A STUDY OF THE FORMALISTIC THEORY OF BEAUTY

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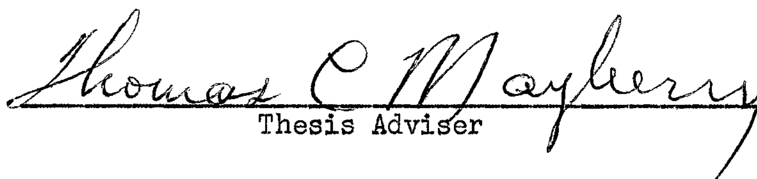

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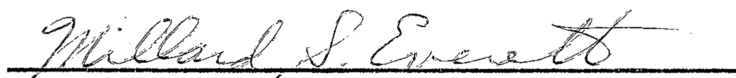

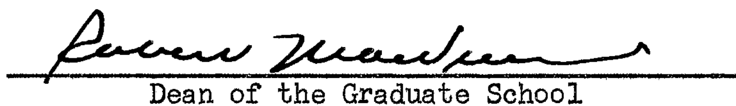

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORMALISM	7
	Clive Bell	7
	Roger Fry	9
	R. H. Wilenski	10
	Hunter Mead	12
III.	FORMALISM AS AN AESTHETIC THEORY	16
	The Aesthetic Attitude	16
	The Aesthetic Experience	18
	Aesthetic Value	20
	The Status of Aesthetic Value	22
IV.	FORMALISM APPLIED TO ART AND NATURE	25
	Painting	25
	Sculpture	29
	Music	31
	Literature	33
	Nature	34
V.	CRITICAL EVALUATION OF FORMALISM	37
VI.	AN ALTERNATIVE AESTHETIC THEORY	46
VII.	CONCLUSION	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY		58

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has been a period of radical change within the arts. In this century the traditional styles, methods, and attitudes of the artists have been going through what could possibly be called a revolution--a revolution toward objectivism and abstractionism, of configuration or form. This, of course, is not to imply that before the twentieth century art was static and homogeneous in nature or that all twentieth century art reflects this modern movement. But this modern revolutionary-like movement does reflect a major change in a great part of the arts, for the movement of new ideas, styles, and attitudes--of art for art's sake, as it is often called--can easily be seen in some of the major divisions of recent art, painting, sculpture, and music, for example.

In painting, such artists as Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Juan Miró, and Paul Klee, to name only a few, have been creating works of art which stress abstract form. Sometimes this movement is called cubism when the artist attempts to reduce objects of nature to their stereometrical and geometrical aspects.[1] At other times, this movement is simply labeled abstractionism when the artist attempts to completely ignore representational notions and instead concentrates solely on pure line and

[1]Hugo C. Beigel, Art Appreciation (New York, 1949), pp. 173-178.

form.[2] Regardless of the term applied, however, the movement stresses configuration--unified form.

In sculpture, Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Jacques Lipchitz, and Alexander Archipenko stand out as leading exponents of configuration. In their sculptures life-like connotations are generally avoided. Instead, the sculptor, whatever material he is working with, attempts to "divine its nature and realize its potentialities without forcing it to simulate something else."[3]

In music, during the early part of the century, a movement of neo-classicism developed in which many features of seemingly pure configuration were stressed. Within this movement such composers as Igor Stravinsky and Paul Hindemith attempted to create, in some of their works, music in which pictorial or specific emotional connotations were avoided. These composers valued clarity, modality, atonality, polytonality, balance, and codification. In short, these composers tended to be "more impersonal, intellectual, and abstract than personal, emotional, and programmatic."[4]

The impact of this modern movement has elicited a varied response from the public throughout the world. Often the movement has frightened people because of its apparent cold obsession with lifeless abstractions and radical departure from what is usually considered to be art, namely, imitation. A visit to a museum or to an art gallery displaying some of these modern compositions will almost certainly confirm these statements. If

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[2]Hugo C. Beigel, Art Appreciation (New York, 1949), pp. 173-178.

[3]William Fleming, Arts and Ideas (New York, 1961), pp. 749-750.

[4]Leonard G. Ratner, Music--The Listener's Art (New York, 1957), pp. 307-313.

one listens very carefully to the comments of other visitors he will often hear statements like "it doesn't look like anything" or "my six year old daughter could draw better than that."

Again situations of shock and misunderstanding are not solely confined to the museums of art. For example:

> One of the most famous pieces of modern sculpture, Brancusi's "Bird in Space," was the center of a cause célèbre during the twenties. Since, as one of the trial judges said, the piece "bears no resemblance to a bird," the customs officials ruled that it was not a work of art, and therefore could not enter the United States duty-free. At the trial at which this ruling was challenged, the government posed this question: "Mr. Brancusi claims that this object represents a bird. If you met such a bird out shooting, would you fire?" And yet the judges, in a classic decision, ruled on behalf of the sculptor. In their decision they recognized "the influence of modern schools of art" which have altered our concept of what "art" is.[5]

Another rather typical instance of misunderstanding in regard to modern art, and this time in the concert hall, was once shown in a review by a music critic of the New York Tribune. In the edition published immediately after the concert the following appeared in the critic's column:

> Last night's concert began with a lot of impressionistic daubs of color smeared higgledy-piggledy on a tonal palette, with never a thought of form or purpose except to create new combinations of sounds . . . . One thing only was certain, and that was that the composer's ocean was a frog-pond, and that some of its denizens had got into the throat of every one of the brass instruments.[6]

The work the critic was attacking was Claude Debussy's La Mer.[7]

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[5]Jerome Stolnitz, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism (Boston, 1960), p. 135.

[6]John Tasker Howard and James Lyons, Modern Music (New York, 1958), pp. 11-12.

[7]By making reference to Debussy I am aware that his music usually is not considered to be an example of configuration as used in reference to the movement described in this chapter. However, because of Debussy's

Ironically several years later the same critic reviewed the same work and stated that it was a "poetic work in which Debussy has so wonderously caught the rhythms and colors of the seas."[8]

By now it should be quite evident that this new movement within the arts has caused a great amount of hostility and misunderstanding; that the new works of art, whether they are paintings or musical compositions, have been conceived in such a manner that many of the traditional ideas and methods of evaluation and criticism are no longer appropriate in dealing with them. In order to meet these doubts and misunderstandings, the advocates of this modern movement of configuration in the arts have attempted to formulate an apology or philosophy to explain the ideas behind the movement and to give these ideas a rational foundation. This aesthetic theory generally has been called formalism. In short, formalism represents the intellectual apology of a particular modern movement within the arts--a theory of beauty stressing configuration.

It is the purpose of this study to examine the validity of formalism; to see if formalism is as rational as its exponents believe it to be. This will be carried out by first selecting some of its outstanding leaders and allowing them, through carefully selected passages, to present the key concepts of the theory. The approach in this part of the study will be primarily expository. This will allow the reader, first, to acquaint

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experiments with parallel fifths and his expressed desire to break with the romantic tradition, I am thinking of him as, perhaps, a type of "semi-formalist." At any rate, the newspaper critic's comments were too good to pass up.

[8] John Tasker Howard and James Lyons, Modern Music (New York, 1958), p. 12.

himself with aesthetic terminology and, at the same time, to have the advantage of seeing how the creators of these terms have used and defined them, and secondly, to give the reader some acquaintance with the interesting style of writing of the formalists.

As the study progresses an attempt will be made to analyze formalism systematically; that is, to study the theory in parts and to see how its leaders have attempted to answer some of the traditional problems of aesthetics. Some of these problems are the ones dealing with the aesthetic attitude and experience, the type of value that is being stressed, and the status of this value. The approach used in this part will still be expository but with an emphasis upon analysis.

However, after formalism has been analyzed from all angles, it will then be tested by applying it as a criterion to recognized art forms. The arts and nature, which are generally believed to be rich sources of beauty, will serve as the testing ground. Here the ideas of the formalists will be put into action. In art, painting, music, literature, and sculpture will all be examined as possible sources of beauty as defined through the terms of the theory. Nature will also be carefully studied. Every attempt will be made to be fair and to give the theory a chance to "prove" itself. An attitude of detachment will be assumed to the degree that this is possible in a study of this kind.

Near the latter part of this study formalism will be evaluated. Here a critical attitude will be taken. The theory will be evaluated in reference to its logical consistency and also to the ability of its leaders to use key terms in a clear and sensible manner. Other factors, such as the success of formalists in carrying out their goals in educating public taste, will be examined.

Since formalism will be found inadequate, because of technical problems and dogmatism, in the last part of the study a general theory of beauty will be given. It is hoped that this one will be able to correct the mistakes and weaknesses of formalism and, at the same time, be one that is wide enough in scope to adequately cover most of man's aesthetic experiences.

The purpose of this study is to examine formalism and see what it is like, to test it and see how it works, and to evaluate it and determine if it is a sound theory of beauty. We shall begin by investigating its development.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORMALISM

In the introductory chapter it was shown that formalism represents a philosophy of the new art movement, which stresses the theme of configuration. Formalism is an outgrowth of this new movement—an attempt by serious modern artists, art critics, and philosophers to give a rational basis to the movement, and to justify configuration in art as the criterion of beauty. The objective of the present chapter will be to discuss the growth and nature of the formalistic movement. This will be done by examining the works of some major leaders of the movement. Another object of this chapter will be to show the particular contributions of each formalist discussed. The representatives of formalism that have been chosen are Clive Bell, Roger Fry, R. H. Wilenski, and Hunter Mead. To be sure, these men represent only a part of the movement, but because of the clearness and rather complete scope of their thought, an adequate understanding of formalism can be obtained from a study of their ideas.

Clive Bell

In 1914 the British art critic Clive Bell (1881-1960) published a book entitled _Art_ which, for all intents and purposes, may be regarded as the beginning of the formalistic movement. In this work the outstanding contribution that Bell made to the movement of formalism was to identify "the quality that distinguishes works of art from all other

classes of objects."[1] Bell called this quality "significant form." To Bell "significant form" is a quality of unity or configuration in an art object. It constitutes a type of formal value that is intrinsic, that is, a value good in itself. Significant form is found in a proper balance of the materials in the art object, whether it is a painting, a piece of sculpture, or a symphony. Bell is clear in pointing out that significant form has little or no connection with moral or intellectual values. In a painting, for example, significant form, supposedly the main value of the painting, is, according to Bell, independent of the picture's place in the realm of art history and independent of the "story" which the artist might have given by evoking personal experiences and feelings in the spectator through the use of representational techniques. As Bell comments:

> But the perfect lover, he who can feel the profound significance of form, is raised above the accidents of time and place. To him the problems of archaeology, history, and hagiography are impertinent. If the forms of a work are significant its provenance is irrelevant.[2]

Bell goes on to state that representation has little or nothing to do with "significant form."

> Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life.[3]

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[1] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 17.

[2] Ibid. p. 33

[3] Ibid. p. 27.

In another passage Bell also states:

> You will notice that people who cannot feel pure aesthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can, as often as not, have no idea what the subject of a picture is. They have never noticed the representative element, and so when they discuss pictures they talk about the shapes of forms and the relations and quantities of colours. . . . They are concerned only with lines and colours, their relations and quantities and qualities; but from these they win an emotion more profound and far more sublime than any that can be given by the description of facts and ideas.[4]

By now Bell's position should be clear: the main quality which distinguishes works of art from other objects is significant form--a proper and harmonious balance of line, color, form, texture, and space.

Roger Fry

Another famous British art critic and artist, who was instrumental in the development of formalism, was Roger Fry (1866-1934). He spent his entire life engaged in the world of the arts and was probably one of the greatest British art critics since Ruskin. While a professor of art at Cambridge University, he wrote two books that especially revealed the nature of his opinions on the arts. Those books were, Vision and Design (1921) and Transformations (1927).

Fry's main contribution to the movement of formalism was what he believed to be a clarification of the nature of the aesthetic emotion. Fry's colleague, Clive Bell, was not particularly clear about the nature of aesthetic emotion in the apprehension of what he called "significant form." Fry, however, attempted to be more specific.

Fry continually made a distinction between "pure" and "impure"

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[4]Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), pp. 29-30.

aesthetic emotion. To demonstrate this he wrote an essay entitled "Pure and Impure Art." In this he speaks of the familiar musical composition, "God Save the King," as an example of how "pure" and "impure" art can effect the aesthetic emotion. He says:

> The simplest examples of this can be taken from music . . . if I strike the first six notes of "God Save the King," every one who was not quite music-deaf recognizes that they have, as one would say, a meaning, a purpose. They occur in such a sequence that after each note has been struck we feel that only certain notes can follow and, as the notes follow one another, they more or less adequately fulfill our expectations, that is, from the beginning the idea of a formal design or scheme is impressed on our minds, and anything which departed violently from that would be not merely meaningless, but an outrage to our sense of order and proportion. We have then an immediate recognition of formal design . . . . Now let us suppose that you hear "God Save the King" for the first time . . . it would probably stir up no image whatever in your mind, would be associated with no particular person or thing or idea. But those particular notes have become associated with many other things in our minds, so that when they are played we no longer can fix our minds on the form, we are instantly invaded by the associated feelings of loyalty, devotion to country . . . this simple case presents in easy form some of the problems which confront us in works of art of all kinds. The form of a work of art has a meaning of its own and the contemplation of the form in and for itself gives rise in some people to a special emotion which does not depend upon the association of the form with anything else whatever.[5]

From this Fry concluded that many people never have a genuine aesthetic emotion; simply because they have the habit of associating matters of everyday life with art. And as a result of this, people have "impure" aesthetic emotions. They allow impure factors to crowd out pure emotion and, hence they never experience real beauty. This was Fry's basic contribution to formalism.

R. H. Wilenski

Another art critic who has played a great role in the development of

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[5]Roger Fry, "Pure and Impure Art," A Modern Book of Aesthetics, ed. Melvin Rader (New York, 1960), pp. 305-306.

formalism as a theory of beauty was R. H. Wilenski (1887-1954). Wilenski, an Englishman, published in 1927 a book entitled The Modern Movement in Art. This book has been highly respected for its originality and clearness of thought. In it Wilenski clarified what he believed to be the motive behind the modern art movement of configuration. This motive was the architectural or classical ideal:

> The idea behind the modern movement in art is a return to the architectural or classical ideal. It is fundamentally a reaction not only against the various degenerate forms of nineteenth century art but also against the romantic movement of the nineteenth century in its purest and most original forms. It is thus, I submit, in line with the general orientation of contemporary thought. Romantic art assumes that the artist is more important than art, and that the artist's emotional personality should dominate his work. Classical art assumes that art is greater than the artist, and that the artist is merely a link between the spectator and some universal order, which man, as such, is always seeking to discover.[6]

With this belief in mind, Wilenski proceeded to attack the art movements of romanticism, naturalism, and representationalism, because of what he believed to be their degeneration of technique. These movements, he said, have strayed from the "classical ideal." Wilenski demonstrated this degeneration in such painters as Vincent van Gogh, Honoré Daumier, Edgar Degas, Eugene Delacroix, and John Constable. In the paintings of Paul Cézanne and George Seurat in the late nineteenth century, however, he found a reconstruction or revival of the "classical ideal." He says that they have:

> . . . abandoned the emotive technique of the original romantics and the various degenerate forms of 'free' emotive handling that derive from it; they have abandoned the daguerreotype 'all-in' naturalism of the Pre-Raphaelites and their imitators which was based on a misconception of the camera's vision; the photographic naturalism of Corot in his middle period and all the other imitations

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[6] R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1927), p. ix.

of the camera's true vision, particularly the degraded procedures known as 'drawing by the shadows' and painting 'by the tone values' in tinted greys; and all forms of derivative techniques imitating the particular way of painting of some artists living or dead.[7]

In another passage Wilenski states:

Both Seurat and Cézanne . . . succeeded in combining representational elements in pictures the subjects of which are as formal as the Parthenon; and it may be that the years which have passed since they died have produced no more perfect solutions of this particular problem. Cézanne arrived at his discovery by studying classical architectural art in the museums and by turning his back on the romantic heresy.[8]

Wilenski believes that the "classical ideal" has once again gained full actualization in the modern art movements of cubism and abstractionism. He believes that these movements, with their emphasis upon configuration, demonstrate the true value of art:

The man, therefore, who can truly understand the formal problems solved by the original architectural artists of the past is prepared for the understanding of the art of the modern movement . . . . True appreciation of this kind of art marks an enlargement of the spectator's experience of the architecture of the universe which is in itself a fresh adjustment on his part of life.[9]

Hunter Mead

Hunter Mead (1905-), a professor of philosophy at the California Institute of Technology, represents the contemporary part of the formalistic movement. His basic contribution to the movement of formalism is found in his book, An Introduction to Aesthetics, published in 1952. In this book he has contributed to the content of the formalistic movement

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[7] R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1927), pp. 123-124.

[8] Ibid. pp. 131-132.

[9] Ibid. p. 190.

with a detailed study of the nature of the aesthetic experience.

Professor Mead first believes that, as a prerequisite to a genuine aesthetic experience, one must be in a proper aesthetic mood. The proper aesthetic mood or attitude is one of detachment, disinterestedness, and impersonality. Detachment means that mood in which "we are for the moment released from the ordinary practical concerns of daily living."[10] Disinterestedness refers to that mood in which "we are content to be absorbed in beholding or in listening, and there is no desire to possess, utilize, or in any way exploit the aesthetic object for our selfish ends or private 'interests'."[11] And the impersonality factor in the aesthetic mood is one in which "Our personal desires, goals, hopes, and fears are temporarily suspended . . . ."[12]

From the development of a proper aesthetic mood Mead believes that a genuine aesthetic experience can be had. When one is in a proper aesthetic mood, associational factors, such as moral, ethical, and religious feelings, are not likely to appear. Instead there will appear the factor of form, supposedly the main element in the aesthetic experience. From this Mead then concludes that the aesthetic experience is "the pleasurable contemplation of perceptual relations discoverable in phenomena."[13] He explains:

> Thus the "perceptual aspects" of things provide us with the building blocks, so to speak, for constructing aesthetic experiences. In terms of our threefold division of experience into sensations,

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[10]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 13.

[11]Ibid. p. 13.

[12]Ibid. p. 13.

[13]Ibid. p. 35.

percepts, and concepts, we see that, while sensations are of cognitive significance only as raw material for percepts, the percepts themselves can in turn be utilized in two different ways by the mind. First (and most frequently) they may constitute the raw material from which concepts are formed. The chief value of these concepts is to classify objects in order to deal with them in some way . . . . Second, percepts may be used as raw material for organizing more complicated perceptual patterns. These patterns may range in complexity from those which combine two or three simple perceptual elements (as, for example, a checkerboard design) to ones of such richness that years of acquaintance are required to exhaust all their perceptual possibilities . . . . The essence of the aesthetic experience lies in the discovery and enjoyment of these perceptual patterns, regardless of their simplicity or complexity.[14]

However, Professor Mead cautions:

> While we have defined the aesthetic experience as the pleasurable contemplation of perceptual relations, this should not be understood as limiting the experience to only such perceptions as are pleasing in or by themselves, before they enter into these relations . . . . The pleasure comes in perceiving or contemplating the relation itself, rather than the elements related. These of course may be pleasant in themselves; on the other hand they may be neutral, or perhaps somewhat unpleasant, when considered as independent entities apart from related perceptions.[15]

These quotations lead to the idea that modern art is one outstanding source of perceptual beauty. And as a conclusion, Mead states that with its emphasis upon design, the modern painting could be "an inexhaustible mine of aesthetic satisfactions."[16]

The four men that have been discussed and quoted all have given something unique to the formalistic movement and an attempt has been made to show this. Bell, one of the first representatives, attempted to clarify problems relating to the nature of the beautiful art object. That is, he was trying to determine the thing that distinguishes the art object from

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[14]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), pp. 34-35.

[15]Ibid. p. 37.

[16]Ibid. p. 39.

other objects. Bell believed that he found the answer in significant form. Fry contributed to the movement with new insights regarding the nature of the aesthetic emotion. Fry believed that pure aesthetic emotion is attainable only when one is detached from associational feelings coming from the affairs of daily life. One might say that Bell was concerned with the objective aspects of beauty, the art object, and Fry, with the subjective aspects, the aesthetic emotion.

Wilenski, on the other hand, was interested in motives and, in this way, gave a great contribution to the movement. He believed that the architectural ideal, the desire for perceptual objectivity, was the motive behind modern art. And, lastly, Mead, the only living representative of formalism selected, was seen to have given much to the theory with his careful studies of the aesthetic experience. Mead concluded that the basic nature of the aesthetic experience is the contemplation of perceptual relations.

Thus with a study of the four selected leaders, one can see how each man gave substance to the theory, and see how the theory gradually unfolded with certain problems being brought to the forefront by each man. To be sure, one must not think that these men were concerned only with the aesthetic problems mentioned in this chapter. Bell and Fry, along with the others have written extensively on all aspects of aesthetics. But their outstanding contributions fell only in small areas, generally the ones mentioned in this chapter. Therefore, with the four notions of "significant form," "pure aesthetic emotion," "the architectural ideal," and the "contemplation of perceptual relations" in mind, one should have a good introduction to formalism. The implications of these notions will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

FORMALISM AS AN AESTHETIC THEORY

In this chapter the objective will be to analyze and to elaborate upon the contents of chapter two. This will be done by studying some of the major concepts implied in the formalistic theory of beauty. These concepts can be studied systematically under four topics:

(1) The Aesthetic Attitude

(2) The Aesthetic Experience

(3) Aesthetic Value

(4) The Status of Aesthetic Value

A systematic discussion of these four topics, coupled with the selected passages of the last chapter, should present the basic message of the formalistic theory of beauty, the first step in the goal of determining the adequacy of this theory.

The Aesthetic Attitude

According to the position of some prominent modern and contemporary formalists who were discussed in chapter two, the factor of proper aesthetic attitude is extremely important if one wishes to have an aesthetic experience. Formalism, in fact, is probably one of the most rigorous of all theories of beauty regarding the necessity of proper aesthetic attitude as a prerequisite to the aesthetic experience.

The common concept running through the statements of the formalists, in regard to the proper aesthetic attitude, is that of mental dissociation. Formalists are always stressing the importance of breaking the connection between our personal lives and the object of beauty that we apprehend. Mental dissociation is important because it is the only way to appreciate beauty. The beautiful object that we apprehend must be separated from the personal aspect of our lives in order that our full capacity to sense its configuration is not in any way hampered. Absolutely nothing but the object of beauty must occupy our minds. This means that the observer must dissociate himself from everything which does not directly concern the object. Formalists emphasize that the essence of beauty is configuration, and, due to the complexity of configuration, complete attention and concentration is required.

Formalism, then, is a theory of beauty that will probably appeal only to a well disciplined person, a person capable of putting himself into a contemplative mood at will. For some people this is apparently very difficult.

> Like the traditional Babbitt of the business world, they find it next to impossible to shift gears (or, more precisely, to shift attitudes) from a mood of efficient absorption in everyday "affairs," with their involved networks of means and ends, to a mood which requires detachment from such aims and efforts. The life long habit of regarding everything from a "practical" standpoint has become too deeply ingrained to be discarded at will . . . .[1]

By the standards of formalism the traditional "Babbitt," a man besieged with practical interests, will never, or at least very rarely, have a genuine aesthetic experience.[2] To a "Babbitt" the lesson of

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[1]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 15.

[2]The reference to "Babbitt" is taken from Sinclair Lewis' novel, Babbitt.

formalism is never understood because there is always the factor of personal association blocking his apprehension of beauty. Never, says the formalist, is he capable of sensing the delicate and somewhat complex essence of pure form.

Another type of improper attitude which formalists often inveigh against, is sentimentalism.[3] This is the habit of introducing personal emotional feelings into objects of aesthetic beauty. Examples of this can be found in people who tie in the emotions of fear, sympathy, and nostalgia, for example, with objects of beauty. These people cannot sever their own personal feelings from the aesthetic experience. They cannot experience the essence of beauty, which is configuration, because they allow their emotions to "run" away. According to the standards of formalism a person like this:

> . . . is enjoying a pseudo-aesthetic experience. He may be "thrilled," he may be "carried away" or rendered speechless and will-less by the experience, but he is not being moved by an aesthetic emotion.[4]

The aesthetic emotion, to the formalist, is emotion _about_ the object of beauty. And the aesthetic attitude is very important because it allows the observer to prepare himself for this experience. Formalists believe that only with complete _mental dissociation_ can the observer have a genuine aesthetic experience.

The Aesthetic Experience

Formalists believe that the aesthetic experience is the process in

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[3]A detailed discussion of the evils of aesthetic sentimentalism is given in chapter seven in Mead's _An Introduction to Aesthetics_.

[4]Hunter Mead, _An Introduction to Aesthetics_ (New York, 1952), p. 53.

which the observer, after preparing himself by getting into the proper aesthetic mood, experiences beauty. The key concept implied in formalistic thought regarding the aesthetic experience is the apprehension of perceptual relationships which display configuration. This means that the aesthetic experience is a process in which the observer experiences beauty as percepts and sensations in harmonious form.

By the term "sensation" I am referring to the "stimuli received through our sense organs, particularly the exteroceptors--the organs which bring us reports concerning our environment."[5] This means that through sensation we experience the simplest types of sense data. Blobs of color or single tones of sound are good examples. By "percepts" I am referring to "organized groups of sensations which cluster together . . . and serve to indicate things in the physical environment . . . ."[6] One might define percepts as "sensations plus meaning."[7] In other words, we have percepts of all physical objects.

Of the two elements in the experience of beauty, percepts and sensations, the formalist places the greatest emphasis upon percepts. Sensation is a factor and might be in a very rare instance the sole component of the aesthetic experience (i.e. Blobs of color or single tones of sound). But generally, sensations are believed to be too simple in nature. The enjoyment of a painting by Picasso or a symphony by Roy Harris certainly is not derived from simple sensations. Their structure, like most works of art and objects of beauty, are perceptually very complex. Hence, the

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[5]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 29.

[6]Ibid. p. 30.

[7]Ibid. p. 30.

stress upon perception as the basic element of the aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, concepts are not believed to be a part of the aesthetic experience. Formalists believe that concepts are of great use in dealing with problems in epistemology, ontology, ethics, logic, science, and mathematics, but are of no use in matters of beauty.[8] To a formalist, beauty is a harmonious combination of lines, textures, colors, space, shades, and forms--perceptual relationships. Nowhere is there room for concepts in beauty. As Hunter Mead states:

> . . . however vivid and primary sensation may be, and however inclusive, important, and intellectually consummatory conceptual thought may be, aesthetic experience has little to do with either of these two levels of mental activity. The aesthetic realm involves our perceptual activity; and, just as philosophy, mathematics, and pure science represent the culmination of man's conceptual life, so aesthetic experience (at least in its richer and more complex instances) represents the culmination of our perceptual life.[9]

The last sentence in the quotation gives the essence of the formalists' position: The aesthetic experience is the culmination of our <u>perceptual</u> life. Thus, the basic concept in formalism regarding the aesthetic experience is the <u>perceptual apprehension of configuration</u>. This concept lies behind the statements of Bell, Fry, Wilenski, and Mead.

Aesthetic Value

Aestheticians have traditionally classified aesthetic values into three types--material, formal, and associational.[10] Of these three types of aesthetic values, the formalists, as their title might lead one to expect, have generally stressed formal value.

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[8]Hunter Mead, <u>An Introduction to Aesthetics</u> (New York, 1952), pp. 30-31.

[9]Ibid. p. 31.

[10]Ibid. pp. 81-120.

Formal value is the value which resides in percepts. As seen in the discussion of the aesthetic experience, perceptual relations are believed to be the foundation of beauty. This, in other words, means that formal value is the foundation of the experience of beauty. When a great painting, for example, is purchased and preserved in a museum, it is valued because of the formal value the painting possesses. When a symphony is acclaimed a "classic," it is acclaimed because of its formal value.

At times, however, the formalist may recognize the existence of material value in an object of beauty. But since material value is the value of sensations, the formalist is apt to classify it as a value too simple in nature to associate it with the complex structure which an object of beauty generally manifests. Formalists then very rarely speak of objects of material value as objects of outstanding beauty.

Associational value, on the other hand, is given absolutely no place in the realm of beauty by the formalist. The reason is that associational values are essentially conceptual. They are:

> . . . satisfactions produced by the contemplation of ideational, verbal, or emotional content or by the excitation of sentimental associations. These satisfactions arise from the realization of what the work is about--that is, the subject, theme, story, or situation--or from indulging sentimental or other types of associations aroused directly or indirectly by the aesthetic object.[11]

A formalist would agree that concepts are of great value in religious or ethical experiences, but are of absolutely no value in the aesthetic experience. Associational value is believed to have nothing to do with beauty. One reason why the formalist is so insistent about wanting the observer to be in a proper aesthetic mood is to make sure that he does not confuse his system of values; to prevent the observer from mixing

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[11] Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 101.

ethical and religious values with a thing of true beauty.

The Status of Aesthetic Value

Are the aesthetic values of which the formalist speaks objective or subjective in nature? In other words, where is the location of aesthetic value? Are aesthetic values in the objects of beauty, or are they in the mind of the observer? The formalist answers that aesthetic values are objective. The formalist might take material value as the first example. Even though the formalist might believe that material values are weak aesthetically because of their simplicity, he is apt to state that they are probably the most objective of all:

> The first type of value, that arising from the perceptual enjoyment of material--its colors, shapes, textures, and sounds, independent of any form or "meaning"--is undoubtedly the most likely candidate for universality. The tactile and visual enjoyment of a polished or delicately granulated surface; the pleasure of handling certain textiles, such as silk and velvet; the visual satisfaction from the perception of many colors, particularly when they have intense embodiment in jewels or stained glass; the auditory enjoyment of certain tonal timbres; the sensuous delight in some odors--all these varieties of experience possess what appears to be universal appeal, excepting only those individuals whose sensory equipment is deficient in some way or temporarily disorganized by illness or drugs. Hence we may conclude that material values possess a high degree of objectivity, probably as high as any secondary quality can have.[12]

Thus, the belief in the objectivity of material value seems plausible. Certain metals, gems, and furs appear to have universal appeal. Gold and diamonds are widely acclaimed as potential objects of beauty provided, says the formalist, that they are apprehended in a proper aesthetic mood--a mood of mental dissociation.

Formal value, supposedly the basic core of the aesthetic experience,

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[12] Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 163.

is also believed by the formalist to be an objective value. Formal values, however, because of their complexity, have led some people to consider them "in some way less 'real' (i.e. less objective) than those things which are perceivable without training"—material values, for example.[13] But in rebuttal, the formalist defends his belief in the objectivity of formal values:

> Modern psychology can find no valid basis for a distinction between "natural" and "acquired" tastes. If the phenomena (in this case, certain formal relationships) are perceivable by all who have learned where to look and how to recognize them, then their objectivity is no less genuine than that of some phenomenon which is too apparent to escape perception by even the dullest mind. There are undoubtedly those whose sensory equipment or intelligence is so deficient as to prevent perception of certain types of formal relations, but these abnormal instances do not affect the "universality" of formal values among trained persons, any more than the large percentage of color-blind individuals challenges the "universality" of man's color experience.[14]

And from this Mead concludes:

> . . . that formal aesthetic values possess objective existence just as do material or sensuous values—admitting, however, that perception of the former is usually more difficult and consequently more dependent upon perceptual effort or experience (or both) than the enjoyment of material values.[15]

When the formalist makes a value-judgment, he is making a judgment about objective value. Aesthetic value is in no way dependent upon the spectator. A formalist would then believe that even if all the people on the earth were to perish there would still exist aesthetic value. The only problem here, the formalist might say, is that there would be no one around to experience the things of beauty. One might say that the formalist "ascribes value to the work as though beauty were something 'out

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[13]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 165.

[14]Ibid. p. 165.

[15]Ibid. p. 166.

there,' . . . ."[16]

One, however, might be led to suspect the formalist of advocating aesthetic subjectivism when he speaks of proper aesthetic "attitude" or aesthetic "emotion." But the formalist would quickly state that the aesthetic "attitude" or the aesthetic "emotion" is not the object of the aesthetic experience. They merely represent the necessary "preparation" and "after-effects" of the observer's experience with the thing of beauty. In other words, the thing of beauty is not the aesthetic attitude or the aesthetic emotion. The thing that is valued aesthetically is an objective entity, something "out there," so to speak, not an internal attitude or emotion within the observer.

When the formalist locates aesthetic value in objective entities he is, in a sense, stating that aesthetic value can be defined; that aesthetic value is something within the range of public observation something universal and intrinsic.[17]

In short, formalism is a theory of beauty stressing a definite kind of aesthetic attitude, experience, and value. The aesthetic attitude must be an attitude of _mental dissociation_. The aesthetic experience must be an experience of _apprehending perceptual relationships_. The value must be _formal_ and _objective_.

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[16] Jerome Stolnitz, _Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism_ (Boston 1960), p. 390.

[17] Ibid. p. 405.

CHAPTER IV

FORMALISM APPLIED TO ART AND NATURE

One aspect of formalism that must be examined is that regarding the source of beauty. In chapter three it was seen that according to the formalists the essence of beauty is form. But where is this form to be found? In art? In nature? If so, in what kind of art or what part of nature? If not in art or nature, where else and why? In other words, where does the formalist find the formal beauty that he loves so well? This chapter will answer these questions.

Since the scope of art is traditionally very large it will be necessary, for the sake of clearness, to discuss only four major divisions of art--painting, sculpture, music, and literature.[1] Nature in general will be discussed as a possible further source of beauty.

Painting

The formalist believes that painting is a very fruitful source of formal beauty. In fact, as seen in chapter one, it was the development of two modern schools of painting, cubism and abstractionism, which sparked the birth of formalism. The painter with his ability to create lines, color relationships, imaginary volumes, forms, and textures has

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[1]Thomas Munro, "Four Hundred Arts and Types of Art: A Classified List," _Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism_, Vol. XVI, September, 1957, pp. 44-65.

the means to create works of complex configuration.

Those paintings most valued by formalists are usually the products of modern art. Cubism, a movement which developed after the turn of the century, and one which attempted to extract the stereometrical and geometrical elements out of nature is valued highly. Cubistic artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse are believed to be first-class creators of configuration.[2] Abstractionism, another twentieth century movement, is highly valued. Abstractionists such as Paul Klee, Juan Miró, Max Ernst, and Wassily Kandinsky are frequently lauded.[3]

However, a great amount of modern art is criticized by formalists. Expressionism is disliked because of its excessive associational overtones. This would include expressionistic paintings created by Marc Chagall, Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, and Oskar Kokoschka. Surrealism, with its exaggeration of particular representative figures, is disliked. Futurism, with its dynamic effort to put motion and energy into life, is viewed with disfavor. Also, symbolism and secessism are criticized.

In the late nineteenth century post-impressionism was a dominant movement in painting, and some formalists look upon the paintings of its leader, Paul Cézanne, as works of genuine configuration. Clive Bell states:

> What the future will owe to Cézanne we cannot guess: what contemporary art owes to him it would be hard to compute. Without him the artists of genius and talent who to-day delight us with the significance and originality of their work might have remained portbound forever, ill-discerning their objective, wanting chart, rudder, and compass. Cézanne is the Christopher Columbus of a new continent of form.[4]

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[2] R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1926), pp. 160-161.

[3] Ibid. pp. 152-153.

[4] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 139.

Some of the other so-called post-impressionists, however, are not looked upon with such enthusiasm. Vincent van Gogh is sometimes criticized for being too sensational. Paul Gauguin is sometimes criticized for being too representational.[5]

The impressionistic painters are generally not liked.[6] Formalists dislike their paintings for having only color and little or no design. Hence, H. E. Degas, Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Auguste Renoir are often looked upon as masters of color and little else. Roger Fry believes that:

> . . . their extreme preoccupation with atmosphere effects tended to destroy any clear and logical articulation of volumes within the picture space. It also destroyed the surface organisation of the picture more completely than had ever been done hitherto.[7]

Naturalism, represented by painters Käthe Kollwitz, Théophile Steinlen, and Max Klinger, and realism, represented by painters Gustav Courbet, J. H. Daumier, John Constable, and Jean Baptiste Corot, are down graded by formalists as nothing but imitative movements that cared very little for formal beauty. Bell states:

> About the middle of the nineteenth century art was as nearly dead as art can be. The road ran drearily through the sea-level swamps. . . . the mass of painting and sculpture had sunk to something that no intelligent and cultivated person would dream of calling art.[8]

Rococo paintings are also given weak appraisals.[9] Rococo painters

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[5] Roger Fry, Transformations (Garden City, 1956), p. 271.

[6] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), pp. 131-132.

[7] Roger Fry, Transformations (Garden City, 1956), p. 289.

[8] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 121.

[9] Roger Fry, Transformations (Garden City, 1956), p. 165.

such as Antoine Watteau, Francois Boucher, and Jean Baptiste Greuze were too concerned with the passion of individualism and not objective form.

However, some Baroque painters are lauded by formalists. The paintings of Anton van Dyck, Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velazquez, and Nicolas Poussin often contain good form, enough at least to impress some formalists.[10] The Renaissance paintings often get varied comments. Bell believed the Renaissance to be "nothing more than a big kink in the long slope . . . ."[11] Fry, on the other hand, had a few words of praise for the paintings of Fra Angelico, Guidi Masaccio, Raphael Santi, and Sandro Botticelli.[12]

Most formalists likewise share the opinion that the paintings of the Christian era are not particularly laudable. This is so because of the religious purpose and theme so often interwoven into the structure of the paintings. This would make the value of the paintings of Giotto di Bondone, Rogier van der Weyden, and Lippo Memmi, for example, too sentimental and conceptual in nature to possess adequate formal beauty. As Bell speaks of Giotto:

> For Giotto could be intentionally second-rate. He was capable of sacrificing form to drama and anecdote. He never left the essential out, but he sometimes knocked its corners off. He was always more interested in art than in St. Francis, but he did not always remember that St. Francis has nothing whatever to do with art.[13]

In short, painting is one of the favorite visual arts of the formalists

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[10]R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1926), p. 226.

[11]Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 109.

[12]Roger Fry, Transformations (Garden City, 1956), pp. 131-133.

[13]Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 103.

provided that it meets his rigid standards. And all in all, probably only a small proportion of the paintings ever created by the masters of the past would meet these standards.[14]

Sculpture

The formalist believes that sculpture is also a fruitful type of art capable of displaying configuration. With the tri-dimensional quality of sculpture the artist can build an unusually satisfying system of lines, masses, and planes. However, due to the strict rules of formalism, the artist cannot make sculpture a way of giving plastic form to psychic values. Nor can the artist imitate organic life and at the same time do justice to formal beauty. The beautiful work of sculpture to a formalist is one that solely exploits form and nothing else.[15]

Traditionally some of the favorite sculptors, that formalists often praise, are the abstractionists. Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Alexander Archipenko, and Jacques Lipchitz are favorites. Brancusi's well known _Bird in Space_ has been highly praised. Wilenski pays Brancusi the highest possible compliment:

> Brancusi believes that the formal order with which he seeks to attain contact is inseparable from the physical stone or metal upon which he is working; and this deep-seated respect for his material determines throughout the character of his supremely classical and

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[14]This is only an estimate.

[15]Professor Louis Flaccus has classified the uses of sculpture into four types: (1) Using sculpture to exploit sensuous material; (2) using sculpture to build a satisfactory system of lines, masses, and planes; (3) using sculpture to imitate organic life; and (4) using sculpture to give psychic values objective form. Louis W. Flaccus, _The Spirit and Substance of Art_ (New York, 1937), pp. 112-113.

architectural art.[16]

On the other hand, expressionistic and impressionistic sculpture, along with naturalistic, realistic, primitivistic, and romantic sculpture, are given little praise. These schools of sculpture all fail to accentuate the essence of beauty--perceptual configuration. And, hence, according to the standards of formalism they are inferior.

Some of the older traditions of sculpture are given some praise by various formalists. The classicists, who lived near the beginning of the nineteenth century, are often praised; namely, Jean Baptiste Carpeaux, Jean Antoine Houdon, and Bertel Thorwaldsen. However, the Baroque and Renaissance traditions with such well known sculptors as Lorenzo Bernini, Andrea del Verrocchio, and Niccolo Donatello are, as one might expect, only coolly praised.[17] The reason for this is probably the use of representationalism in their works and, also, possibly, the motive of the artists. Some works at this time were created for purposes other than for art itself. As Bell states, "The art of the High Renaissance was conditioned by the demands of its patrons."[18]

Medieval sculpture generally does not impress formalistic critics. However, the sculpture of ancient Greece does. The formalist often delights in studying the ancients' sense for pure form. The Greek emphasis upon the universal, the norm through the particular, is greatly admired.[19]

In brief, if the sculptor uses his media to construct masses, planes,

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[16] R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1928), p. 161.

[17] Ibid. pp. 29, 111.

[18] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 112.

[19] R. H. Wilenski, The Modern Movement in Art (London, 1926), p. 160.

and lines displaying configuration then the formalist will admire him. But if the sculptor uses his media to imitate life or to give visual form to psychic values, he will be criticized. The strict rules of formalism would then probably exclude one-half or more of the well known sculpture traditionally listed in the history of art.

Music

Many formalists believe that music can be a pure expression of configuration.[20] In many ways the musician is endowed with superb tools to construct a work of formal beauty. Rhythm, which can organize and control musical time, and melody with its tones which can give music a meaningful shape, and harmony, which can give music position and stability, are often utilized to make outstanding works of beauty.

In the history of music the compositions most generally valued by formalists are those produced by neo-classic and classic composers. Neoclassicism, a movement of the twentieth century, is an attempt to revive and accentuate the formal qualities of music. It is the formalist's ideal concept of music.

> Neoclassicism is characterized by an economy of means; very often a chamber music texture is used. Specific emotional connotations and pictorial values are avoided. There is a sense of purpose, of well-controlled movement directed solidly to a logical point of arrival. We find strong coherence in the melodic lines and the interplay of motives.[21]

Paul Hindemith's _Third String Quartet_ and Bela Bartok's _Mikrokosmos_

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[20]Jerome Stolnitz, _Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism_ (Boston, 1960), p. 142.

[21]Leonard G. Ratner, _Music--the Listeners Art_ (New York, 1957), pp. 307-308.

are two good examples of neo-classical compositions, and quite possibly, also, two compositions that would receive the admiration of the formalist. Also, some of Igor Stravinsky's early works, his Octet, for example, would probably be liked.

The classicists of the eighteenth century, Mozart and Beethoven, for example, are generally looked upon as masters of configuration. Mozart's Symphony No. 40 or Beethoven's symphonies No. 5 and 7 are traditional favorites.[22] Some of the Baroque music is welcomed. J. S. Bach, Henry Purcell, and Antonio Vivaldi are lauded for producing beautiful works of form. However, the excessive use of religious themes in Baroque cantatas, oratorios, and arias gives this period of music heavy conceptual overtones and evokes criticism for stressing the wrong aesthetic value.

The impressionistic, expressionistic, neo-romantic, and primitivistic schools of the twentieth century do not satisfy the standards of formalism because they over-emphasize what the formalists would call non-aesthetic values. Another well-known musical tradition, the romantic, is disliked by formalists for stressing pictorialism, nationalism, exoticism, and emotionalism.[23] This would mean that such modern and contemporary composers as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Arnold Schoenberg, Gustav Holst, Aaron Copland, and such romantic composers as Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner would be composers of lesser merit simply because they did not make configuration the main objective of their works.

Music then is a fruitful source of beauty to the formalist, provided

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[22]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), pp. 99-100.

[23]Edward Hanslick, The Beautiful in Music (London, 1891), p. 68.

that the composer uses music to express configuration and not sentimental, religious, ethical, or pictorial themes. Only a small proportion of the music of the past could meet this standard.

Literature

Literature has been defined as an art devoted to the combination of words which can give satisfactory aesthetic meaning.[24] Prose, which is much like ordinary conversation in that it lacks rhyme, meter, and regularity of sound, and poetry, which usually has rhyme, meter, verses of even length or regularity of sound, have almost universally claimed the hearts of men. Formalists, however, have turned their backs upon tradition and have conceded to literature very little aesthetic merit.

The reason for the formalistic criticism of literature is simple. Literature by its very nature conveys conceptual meaning and conceptual meaning to a formalist is not the essence of beauty. To the formalist, novels, short stories, novelettes, moral tales, allegories, parables, fables, sagas, ballads, and epics are weak aesthetically. Dramatic literature with its comedies, tragedies, passion plays, and masques are also poor sources of formal beauty. Even poetry, with its many forms of expression—sonnets, odes, elegies, idyls, bucolics, etc.—is also vapid as a source of beauty. The formalist would admit that literature has great value in the religious, intellectual, and ethical parts of the lives of men, but he would insist that its place in aesthetics is relatively

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[24]Thomas Munro, "Four Hundred Arts and Types of Art: A Classified List," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. XVI, September, 1957, pp. 44-65.

minor in nature. Bell states:

> Literature can subsist in dignity on ideas. Finlay's history of the Byzantine Empire provokes no emotion worth talking about, yet I would give Mr. Finlay a place amongst men of letters, and I would do as much for Hobbes, Mommsen, Sainte-Beuve, Samuel Johnson, and Aristotle. Great thinking without great feeling will make great literature. It is not for their emotional qualities that we value many of our most valued books. And when it is for an emotional quality, to what extent is that emotion aesthetic? I know how little the intellectual and factual content of great poetry has to do with its significance.[25]

In another passage Bell gives the formalistic position in a nutshell:

> In great poetry it is the formal music that makes the miracle. The poet expresses in verbal form an emotion but distantly related to the words set down. But it is related; it is not a purely artistic emotion. In poetry form and its significance are not everything; the form and the content are not one. Though some of Shakespeare's songs approach purity, there is, in fact, an alloy. The form is burdened with an intellectual content, and that content is a mood that mingles with and reposes on the emotions of life. That is why poetry, though it has raptures, does not transport us to that remote aesthetic beatitude in which, freed from humanity, we are upstayed by musical and pure visual form.[26]

Literature is then a poor source of beauty. The prose and poetry of past ages must be excluded from the realm of aesthetic beauty.

Nature

Nature has long been recognized as a great source of beauty to many people. Poets have marveled at its mysteries and have written much about it in verse. Painters have attempted to reproduce it on canvas. Homes are often built in rough terrain--at great expense--just so that the owner can have a daily view of a mountain or a lake. Resort centers, cities, and even nations are often filled with vacationers who are just seeking

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[25]Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), p. 109.

[26]Ibid. p. 110.

the wonders of nature. But formalists are generally not impressed. Nature to them is a relatively poor source of beauty.

The formalist might agree that nature abounds with material value. But material value, as seen in chapter three, is aesthetically quite simple. It is a value of simple sensation, a value incapable of displaying the essence of beauty--configuration. Thus, the "textures of flower petals, plant leaves, wood grains, furs and skins, and some rocks and crystals; the colors of many natural objects, notably flowers, plants, birds, and insects; and some natural sounds, such as wind in pine trees, running or falling water, and bird calls" can only be examples of simple aesthetic beauty.[27]

Formal value, the value of configuration and, hence, the main aesthetic value, is quite rare in nature. Only occasionally, states the formalist, will one locate objects in nature having adequate or significant form. Compared with art, nature is very weak aesthetically. Hunter Mead states:

> If we compare these natural values with those in art, nature appears even more meager. Indeed, it is here that the realms of "art" and "nature" are least comparable; even a casual comparison of the two in this regard should by itself cast grave doubts on the adequacy of any imitational theory of art. Satisfying formal relations exist in nature, but ordinarily they are relatively monotonous, as they are based on pure symmetry or rhythmic repetition.[28]

And, hence:

> While such a simple type of balance is undeniably pleasing, our satisfaction from the perception of this alone is usually quickly exhausted.[29]

Nature to a formalist is then largely a world of change and chance.

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[27]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952), p. 124.

[28]Ibid. p. 125.

[29]Ibid. p. 125.

That is, the elements of nature are arranged by accident: The wind with its dizzy cyclic movement, the sun with its powerful heat rays, the rainstorm with its destructive deluge of water, earthquakes and volcanoes with their powerful forces, and the vicious parasites who maime the animals and plants of nature, all seem to take a part in the indeterminate freeplay of the elements. Therefore only by rare chance could an object of nature be arranged so as to produce an object of formal beauty.

The artist, on the other hand, plans every line, shade of color, every form. The artist can create an object of beauty with harmony of the most complicated sort. In short, the artist can do something nature cannot do, create outstanding formal beauty.

To conclude this chapter a few points may be summarized. First, painting, sculpture, and music are believed to be excellent sources of beauty, provided their main feature is that of configuration. Secondly, literature is a poor source of beauty because it is hopelessly conceptual. And thirdly, nature, as just seen, is likewise a poor source of formal beauty because the forces of nature appear to work by chance and not by planned reason like the adroit movements of the artist at work.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF FORMALISM

Up to this point the objective of each chapter has been to clarify a particular aspect of formalism. In chapter one the connection between formalism and modern art was established in order to show why the theory developed and what its objectives were. In chapter two, four well known leaders of the formalistic movement were given a chance to speak for themselves through carefully edited passages. In chapter three the theory was analyzed systematically in order to bring out important concepts contained within it. And in chapter four, an attempt was made to see how formalism works in the arts and in nature, i.e., to see how formalism would affect the aesthetic taste of a person who attempted to apply its rules in the realm of art and nature. With the conclusion of chapter four the presentation of formalism has been completed. It is now time to evaluate the theory and to see whether the formalists have succeeded or have failed in their attempt to defend the idea that perceptual configuration is the sole constituent of beauty.

Probably, the first thing that should be done is to go right to the central issue: Have the formalists succeeded in justifying the view that configuration alone is the essence of beauty? Have the formalists given an adequate justification for the idea that the only element of genuine aesthetic beauty is some type of perceptual harmony of lines, colors, and forms?

It appears that formalists have not given an adequate justification for their basic assumption. For example, just why do the formalists believe that beauty is only perceptual configuration? Clive Bell answers that it is so because of "significant form," because of some kind of perceptual harmony which produces aesthetic emotion within the observer.[1] This justification, however, does not answer the question. Bell has not justified his reason for saying that perceptual configuration should be considered as the only source of beauty. How do we know that other qualities may not produce the aesthetic emotion? Merely stating that only perceptual harmony can produce aesthetic emotion because only it has "significant form" does not answer the question. It only forced him into a circular argument. The term "significant form" does not justify his position when it is used in this question-begging manner.

Roger Fry does much the same thing. He states that perceptual configuration is the main element of beauty because it produces "pure" aesthetic emotion.[2] But one might ask how does he know this? Why is it that only form can engender "pure" aesthetic emotion? Why is it that other ways of art, poetry for example, cannot at times produce "pure" emotion like a formalistic painting? And if one wants to press the issue even further, how does Fry know that there is such a thing as "pure" aesthetic emotion to begin with? Do we have some inner sense that can qualitatively analyze our emotions and determine if they are "pure" or "impure"? He gives no answer. He has begged the question regarding the usage of "pure" aesthetic emotion. The same criticism applies to R. H. Wilenski.

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[1] Clive Bell, Art (New York, 1958), pp. 15-34.

[2] Melvin Rader, A Modern Book of Aesthetics (New York, 1960), pp. 305-306.

He believes that "form" is the essence of beauty because it reflects the "classical ideal." But, one might ask, where or how does the "classical ideal" prove or demonstrate that beauty is only formal in nature? Wilenski gives no details.

Hunter Mead seems to commit the same error. First, Mead clearly states that perceptual relationships can produce great aesthetic emotion.[3] It is unlikely that anyone would disagree with this. But, then, he suddenly states that perceptual configuration is the sole quality of beauty.[4] Why? He answers, because the other alternatives are not perceptual. They are inadequate because they are conceptual, representational, or sentimental in nature.[5] Mead's statements are not capable of answering the basic question—again, why only perceptual configuration? Mead, in his attempt to delineate a single quality for aesthetic beauty, has begged the question by assuming that beauty can be only perceptual.

The point of this criticism is simply that the formalists have not been able to justify their basic assumption, that "form" is the only quality of beauty. They have not been able to exclude, without begging the question, other traditional philosophies of beauty but consistently reject the other theories simply because they do not stress the same assumptions as made in the formalistic theory.

The formalists should certainly not be criticized for stating that perceptual harmony is aesthetically important. In fact, they have spoken

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[3]Hunter Mead, An Introduction to Aesthetics (New York, 1952) pp. 28-61.

[4]Ibid. p. 88.

[5]Ibid. p. 103.

comprehensively, clearly, and convincingly on this topic. But one is entitled to criticize them for their dogmatic attempt to limit beauty to a single kind. And until formalists can give an adequate reason for this dogmatic reductionism, then this criticism must stand as the one major weakness in their theory and must be accepted as sufficient justification for the rejection of formalism as an adequate theory of beauty.

In addition to this basic weakness a number of other defects may be mentioned. One is the ambiguous usage of terminology. Just, for example, what did Bell have in mind when he spoke of "significant form"? What is the meaning of such a statement? The statement must have some meaning or else it must be rejected as an empty term. Bell once spoke of the term as an arrangement of lines and colors which produce aesthetic emotion in the observer.[6] But what does that mean? It seems that there is, implied in his usage of the term, some kind of mysterious quality which makes it significant. Just what is this quality that makes form significant? Bell has not given a clear answer. One sometimes wonders if the "significant form" in the art object is not really some kind of instinctive satisfaction or product of conditioning in the observer.

Fry used a vague term when he spoke of "pure" aesthetic emotion. What could possibly be the meaning of such a term? He did not give a discernible answer. If Fry had elaborated more upon the meaning of his statements, then this criticism might not have been necessary. However, he did not and one is justified in asking questions especially since this term is quite generously used in some of his writings.

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[6]Jerome Stolnitz, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism (Boston, 1960), pp. 145-146.

Wilenski's "classical ideal" is another ambiguous notion. Is it possible for a term of this nature to be used as a criterion of beauty? Does it clarify matters to say that a work of art is beautiful if it embodies the "classical ideal"? Can one accept such a vague notion as a basic part of a theory of beauty? It seems doubtful. Wilenski, as well as Bell and Fry, could have been more objective and careful in their usage of key words.

One other weakness in formalism is that it is narrow in scope. In chapter four this theory was applied in the arts and in nature. The result was somewhat shocking. In the medium of painting it was estimated that about two-thirds of all the famous paintings in the history of art would have to be judged, according to the rigid standards of formalism, as inadequate or poor in aesthetic quality because the creators of these works had resorted to the vices of representationalism, conceptualism, or sentimentalism. In sculpture the same was found to be true. In music it was estimated that about three-fourths of the "classics" would have to be judged as inferior or poor creations because they contained the wrong aesthetic values. And the most shocking of all was the discovery that formalism, when carried into literature, would force one to judge the spoken or written word as aesthetically weak because of extreme conceptual overtones.

This brings forth some pointed questions. Can the majority of the great painters, sculptors, musicians, and writers of the past have been so consistently in error regarding the nature of beauty? Is it possible that the Wagners and Coleridges of the past have all been led astray because they were not wise enough to make perceptual configuration the only object and purpose of their creations? Should the vivid experiences of

life that artists so often speak of, such as birth, love, happiness, sadness, and death, be excluded from the realm of the beautiful? Is not there a universal recognition by mankind in general that these experiences are potentially beautiful--potentially within the boundaries of art? These questions do not disprove formalism, but they do make one question whether such a rigid viewpoint can be maintained. It hardly seems credible that so many people--even artists--can be so aesthetically blind as some formalists are apt to claim or at least imply.

Regarding another aspect of the same problem, it might be interesting to press the issue in order to see whether the formalists have really been able to isolate pure perceptual form from sentimental, representational, or conceptual factors, as they claim that they have done. For example, formalists are always quick to condemn a certain painting or musical composition for being too associational and, on the other hand, are quick to praise some other painting or musical composition for embodying what they believe to be pure perceptual configuration. But are formalists consistent when they make such claims? Have they ever been able to isolate "pure" form, as they claim? Stephen Pepper, a University of California philosopher, does not believe that they have. Pepper took one of the formalists' favorite painters, Cézanne, a man often praised as the master of pure form, as an example:

> But one should not think that Cézanne's devices are free from suggestiveness of dynamic human experience. They get their dynamics mainly from association with human action. The stability of the vertical axis and the movement of the tipped axis are references to human balance. The picture box with its positive and negative spaces comes from human locomotion in the familiar space of every-day living. The tensions between objects in this space are the tensions of possible movements among objects in space. The path of a dynamic movement through the plastic forms of a picture is the path of the potential movements of these forms or of free locomotion

> in the negative spaces among them. The plastic drama of a highly organized Cézanne is an organization of associations based on years of spatial and gravitational experience. It is non-representative only by courtesy and by being at a slight remove from the recognition of particular specimens of recognizable things. Plastic associations are highly generalized associations. But they are genuine associations just the same. A nonobjective organization of dynamic tensions in space is just as much an integration of meaning as Rembrandt's Portrait of an Old Woman. But the meanings are of a different sort.[7]

Such direct criticisms make one wonder whether the formalists are really justified in going through the history of painting or literature, for example, and damning certain works for being too conceptual or too representational. It makes one wonder whether the formalists have not been blinded by their own dogmatism.

However, not everything about formalism is bad. Even if the formalists have failed in their goal of trying to justify perceptual configuration as the whole essence of beauty, they have succeeded in other respects. First, formalists have actualized one of their goals, that is, to remove a somewhat widespread human fear of modern cubistic and abstract art. Jerome Stolnitz, a University of Rochester aesthetician, states that:

> Because of the missionary work of Bell and Fry, many people came to understand the nature and value of modern art. They no longer considered it odd or ridiculous, they gave up the habits of perception which had been developed by looking at traditional art, and therefore they came to see and relish the vitality of the Post-Impressionist artists. Fry said, with a combination of personal modesty and British understatement, that because of his efforts and those of others "a rather more intelligent attitude exists in the educated public of today than obtained in the last century." Doubtless much still remains to be done. But modern art, once the object of contempt and ridicule by all save a very few has now established itself firmly.[8]

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[7] Stephen C. Pepper, "Is Non-Objective Art Superficial?" Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. XI, March, 1953, pp. 255-261.

[8] Jerome Stolnitz, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism (Boston, 1960), p. 144.

Another positive virtue of formalism is its instructive nature. It may be true that formalism is, as mentioned before, narrow and one-sided, but what it does delineate as beautiful it does so with penetrating skill. Nowhere do the formalists engage in watery and jumbled eclectic thinking. They believe that they know what beauty is and they do not hesitate to state their views. Fry's description of the beautiful perceptual relationships in Cézanne's paintings or Wilenski's statements on beauty in a Matisse painting cannot be anything but impressive and full of aesthetic wisdom. This theory does have bite. One might say with confidence that formalism "throws light upon one salient feature at least in the realm of art and, in its very onesidedness, provokes us."[9]

To conclude this chapter, the following negative aspects of formalism may be summarized:

1. Formalism cannot be accepted as a sound theory of beauty because it cannot justify its basic assumption that beauty is only perceptual configuration. This has led many formalists to use question-begging terminology in an attempt to justify the theory. This is, in short, the major weakness of the theory and it gives one a good reason to reject formalism as a workable general theory of beauty.

2. Formalism is a disorderly theory of beauty. Formalists have been very careless in defining the meaning of key terms. This has cast an ambiguous mist over the entire theory. This confusing and irritating factor distracts from the message which the theory seeks to give.

3. Formalism is too limited. Because of the rigid rules in the

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[9]Jerome Stolnitz, Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism (Boston, 1960), p. 199.

theory too much traditional art is discarded. Music, painting, sculpture, and, especially, literature are all drastically censured for containing, supposedly, the wrong aesthetic values. This narrowness is a distracting and a dimming factor in the theory. It makes formalism appear cold and unsympathetic with human affairs.

These weaknesses--especially the first--definitely spell out the inadequacy of formalism as a general theory of beauty. The good aspects of the theory, that is, its success in educating artistic tastes and its clarifying message regarding the wondrous beauty to be found in perceptual configuration, are not to be challenged. But the dogmatic negativism of the theory is being challenged. Formalists have not been able to justify their claims that the non-formal values found in art and nature are aesthetically worthless. One might say that formalism is "right in what it affirms and wrong in what it denies."

CHAPTER VI

AN ALTERNATIVE AESTHETIC THEORY

Formalism is a theory of beauty that does not do proper justice to the many facets of beauty in art and nature, and is one also that cannot be justified because of its peculiar dogmatic reductionism. In this chapter an attempt will be made to develop a theory of beauty that will correct the mistakes of formalism and at the same time also use the valuable insights of this doctrine.

An adequate theory of beauty must be one that is comprehensive enough to cover the personal experiences of mankind in general and at the same time be one that is sensitive enough to reflect the delicate creative moods of the artist. It would have to be pluralistic in nature and possess universal scope. It would have to be able to account for all of man's experiences with the beautiful, not just one particular aspect. To be adequate it would have to be a theory that is not detached from human experience.

The key concept in the theory of beauty which I believe to be adequate is experience. The late Columbia University professor, Irwin Edman, once beautifully wrote:

> Whatever life may be, it is an experience; whatever experience may be, it is a flow through time, a duration, a many-colored episode in eternity. Experience may be simple as it is among babies and simple people; it may be complex as it is in the case of a scientist or poet or man of affairs . . . . Totally considered, it may be merely the veil or revelation of something behind or beyond experience itself. It may be merely a systematic transient delusion. It may be a nightmare or a dream. Philosophers and poets have

espoused at one time or another all these hypotheses.

> But what ever experience may portend or signify, veil or reveal, it is irretrievably there.[1]

The notion that Edman spoke of is important in aesthetics for beauty is a quality of objects, which we correlate with experience. It seems that common to outstanding aesthetic experiences there is a factor of high experiential quality. There is something about these experiences that makes them stand out. They seem to capture our attention and reveal to us qualities that we wish to linger over and re-experience. Professor Monroe Beardsley of Swarthmore College has made a careful study of aesthetic experiences and in his book, Aesthetics, lists four characteristics that he believes to be common in this sort of experience. They are:

> First, an aesthetic experience is one in which attention is firmly fixed upon heterogeneous but interrelated components of a phenomenally objective field--visual or auditory patterns, or the characters and events in literature. . . .
>
> Second, it is an experience of some intensity. . . .
>
> Third, it is an experience that hangs together, or is coherent, to an unusually high degree. One thing leads to another; continuity of development, without gaps or dead spaces, a sense of overall providential pattern of guidance, an orderly cumulation of energy toward a climax, are present to an unusual degree. Even when the experience is temporarily broken off, as when we lay down the novel to water the lawn or eat dinner, it can retain a remarkable degree of coherence. Pick up the novel and you are immediately back in the world of the work, almost as if there had been no interruption. . . .
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> Fourth, it is an experience that is unusually complete in itself. The impulses and expectations aroused by elements within the experience are felt to be counterbalanced or resolved by other elements within the experience, so that some degree of equilibrium or finality is achieved and enjoyed . . . .[2]

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[1]Irwin Edman, Arts and the Man (New York, 1939), pp. 11-12.

[2]Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics (New York, 1958), pp. 527-528.

Aesthetic experiences can be of all kinds. They may range from the extremes of simplicity to complexity. Simple sensations sometimes can give us high experiential quality. We often love just to revel in simple color and sound. The simple sensation of feeling fur or silk, or just rolling words on the tongue can make certain moments vivid. And, on the other hand, complex perceptual relationships of rhythm, unity, symmetry, variety, contrast, and balance can arrest our attention. Events that provoke suspense, surprise, and excitement can do the same. These are the favorite subject matter of artists.

Furthermore, certain events in the individual and social aspects of our lives can evoke aesthetic experience. In many life situations we have feelings of sincerity, pity, humor, sorrow, irony, and fortitude, we like to see these emotions well expressed, and we sometimes wish to share these experiences with others. These experiences, like those evoked by perceptual form, can become aesthetic when we become clearly aware of them and pause to contemplate or re-experience them. Also, these experiences are ones that artists love to recreate. Poets, dramatists, and novelists are masters of this art. Some experiences may make us happy and give us pleasure while others may fill our lives with sadness and perhaps even pain. But when they become aesthetic they acquire a high experiential quality and involve an appreciation of the quality of our experience as such or of the experience for its own sake.

Of course, we may have intense experiences that are not in any way aesthetic. Whether they are aesthetic or not depends upon the all-important factor of personal attitudes or moods. Our subjective selves play a great role in determining our attitude towards our experience. Our habits, moral feelings, cultural traditions, and physical and

mental health can be decisive factors. For example, a devout Catholic may be having primarily a religious experience when hearing Verdi's Requiem, whereas, on the other hand, someone else may be experiencing it in a purely aesthetic manner. To a zoologist, rattlesnake hunting may be an aesthetic experience, but to a phobia-ridden man it may be just the opposite. To a man who is ill or worried, nothing may be beautiful or moral.

There is no absolute rule that all vivid, intense, unified, or coherent experiences have to be aesthetic any more than that they have to be religious, moral, or intellectual experiences. If we do not want to have aesthetic experiences, we can avoid them. But if we have a well-developed aesthetic sense, many of these experiences will be aesthetic.[3] Factors such as education or a change in attitude can increase the scope of our experience of beauty. Such changes can open doors, previously closed, to the appreciation of beautiful things.

Thus we see how experiences involving little awareness or conscious appreciation, as when we are absorbed in some of the events and activities of everyday life, are those which we usually regard as very low in aesthetic value. And, on the other hand, when we visit an art gallery or hear a symphony concert or contemplate a massive snow-covered mountain, we are most likely to have experiences that are very rich in aesthetic

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[3]Often the aesthetic attitude is one where we will be in a mood stressing detachment, psychic distance, impersonality, and disinterestedness. Of course this varies with individuals. Some people may stress detachment where, on the other hand, others would dispense with it. For example, in a religious experience the mood is usually just the opposite of the aesthetic. A devout Christian would not seek to detach his religious experience from daily life; or to care little for his personal welfare and hopes (salvation); or to have no desire to utilize the experience; or to have a feeling of distance with the Spirit in the experience.

quality. We live, however, in a world of process without strict lines of division; and this applies to the realm of beauty as well. Stephen Pepper, a University of California philosopher wrote:

> There is obviously, for this definition, no sharp line between things beautiful and things not beautiful, since quality fades from textures by degrees. But at the extremes there is no question, and it is only with textures about which there is no question that we are greatly interested aesthetically. Moreover, the fact that beauty shades over into practical life and other predominantly relational attitudes simply shows that there is no problem of incompatibility between making a living and appreciating life, but that each attitude can suffuse the other if both relax from their extremes.[4]

If Pepper is right, this means that in matters of beauty one can draw no sharp distinctions between aesthetic value and the other values and types of human experience. Beauty is something that can be found in all phases of our lives. It may even include, at times, the practical, the analytic, the moral, and the religious. In these vague areas of human life no clear distinction can be made between what is aesthetic and what is moral or religious. Experiences of beauty can generally be clearly defined, as Pepper stated, only in their extreme degrees, that is, when qualities of beauty stand out as in art. But this inability to define clearly the nature and boundaries of beauty in all phases of human experience should not blind us to its existence in those areas. Certainly no attempt should be made to try to narrow beauty down to some small area of human experience, as formalists attempt to do. Experience can be of all types. But most of the time our experiences are rather uneventful and dull. Our lives are usually full of dead spots only occasionally heightened by brief moments of noteworthy experiential quality. By our very biological nature we have to learn to adjust to

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[4]Stephen C. Pepper, Aesthetic Quality (Dallas, 1938), p. 221.

the trying experiences of life, and this adaptive process involves the development of habits. Habits, though very useful in life, have a tendency to "grow by geometrical progression, compounding on one another." One might say that "we [eventually] develop habits for developing habits."[5] And as a result of such habitual action, our lives are dulled for lack of novelty and vividness. Yet, perhaps because of this apparent natural biological tendency of life to involve itself progressively in habits as time passes, man has devised a way of bringing experiences rich in aesthetic quality back into his life. This device is art. Edman wrote:

> It is one of the chief functions of the artist to render experience arresting by rendering it alive. The artist, be he poet, painter, sculptor, or architect, does something to objects, the poet and novelist do something to events . . . .[6]

All of this leads to the idea that art is something that can <u>intensify</u> experience. Perhaps this is why, when we visit the art gallery and gaze upon paintings and other works of art, our experiences are of high quality. Again perhaps this is why, when we hear a string quartet or a piano concerto, we find ourselves engrossed in one of the most intense of all experiences. But let us walk out of the gallery or concert hall into the realm of everyday life, and we usually sense a change in the quality of experience. The presence of dull people in our daily lives, the ugliness of our environment, and the habits of our daily life can sap the quality of our experiences and give us feelings of monotony or drabness. In such situations, however, do we not often long for the arts again? Do we not find that a novel, or a good painting, for example, can remove the drabness and once again fill our lives with colorful

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[5]Stephen C. Pepper, <u>Aesthetic Quality</u> (Dallas, 1938), p. 64.

[6]Irwin Edman, <u>Arts and the Man</u> (New York, 1939), p. 17.

experiences? Do we not use the arts as a way of adding high quality to our otherwise ordinary experiences?

Another function of art, aside from the intensification of experience, is to clarify experience. Again Edman wrote:

> Others than painters of still life have seen fruit in a bowl on a table. But it requires a Cézanne or a Vermeer to organize the disordered sensations of color and form into something lucid and harmonious and whole. Everyone has experienced the blindness of human pride, or the fatal possessiveness of love. But it requires a Sophocles to show him the tragic meaning of the first in such a play as Oedipus, a Shakespeare to exhibit to him the latter in Othello.[7]

Thus, it is possible to see from Edman's statements that art can clarify things that often remain unnoticed in the common affairs of life. The artist has a unique ability to take a "mood half articulate and half recognized in its confused recurrence" and to clarify it "forever in a poem or a novel or a drama."[8] The artist has the whole world in all of its complex ramifications as his subject, not just some particular part. The mysteries of life and death, of love and hate, of order and perhaps even chaos, all give the artist a challenge in his mission to clarify experience.

One other very important function of art, and one that must not be overlooked, is the interpretation of experience. If art can intensify and clarify experience, then it can also interpret the events of our lives. It can "enable us to respond to things not simply as sheer physical stimuli but as meanings."[9] The artist may not interpret anything more than the sensations we have in viewing a bowl of fruit. On

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[7]Irwin Edman, Arts and the Man (New York, 1939), p. 31.

[8]Ibid. p. 32.

[9]Ibid. p. 33.

the other hand, he can give us depth of understanding or insight into complex events whether they are moral, religious, political, or even practical. He may, in a War and Peace, interpret "the confused intuitions of millions of men, bringing to a focus an obscure burden of human emotion."[10] Pepper wrote:

> Art is thus fully as cognitive, fully as knowing as science, so that contextualists are fond of calling the intuition of quality a realization. If scientific, analytic knowledge has scope, it nevertheless lacks intimacy and realization. The artist like the scientist is a man whose function it is to lead us to a better knowledge of nature--not, however, by showing us how to control her, but how to realize her.[11]

The three functions of art, intensification, clarification, and interpretation obviously do enhance the quality of experience.[12] Once this pluralism of functions is recognized, a new world of art unfolds. Once the dogmatisms are removed, no longer have we any reason to believe that art should be viewed as solely the pastime of the élite or the highly educated. No longer have we any reason to believe that art should be considered as something that stresses only "form" or only "pleasure" or only a "moral lesson" or any other reductionistic purpose. Art is enhanced human experience, and human experience is all-inclusive. Human experience in art ranges from the apprehension of formal relationships, as the formalists have clearly shown, to the apprehension of conceptual values. The range of beauty is wide, and it spreads into all aspects of human life.

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[10] Irwin Edman, Arts and the Man (New York, 1939), p. 33.

[11] Stephen C. Pepper, Aesthetic Quality (Dallas, 1938), p. 31.

[12] Irwin Edman, Arts and the Man (New York, 1939), p. 33.

Thus, one can see how the arts can again be enjoyed for what they are. No longer need there be a dogmatic fear of conceptual values. These with all their diversification are just as aesthetically important as perceptual or material values. Epics, novels, fables, short stories, sonnets, odes, eclogues, idyls, dramas, allegories in literature, and operas, art songs, oratorios, and tone poems in music, to mention only a few, would all be accepted as special ways which man has devised to enhance the quality of life.

Conversely, however, one must not think that this approach to art overplays the importance of human-centered emotions and de-emphasizes the importance of perceptual values. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Here the positive lessons of the formalists are welcomed. Perceptual art can be enjoyed in all of its splendor with this approach. The formalistic Cézannes and Bartoks render experience rich in their own way as well as Respighi does in his way in a representational-laden tone poem.

And lastly, moving away from art, nature must not be forgotten as an outstanding source of beauty. Nature does give to human experience something of great quality, and an adequate theory of beauty must recognize this. Scientific discoveries have given evidence indicating that man evolved from nature through a process that lasted millions of years. From this it seems that man would find it very difficult to detach himself from the process that produced his kind. Perhaps this is why, when we "get close to nature," so to speak, we find that our experiences are often again full of aesthetic quality. And in such circumstances we usually have no desire or use for art because it is not needed. Nature can be beautiful in itself because it may not need to be intensified, clarified, or interpreted. Its qualities may be so magnificent

at times that an artist could do nothing but diminish them.

On the other hand, if the artist has used nature as his subject, one should not dogmatically accuse him of having a lack of imagination because he appears to copy or imitate things. Nature-laden, representational, and sentimental paintings or poems, for example, may not be, as formalists assert, outstanding examples of perceptual form, but they may throw light upon something else just as real as "form." Our experiences have wide boundaries, too wide to be grouped under the title of "form" alone, and nature by itself or nature made experientially rich through art can bring many of these qualities into our lives.

This broader theory of beauty has the following advantages:

1. It is pluralistic: it finds aesthetic value in all aspects of experience. This permits an avoidance of aesthetic reductionism where beauty is confined to some small area of human experience at the expense of others.

2. Our theory states that art intensifies, clarifies, and interprets experience. This permits the artist to work with all types of aesthetic value, not just with one type, as some reductionists have suggested that he should do. This gives all of the arts a role in infusing an aesthetic quality into experience.

3. This theory allows man to appreciate the beauty in nature in all of its variable forms without imposing upon himself a type of aesthetic asceticism in which everything must be seen or evaluated through one aesthetic norm.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In this study I have attempted to examine formalism and to see what it is like, to test it and see how it works, and to evaluate it and determine whether it is an adequate theory of beauty. My conclusion is that formalism is an inadequate theory of beauty. There are three basic reasons for this:

First, formalists have been unable to justify their basic assumption that beauty is only perceptual configuration. In trying to do this some have been led into question-begging terminology.

Secondly, formalism cannot be accepted because some key notions within the theory have not been clarified. Ambiguous terms like "significant form," "pure aesthetic emotion," or "classical ideal" only serve to confuse matters. Their exact meaning can not be determined.

Thirdly, this theory is too limited in scope. Because of the dogmatic assumption, that only formal characteristics can convey beauty, large areas of the arts have been unjustly rejected. Only a small proportion of the traditional masterpieces in the history of sculpture, music, or painting could meet the rigid standards of formalists. Literature is completely rejected because it supposedly is

too conceptual.

These weaknesses justify the rejection of formalism, for, because of them, it cannot account for the plurality of man's experience of beauty. Does it make sense for one to believe that the majority of all the great painters, composers, and sculptors of the past have been aesthetically blind, or that literature has nothing to do with beauty?

I have presented in the latter part of this thesis a theory of beauty that incorporates the positive lessons of formalism regarding the importance of perceptual form and at the same time avoids the dogmatism of that theory in rejecting other kinds of aesthetic value. My thesis makes the assumption that aesthetic value may be found in all aspects of experience, not just in one area as the formalists have asserted. I have attempted to show that our experiences become aesthetic when we value them for their own sake and they thus acquire a richer quality. The objects of aesthetic experience range all the way from simple colors or sounds to complex perceptual forms or occurrences of social significance. With this as a foundation, art can once again be looked upon as something other than just the vehicle of perceptual form, although it is recognized that form is very important in many areas of art and that the formalists have educated our aesthetic taste by stressing the formal elements of beauty. Art, therefore, can serve man in the broadest possible way by intensifying, clarifying, and interpreting all phases of human experience.

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