighbors to bring order to a shared habitat that becomes the record of our having lived somewhere in particular rather than anywhere at all. Nowhere is the artist's role as custodian of a cultural inheritance more important than in architecture. If Kant is right, and we are "suitors for agreement" in aesthetic judgment, seeking universal assent to our subjective experience, in architecture, we seek agreement not only with the present but with our inherited past and with generations yet to come.<sup>49</sup> As Scruton explains, "there is a point to the judgment of beauty, and that is to coordinate the appearances that surround you with those that surround your neighbours. The judgment is a tacit recognition that things matter to others as they matter to you."<sup>50</sup>

Architecture that proclaims its own originality, that seeks to stand out from rather than be integrated into the existing world, bespeaks a greater concern for itself than for others – a willingness to elevate its own satisfaction above the community's common good. Drawing on the work of Leon Krier and his anti-modernist manifesto, *Architecture: Choice or Fate*, Scruton argues:

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45) Ibid., 239.

46) Jacobs, *Great American Cities*.

47) Scruton, *Confessions*, 14. Cf. Scruton, *Beauty*, 67–81.

48) Scruton, "Building to Last," 67.

49) Scruton, *Beauty*, 112–23. Cf. Scruton, *How to Think Seriously*, 209–91.

50) Scruton, "Beauty and Power."

Classical forms result from convention and consensus over centuries, ... modernist forms, by contrast, have been imposed on us by people in the grip of ideology. They derive no human significance from the materials that compose them, from the labour that produced them or from the function they fulfil, ... [all of which] forbids them from acquiring symbolic value, or from conveying a vision of the city as a public space. ... All relation to neighboring structures, to the street and to the sky is lost, in a form that has nothing to convey apart from the starkness of its geometry.<sup>51</sup>

Eccentricity in taste or experimentation in style is far more palatable – and may even be, like Duchamp’s 1917 “Fountain,” the source of amusement – in other less public and enduring art forms. But in architecture, novelty for its own sake disrupts the whole of which any single building is a part, and the radically distinctive structure that strives to emphasize its difference and singularity is comparable to the member of a dance troop who willingly sacrifices the unity of the whole for the sake of indulging their own caprice.

Such buildings use no architectural vocabulary, so that they cannot be “read” as a classical building is read. This “unreadability” is felt by the passer-by as a kind of rudeness. Modernist buildings exclude dialogue, and the space they create around themselves is not a public space but an unravelling of the urban fabric.<sup>52</sup>

There is a moral dimension to the aesthetics of architecture that we neglect at the peril of failing to attend to the conditions of community. “In architecture we ‘realise’ a conception of ourselves, not as isolated subjectivities, but as self-conscious beings with an enduring identity in a public world” – a world that endures only so long as we each see it not as mine or yours but *ours*.<sup>53</sup> To the extent that architecture nurtures or stifles this propensity to communion, it is as important to peaceful co-existence and human flourishing as the rules or regulations by which we govern our mutual dealings. The highest vocation of the architect, therefore, is the discovery of forms adequate to architecture’s ultimate purpose – the function of providing the setting for community.<sup>54</sup> In the “Building Better, Building Beautiful” commission report of 2020, Scruton argues that “what people want is buildings that reflect the history, character and identity of their community and that belong in their surroundings: somewhere, not anywhere.”<sup>55</sup>

Architecture may support and sustain communities, or it may disrupt and undermine them. Buildings can rudely draw attention to themselves and away from their surroundings, alienating themselves from the neighborhood and giving us the impression of a fractured and chaotic world. Consider, for example, London’s Gherkin skyscraper, a round glass cylinder that towers over the financial district. It does not fit in; on the contrary, it is intended to stand out. But in standing out it draws attention to itself and away from the buildings around it – it sets itself at odds with its world. It is a building that is not at home. How could it make human beings feel at home? Because of its role in community life, architecture is also especially susceptible to being hijacked by tyrannical impulses. Certain political movements that believe they have a total solution to the problems of human life have been tempted to bulldoze the world and rebuild it in the image of their own ideals. Thus, the world has seen its share of totalitarian architecture, although such architecture

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51) Scruton, “Building to Last,” 72–73.

52) *Ibid.*, 73–74.

53) Scruton, *Architecture*, 231. Cf. Scruton’s discussion of alienation in *ibid.*, 225.

54) *Ibid.*, 218–35.

55) Scruton, “Building Better,” 22.

has oftentimes been resisted – Le Corbusier was prevented from carrying out his fantasy of demolishing Paris to rebuild it into a modernist utopia. This type of architecture smooths out cities and eviscerates ornaments, idiosyncrasies, and unplanned moments – “the little sheds, shrines, and shelters that barnacle our ancient cities.”<sup>56</sup> Such architecture, as well as the political impulses that drive it, is born from the idea that communities should be compelled to conform to certain ideals. Remembering Scruton’s idea that the paradigm of political life is the free harmony of dance, we can see that a community formed under compulsion is no community at all.

Beautiful buildings will not only be wholes composed of well-ordered parts, but will also themselves be parts of a well-ordered whole – of the neighborhood, town, or city in which they are built. Architecture exhibits the same part-whole structure found in each of the other arts: patches of color and value coming together to form painted objects, tones coming together to form melodies, and dancers coming together to form groups or pairs. Yet there must simultaneously be differentiation: boundaries that divide object from object in painting, note from note in music, and each individual participant in a dance. Thus, common to all of these art forms is the principle that disparate elements come together to form a unity without the constitutive elements being dissolved or dominated – a unity that contains a multiplicity within itself. Such multiplicity in unity is an echo of the structure of every human community and every human soul.

### Conclusion: Recovering Beauty from the Cult of Repudiation

For well over a century, we have lived in a disenchanted world – a world stripped of human meaning and moral purpose, a world in which the concerns of the subject can find no legitimate ground in the world of objects. We became masters and possessors by stripping nature bare, exposing its secret inner workings, and reducing qualitative majesty to the mathematically quantifiable, and so manipulable, locomotion of formless matter. In our efforts to demystify nature, we strove heroically to banish the gods, only to realize that in their flight, they took our humanity with them.<sup>57</sup> Having discovered our cosmic solitude and the fundamental contingency of our existence, there seemed no authentic alternative but the defiant proclamation of our essential alienation. Rather than mourn our loss, we strove to dance above the abyss, to revel in our groundless freedom, to make an idol of the impossibility that, in Sartre’s words, the subjectivity of *pour-soi* ever really communes with another *pour-soi*. Reveling in our angst, literary reflection and artistic practice became increasingly preoccupied with desecration. Animated by an Iago-like *animus* against all pretenses to nobility, high culture strove to prove over and over again that nothing was sacred; for, like Iago, such art was nothing if not critical. But after decades of what Scruton termed “the cult of repudiation,” we can see clearly that this endeavor is nothing but “the expense of spirit in a waste of shame.”<sup>58</sup>

In such circumstances, Scruton challenges us to ask: what if the fear of error might actually be a fear of truth? Might acts of desecration really mask an awareness of our human-all-too-human shortcomings? Rather than the courageous resolve of a noble soul willing to face the abyss of existence, might the flight from beauty be but an adolescent rebellion against the claims that tradition, culture, and community make on us? Beauty makes a demand on us. In Rilke’s words from the first of his *Duino Elegies*, “beauty is but the first touch of terror we can still bear.” It is the intimation of an Angelic order which in our disconsolate isolation is more terrifying

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56) Scruton, “Beauty of Belonging.”

57) Scruton’s work on Wagner is a meditation on redemption after the *Götterdämmerung* of modernity. See especially Scruton’s final work: *Wagner’s Parsifal*.

58) Shakespeare, Sonnet 129. Cf. Scruton, *Beauty*, 139–61.

than ever before. To be responsive to beauty runs the risk of being open to that same injunction Rilke heard when viewing an ancient sculpture: “*Du mußt deine Leben ändern.*”<sup>59</sup> Such a categorical imperative brooks no disputation. We cannot bargain with it or make excuses in the face of its commanding authority; and so, we flee from the claims beauty makes on us, covering our shame with the consoling theory that all experience of the transcendent is illusory, confident that those “masters of suspicion” were correct in debunking the noble.<sup>60</sup> Artistic practice thus becomes an exercise in maintaining our cynical distance. Our ironic detachment from nobility, excellence, and virtue signals our awareness that all meaning is a social construct, all traditions merely forms of prejudice, and all values the reflection of relations of domination. Consequently, we compete to outdo one another in acts of repudiation lest we get caught out and look the fool for actually believing in something. Such naiveté is the great faux pas of our age; avoiding it, as well as the sole remaining sin, that of hypocrisy – a risk we run in every act of reverence or elevation – are the twin orienting principles of much of contemporary art. And so, we self-consciously play a role in endless self-referential games in order to convince ourselves and others that we are in the know. How else can one explain the inflatables of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst’s “Shark in a Tank,” or Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” – all of which have exhibited at major galleries, from the Tate Modern in London to the Whitney in New York.

The true irony of our situation, however, is that art has wholly lost the capacity to shock, precisely because it aims at nothing else – after the joke of Duchamp’s urinal, the self-conscious kitsch of Warhol, or the disturbing portraits of Francis Bacon, it is almost impossible to imagine a spiritual milieu in which Stravinski’s “Rite of Spring” could cause a riot. The problem of self-consciously subversive art is that it requires an ideal to subvert. It becomes increasingly difficult to *épater la bourgeoisie* when the bourgeoisie line up in droves to consume the very product that is supposed to shock them.

Even when art is not explicitly aimed at mocking bourgeois pretensions to decency and order, an almost tyrannical obsession with novelty forces out all other considerations. But novelty, like subversion, requires a background condition for its negative posture; thus, in proportion as the substantial is eroded and our cultural fabric frayed, innovative gestures and “critical problematizing” become exaggerated to the point of absurdity. The only recognized positivity that remains is the activity of the artist itself, now the focal point of ever more fantastic creations. By calling attention to the performative act, art and architecture focus our observations on the subject, who in their radical freedom is also sundered from the world of objects. The art that most loudly proclaims its free interiority and its independence from all traditions inevitably ends up shouting its own alienation. Consider, for example, Thom Mayne’s Cooper Union New Academic Building. The Cooper Union building displays an astonishing abstract brilliance, combining geometric and organic morphism into a disorienting combination constituting a structure that strains credulity: “How are the parts making a whole?” “How does it even manage to stay together?” From the purely intellectual perspective, one can find it rather intriguing, but such architecture shows that the designer was more concerned with displaying their own ingenuity than with seeking to be at home in their surroundings: having abandoned the principle that in aesthetic activity we “are suitors for agreement,” the building seeks only to say, “look at me.” Having abandoned the labor of welcoming the other, the tragedy of such egoism is its concealed alienation. In such circumstances, is it any wonder that so many of our critics affirm some version of Danto’s “end

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59) Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Cf. Scruton, “Beauty and Power”: “The flight from beauty is an attempt to avoid judgment, to recognize no defect in one’s desires or appetites and to refuse to idealize the human condition.”

60) For Scruton’s engagement with the methodological reductionism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – the three preeminent practitioners of what Paul Ricœur called “the hermeneutics of suspicion” – see *Modern Philosophy*, 459-79; *Understanding Music*, 216-18; *Aesthetics of Architecture*, 139-44.



of art” thesis?<sup>61</sup> After all, artists themselves seem to be the ones most loudly proclaiming the bankruptcy of traditional artistic practice.

Scruton rejects this conclusion and directs our attention to the great modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who sought to find a way to sustain a richer world of meaning and a more authentic form of artistic creativity. Modernist poets like Wallace Stevens illustrate the tremendous craft and mastery of technique necessary to describe “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” and T.S. Eliot employs all his immense learning to diagnose but also to transfigure the spiritual desolation of the modern city. As Eliot’s manifesto for modernism, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” argues, tradition is a repository of models, ideas, and reflections on the poetic act itself.<sup>62</sup> It is a storehouse of material for the adventurous artist, whose own endeavor to search out new artistic forms is enriched by the labor of learning from those exemplary models of artistic genius that preceded them. As Scruton observes, originality, unlike mere innovation for its own sake, “can never break with what preceded it: to be original, an artist must also belong to the tradition from which he departs. To put it another way: he must violate the expectations of his audience, but he must also, in countless ways, uphold and endorse them.”<sup>63</sup> To speak with one’s own voice is not to speak one’s own private language.

The modernists, moreover, prove that one need not turn away from what is ugly, painful, or alienating about the modern world to produce great art, any more than one needs to sacrifice artistic integrity or authenticity on the altar of tradition. Manet took up Baudelaire’s challenge to paint the beauty of modern life and discovered anew the human person; regardless of the scene, the human subject stands out in luminescent glory from the canvas. And as Manet’s most provocative painting, “Olympia,” demonstrates, respecting one’s cultural inheritance does not mean mindlessly aping the past. Manet’s paintings challenge and provoke precisely because they are in dialogue with the tradition – from Velasquez and Goya to Poussin and Watteau. An artist need not slavishly follow the rules, but subverting them does require first knowing what they are and why they exist.<sup>64</sup>

Modernists also show how the tradition is a repository of spiritual forms that challenge contemporary mores and pretensions. Composers like Poulenc in his *Les Dialogues des Carmélites* remind us of the power of music to express the grandeur of self-sacrifice and martyrdom; and painters like Hopper – dismissed as passé by Greenberg many years ago – show us the power of figurative art to convey the melancholy of isolation amidst abundance.<sup>65</sup> As Scruton argues, far from being a dispensable luxury, we need beautiful artwork all the more in our spiritless and dispirited age.<sup>66</sup>

In the wake of two devastating world wars, however, when we most needed redemption, the culturally sophisticated rejected the power of beauty to transfigure our world. When we needed to be reminded of our humanity, brutalist architecture exemplified the trend of much of the postwar avant-garde: to dispense with ornamentation, to prioritize function over form, and to value utility over beauty served only to underscore that we were, in reality, brutes. But rather than being realistic and practical, art without beauty and architecture without adornment confirm our worst suspicions about ourselves – that we are essentially egoistic creatures

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61) See Scruton, “The Philosophical Hedonist Danto on Art.”

62) Eliot, “Tradition and Talent.”

63) Scruton, *Untimely Tracts*, 55.

64) Examples could be multiplied endlessly, but to select just two: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Scruton calls “the greatest work of modernist literature,” reaches back not only to the origins of Western poetry but also to Dante and Tennyson, who presented their own versions of “willy Odysseus.” Similarly, one of Shostakovich’s most unsettling operas is an interpretation of an 1865 novella by Nikolai Leskov, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, which is itself a magnificent transformation of one of Shakespeare’s most memorable characters.

65) Scruton, *Beauty*, 142, and 157. Cf. Scruton’s discussion of Robert Lowe in “In Praise of Bourgeois Art” in *Untimely Tracts*.

66) Scruton, *Beauty*, 139–48.

animated solely by petty ambition and crass materialism. Art that trumpeted its social significance, its liberating potential, and its engagement with radical politics was often centrally preoccupied with debunking the culture's most cherished values, intent on proving that any apparent virtue masked a grave crime. As the cult of desecration became the creed of high culture, the avant-garde succeeded in further denuding our common world: not only had the gods fled, but so too had truth, goodness, and beauty. In our frenzied pursuit of the effectual truth, we strip the surface bare, forgetting that we live on the surface.

Yet as Scruton's numerous aesthetic reflections demonstrate, beautiful art is in fact often the deepest form of social critique, the most serious challenge to political injustice, and the gravest rebuke of moral evil. Moreover, such artistic works need not be the province of an elite or a privileged caste; great art can be radically democratic. *Pace* Adorno, the quintessential American art form, Jazz, illustrates the potential of democratic art to serve the ends of social justice.<sup>67</sup> Consider the works of Billie Holiday: there is no more disturbing depiction of Jim Crow racism than Billie Holiday's 1939 rendering of "Strange Fruit,"<sup>68</sup> no more profound meditation on the existential despair of modern life than the haunting refrains of "Gloomy Sunday," no more realistic depiction of the pain and madness of erotic love than her 1957 performance of "Fine and Mellow," recorded before a live studio audience under the auspices of that most bourgeois institution, CBS. Such works are not consoling illusions peddling cheap satisfactions, but unsurpassed acts of social critique which continue to disturb, unsettle, and challenge us precisely because they are extraordinarily beautiful. As Wynton Marsalis has demonstrated time and again throughout his career, the musical tradition and America's peculiar cultural inheritance remain capable of ennobling the human, educating the citizen, and reminding the individual of human frailty without ever losing sight of human excellence. His extraordinary 1989 album "The Majesty of the Blues" reminds us that there rose "in the third century of American slavery" a form of music that "sought to elevate through elegance," which denied the "ignoble proclivities of the marketplace," and was animated by a desire to depict "in music the presence and the power and the possibilities of the human spirit" – an art form that contributed to the resurrection of America in full awareness of slavery as "the cross upon which the Constitution of this nation was crucified." In this album, Marsalis recalls the heroism of great artists like Duke Ellington, who "spoke through music" of human dignity, and in whose music we "felt ourselves made whole."<sup>69</sup> The truth exemplified by the history of American Jazz is precisely the truth Scruton's aesthetic philosophy aims to teach: beautiful art is integral to the infinite task of human redemption.

Scruton's admonition that we must turn back towards beauty stems from his recognition that "implicit in our sense of beauty is the thought of community – of the agreement in judgments that makes social life possible and worthwhile."<sup>70</sup> As we have seen, painting, music, dance, and architecture all compel us to participate in an intersubjective encounter with another point of view – a universal point of view, which emphasizes what we have in common with other human beings. Taking art as a basis for understanding the human, then, produces an account that recognizes that the human cannot be understood in isolation. We are at our most human when we are with others, and an aesthetic anthropology emphasizes this fact. Yet art calls us to encounter the universal point of view in such a way that the universal point of view does not obliterate the particular point of view of the human individual; rather, art can hold the particular and the universal aspects of the human in tandem

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67) Cf. Scruton, *Understanding Music*, 16–18, 213–18.

68) Billie Holiday's adaptation of the 1937 poem "Bitter Fruit," written by the Jewish high school teacher Abel Meeropol, first appeared in a *Teachers Union* publication.

69) Marsalis, *The Majesty of the Blues*. Quotations are from the fourth movement, "Premature Autopsies (Sermon)," written by Stanley Crouch and performed by Jeremiah Wright.

70) Scruton, *Beauty*, 134.

without collapsing either. Thus, beautiful painting shows us a world in which all parts harmonize, a world that accords both with the individual vision of the painter and our common desire for order; beautiful music invites us into an acousmatic space that opens us up to the transcendent even as we feel we are encountering another purposive individual; beautiful dance shows how the freedom of individual dancers gives rise to the common pattern that they follow together; and beautiful architecture shapes the spaces in which individuals live such that they can be at home in their communal environment.

A philosophical anthropology which takes our longing for and experience of the beautiful seriously avoids the reductionism of “nothing buttery” and the spiritual desolation of the “cult of repudiation.” Such an account of the human is able to save the appearances and thus to ground the truth of the *Lebenswelt*. It can do justice to the world in which we live as individuals and in which we experience ourselves as free – the world in which we find things beautiful or ugly, in which we love and grieve, in which we form communities with one another – instead of degrading this world as “nothing but” configurations of matter, evolutionary advantageous instincts, and blind power struggles. Attending to our aesthetic experience teaches us that we need not sacrifice the truth of the world disclosed to the first-person perspective on the altar of universal, objective truth. Instead of the universality of positivism, which eschews the “subjective” in its search for “objective” truth, beautiful art points us towards a more human universality: the universal point of view that belongs to each individual *qua* human being, that is “no one’s and therefore everyone’s,” and that thus does not require us to deny our human hope for belonging.

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