

University of Southampton Research Repository ePrints Soton

Copyright © and Moral Rights for this thesis are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder/s. The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given e.g.

AUTHOR (year of submission) "Full thesis title", University of Southampton, name of the University School or Department, PhD Thesis, pagination

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

AESTHETICS AND ASCETICS

Nina Reicher

Submitted for the Degree of Master of Philosophy

April 2015

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Department of Philosophy

Master of Philosophy

AESTHETICS AND ASCETICS

Nina Reicher

The aim of this dissertation is to offer a revaluation of several (related) phenomena that, it is argued here, are too readily omitted from, unjustifiedly maligned by, or inadequately accounted for in the considerations of philosophers of aesthetics: the phenomena of asceticism, the grotesque, and the (visual) arts of the (Christian) Middle Ages (in which, incidentally, the ascetic and the grotesque (are commonly considered to) coalesce). The first step towards such a revaluation is a reappraisal of philosophical aesthetics itself, which is undertaken here in Chapter One. This is followed, in the latter half of Chapter One and in Chapter Two, by a (re)appraisal of (the reception and representation of) asceticism, and a (re)valuation of the grotesque. Chapters Three and Four are given over to a more detailed account of what is (claimed here to be) entailed by the aesthetic endeavour, by the ascetic's peculiar investment therein, and what "lessons" may be learned from his example.

Contents

Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Declaration of Authorship	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
SECTION ONE	1
Chapter One	3
Chapter Two	33
SECTION TWO	57
Chapter Three	59
Chapter Four	89
Bibliography	113

Declaration of Authorship

I, Nina Reicher, declare that this dissertation entitled 'Aesthetics and Ascetics' and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this university;
2. Where any part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this university or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this dissertation is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by me jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed: *Nina Reicher*

Date: *7 April 2015*

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Professors Alex Neill, Aaron Ridley, and Denis McManus
for their discussions, questions, and encouragement.

SECTION ONE

‘...this affront to the sacred rhythm of life, this defiant movement...
is a paradigm of Art.
...it becomes renegade and remarkable by virtue of its very discontinuity...
Because Art is life, playing to other rhythms.’

MURIEL BARBERY, *THE ELEGANCE OF THE HEDGEHOG*
(ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY ALISON ANDERSON)

Chapter One

In the array of writing that, however (in)appositely, comes to be categorised under the designation of philosophical aesthetics, the label itself seems to carry (at least) two (often quite distinct) denotations. On the one hand, drawing on the supposed specific signification of the term in its original ancient Greek, aesthetics is employed to identify a philosophy of (sense) perception. Elsewhere, it is taken up (to the confused consternation of some critics) by philosophers of the so-called fine arts, as a means of classifying their collective attempt to theorise the experience (and subsequent appraisal) of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, and so forth (joined in some cases by the spectacle of the natural environment). As suggested by at least one writer, whose work, though pertinent, rarely appears in such a catalogue, neither application proves adequate. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century (a good century and a half after the establishment of aesthetics as a legitimate branch of philosophical inquiry) on matters of the widest variety of concern to human existence, William James notably ‘offered almost no theorising in philosophical aesthetics’.¹ As Richard Shusterman compellingly infers, this was due to a conviction on James’s part that the kinds of ‘abstract formal principles and discursive definitions’ cultivated and demanded by any such school or system of thought necessarily fail to capture (and even tend to obscure) ‘the crucial nameless subtleties... that make all the difference in actual aesthetic experience’.² Far from indicating a lack of appreciation for or estimation of the aesthetic, James’s relative silence on the matter seems rather to be of the most suitably eloquent significance. As Shusterman notes, James appears to have ‘held the aesthetic dimension... to be extremely important’.³ Unlike many canonical writers on the subject, he also took it to extend ‘well beyond the field of fine art’.⁴ In such a case of apparently keen valuation of aesthetic experience, it is not surprising that emphasis should be made to lie upon what are regarded to be its immediately recognisable but ‘nameless qualities’, and the equally inscrutable hold that such qualities tend to have upon us.⁵

Insofar as the aesthetic dimension of existence is accordingly accepted as being necessarily impervious to ‘theoretic grubbing and brooding’, the attempt to philosophise upon it could seem to be something of a self-defeating enterprise.⁶ If this is the case one may be impelled to ask what (else) there might be to say on the matter, perhaps beyond asserting something like: the aesthetic is nothing but that enigmatic experience somewhere *between* the two domains with which it is typically associated; namely, perception (which it presupposes),

¹ Richard Shusterman, ‘Dewey’s *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* vol. 44, no.1 (2010), p. 27.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The quoted words are James’s, as cited in James F. Brown, *Affectivity: Its Language and Meaning* (University Press of America, 1982), p. 148.

and the (necessarily) retrospective qualitative appraisal to which we often try (hopelessly) to subject it. Nonetheless, while seeking to steer clear of the Scylla of attempting (and inevitably failing) to attain a degree of conceptual or analytical distinctness about the workings of aesthetic experience, and the Charybdis of defying an appropriate, Jamesian eloquent silence on the matter, it might yet be possible to say something (more) about the aesthetic dimension of existence.

The question of the adequacy of aesthetics as a designation for the philosophy of the fine arts has been raised in recent years by proponents of the informally-so-called ‘Everyday Aesthetics’ movement. Contrary to the former tradition, among those writers roughly affiliated with the ‘Everyday Aesthetics’ movement it is ‘generally agreed’ that ‘anything at all’ may (potentially) be subject to ‘aesthetic attention’.⁷ The collective endeavour of these thinkers has therefore been to call for a ‘progressive broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry’, away from the conventional domains of art and the natural environment sequestered ‘in museums and privileged views’ and (so) distanced from the wider course of human existence.⁸ Given their claim for the potential pervasiveness of the aesthetic dimension, it is deemed suspectly curious by such scholars that philosophical aesthetics should continue to concern itself mostly with the fine arts.⁹ In the words of Thomas Leddy, although many philosophers of aesthetics might (now) concede ‘that aesthetic qualities are not limited to the arts, even *those* thinkers [still] generally take the arts as the primary focus of their discussion.’¹⁰ The subject matter of philosophical aesthetics has been and continues to be so dominated by artistic matters, observes Yuriko Saito, that even the odd discussion of a non-art object or activity will tend to focus on the latter’s ‘likeness to art’.¹¹ It is perhaps therefore understandable, even if objectionable, as Saito suggests, that the philosophical tradition is so habituated to considering the aesthetic (only) by means of ‘comparison’ with the artistic, simply because an ‘aesthetics of art’ has become an entrenched ‘frame of reference’.¹² Such entrenchment is perhaps exemplified by Sherri Irvin’s survey of the approximately 270 articles published between 2001 and 2006 in the two major English-language journals devoted to aesthetics.¹³ Of these Irvin found an overwhelming 95 per cent took fine art as their focus.¹⁴ Only 3 per cent looked at nature, and just five turned their attention to ‘anything

⁷ Yuriko Saito (quoting Jerome Stolnitz’s *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism*), ‘Everyday Aesthetics’, *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 25, no. 1 (2001), p. 87.

⁸ Arnold Berleant, ‘Transformations in Art and Aesthetics’, available at <http://www.autograff.com/berleant/pages/Transformations%20in%20Art%20and%20Aesthetics.11.htm>

⁹ Saito, ‘Everyday Aesthetics’, p. 87.

¹⁰ Thomas Leddy, ‘Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities’, as quoted by Saito, ‘Everyday Aesthetics’, p. 87.

¹¹ Saito, ‘Everyday Aesthetics’, p. 87.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Sherri Irvin, ‘The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 48, no. 1 (2008), fn. 1, p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

else'.¹⁵ Even those authors who dedicated themselves to addressing 'general concepts' like 'aesthetic value and aesthetic experience', Irvin highlights, drew their examples almost exclusively from the world of art.¹⁶ The problem has also been, it is worth emphasising, not just one of academics. The prevailing 'aesthetic ambience' appears to have so permeated and predisposed the educated layperson's thinking and talking on the subject that we (in the west) appear to be (unwittingly) 'embroiled' in its mindset.¹⁷ According to counter-traditional thinkers like Leddy, Saito, and others, however, such habit unduly 'limits' and generally 'impoverishes the scope of aesthetics'.¹⁸ It also represents, as more than one critic has maintained, 'a rather parochial viewpoint', particular to modern western philosophies, and (thus) also presupposing of certain (institutionalised) socio-cultural and 'economic conditions'.¹⁹ Instead, as Arnold Berleant intimates, and in words that resound with the thesis to be presented here, 'an aesthetic dimension pervades the human world', and the experience thereof is always implicated with(in) a broader 'existential context'.²⁰

The questionable adequacy of aesthetics as a designation for the philosophy of the fine arts is also objected to from a slightly different perspective by those who call for an alternative restriction of its denotation; in this case, to the category of (what is deemed to be its proper, etymologically accurate signification): (sense) perception. The conflict between these two claims to the term aesthetics is perhaps most extravagantly encapsulated in Robert Dixon's 1995 book *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy*. Pitting the two claimants against one another, Dixon sets up a (rather declamatory) dialectic between what he calls Aesthetics with a capital A (the 'socially instituted official particular practice' of the Philosophy of the Fine Arts (note the similarly-motivated capitalisation)), and aesthetics (in lower case) as a generic term for what he takes to be the straightforward category of (sense) perception (as opposed to rational conception).²¹ The 'capitalised' Aesthetics, Dixon claims (and complains) to have been an untoward arrogation by eighteenth-century philosophers of an unambiguous ancient Greek category distinction between *aisthesis* (percept) and *noesis* (concept); a (mis)appropriation that has, in the two-hundred-and-sixty-odd years of its (to his mind) pernicious influence, deceptively contracted (and corrupted) the term's original and appropriate 'domain of reference'.²² Dixon seeks to make clear that if a discrepancy between the capitalised and generic manifestations of the term is *not* made, the word 'suffers from the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ M. Kilian Hufgard, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: A Theory of Art Formulated from His Writings and Illustrated in Twelfth-Century Works of Art* (E. Mellen Press, 1989), p. 159, and Robert Dixon, *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy* (Pluto Press, 1995), p. 71.

¹⁸ Saito, 'Everyday Aesthetics', p. 88.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Arnold Berleant, 'Aesthetic Sensibility', available at <http://www.autograff.com/berleant/pages/Aesthetic%20Sensibility.draft%208.htm>

²¹ See Dixon, *The Baumgarten Corruption*, p. 2.

²² Ibid, p. 38.

ambiguity caused by the take-over of a descriptive category by a prescriptive pseudo-quality.’²³ It is worth noting that, in his call for such a remedial differentiation between Aesthetics and aesthetics (he adds that ‘parallel’ distinctions may be made in many other instances *in the ‘Arts and Humanities’* (for example, Literature and literature)), Dixon makes no secret of his general intellectual preferences by asking the reader to notice that, by salubrious contrast, there is neither the need for, nor even the possibility of making a similar distinction between, say, ‘Mathematics and mathematics, Physics and physics, Astronomy and astronomy, and so on.’²⁴ Drawing upon the alleged definitive denotation of the original Greek, Dixon advocates a return to this definition as the only legitimate means of straightening out the above-described ‘philosophical mess’.²⁵ He once again makes no secret of his intellectual preferences in venturing that science (alone) still ‘speaks pure Greek with *anaesthetic*’.²⁶ Dixon accordingly rues the fact that modern dictionaries tend to declare obsolete this first of what are typically three given meanings for aesthetic, and is justifiably puzzled by the relegation, insofar as *anaesthetic* and *kinaesthetic*, which depend upon such a meaning, remain in (medicinal and scientific) use.²⁷ To Dixon’s apparent delight, however, the second and third given meanings for the term, those referring ‘respectively to beauty and to art’, are by at least one modern dictionary associated with ‘affectation’ and ‘pretence’.²⁸ Needless to say, Dixon seems to find this a fittingly disdainful dismissal. ‘Obsolete or not,’ he maintains in determined defiance, it is only the first meaning that ‘survives genuine philosophical appraisal’.²⁹ Nevertheless, despite the determination of advocates like Dixon, and as will be discussed further below, the attempted restriction of aesthetics to the category of (sense) perception, and the supposed historico-linguistic pedigree on which it stakes its claim, is not necessarily more clear-cut or conclusive than the fine arts formulation with which it stands in contention.

In contrast to, though still accommodating of these prior but persistent understandings of aesthetics, what is here proposed to be fundamental to the aesthetic dimension of existence (and the force that we find in the experience thereof), is its unique capacity to register with what might be described (of course only approximately) as one’s sense of (one’s) being-in-the-world.³⁰ Such an employment of the term is perhaps comparable with (but not equivalent to) what Nicholas Davey distinguishes as a particularly (post-)twentieth-century usage (thus differentiating its connotation from the other two implications theretofore (and still) typically

²³ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid. My emphasis.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 38.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ The reader is asked to note that this expression is employed here without reference to its Heideggerian usage.

attached to the word).³¹ This third usage, in which the term necessarily assumes an associated adjective (as in, for example, a *decadent* aesthetic or a *macabre* aesthetic), Davey explains is linked to ‘a way of seeing’ (and/or, it must be said, a way of being), a usage that draws on ‘related notions’ of a *Weltanschauung* or *Lebenswelt*.³² According to this application, Davey clarifies, one may distinguish between, on the one hand, say, Nietzsche’s or Schopenhauer’s *aesthetics* (how the particular philosopher in question accounts for aesthetic experience), and, on the other hand, a Nietzschean or Schopenhauerian *aesthetic* (how the world and everything in it, including oneself, might be said to appear from a Nietzschean or Schopenhauerian perspective).³³ According to the delineation of it offered here, however, this “perspective” said to be granted by the aesthetic dimension is understood to be obtainable by, or accessible to *only* the individual aesthetic experiencer in question (in the above-mentioned case, by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer *themselves*), and, moreover, is unattainable to that individual by any means or mode *other than* the aesthetic.

As already suggested, such a delineation of the aesthetic, while distinguishing itself from, nevertheless remains accommodating of both prior (but persistent) associations of the term. On the one hand, it remains understanding of the attempted delimitation of aesthetics to a philosophy of the fine arts, insofar as such arts are granted to be uniquely acute (though not exclusive) “channels” of aesthetic experience. Supported by recent research into the history of the word’s usage, the delineation offered here is also more broadly accommodating of, and attentive to the latter’s etymological evolution than the sometimes staunchly advocated restriction of aesthetic to the (quasi-scientific) category of sense perception.³⁴ Contrary to the claims of such ambitious pedantry, in the many ancient Greek philosophical writings in which the term appears, *aisthesis* does *not* abide by so specific a usage, but, as Daniel Heller-Roazen discusses, already carries a confoundingly varied series of connotations.³⁵ Among the several proposed interpretations and translations, the word may be rendered in English as any one of the by-no-means-synonymous “perception” (‘with its suggestion of activity’), “sensation” (‘with its implication of passivity’), and the even more vague “feeling”.³⁶ According to Heller-Roazen, in at least one case, that of Thucydides, the term is employed with a connotation that seems to have little to do with any of the aforementioned nouns, and rather gives the impression of indicating

³¹ Nicholas Davey in discussion in James Elkins (ed.) *Art History Versus Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2006), pp. 61-62.

³² *Ibid*, p. 62.

³³ The two will of course in most cases bear some relation. I have here expanded upon Davey’s description. See *ibid*.

³⁴ See Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (Zone Books, 2007). Relevant observations are also made in his article “‘Ships of Theseus’: Review of Udo Thiel’s *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*”, *Times Literary Supplement* August 2 (2013), p. 24.

³⁵ Though not an exhaustive list, among the writers in whose work the term appears Heller-Roazen enumerates ‘Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Neoplatonists’. *The Inner Touch*, p. 22.

³⁶ Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, p. 22.

something like ‘intellectual discernment’.³⁷ Modern readers would be ‘rash’, posits Heller-Roazen, to render the many expressions of the ancient Greek *aisthesis* ‘by a single set of corresponding modern terms.’³⁸ ‘The truth’, he submits, ‘is that *aisthesis* was by no means a technical term in the Greek language,’ and could be employed with a range of associations ‘a good deal wider than the historian of philosophy might wish to admit’.³⁹ Just about ‘everything that affects a living being’ appears to have been subsumable under it.⁴⁰

The likely diversity and lack of distinctness suggested by the above is not meant to enfeeble, but rather to exemplify what is intended here by the expression “one’s sense of (one’s) being-in-the-world”. To repeat the point made briefly above, such a sense (the fortuity of our referring to it as a sense is significant) is claimed to be unattainable by us in any way but the aesthetic. To make clearer the emerging argument here, it is useful again to draw on the noted subtleties of the term’s pre-modern applications. Cautioning once more about modern claims to the original Greek usage of *aisthesis*, Heller-Roazen explains that while in many cases the classical signification of the word appears to approach ‘the terrain of the often-elusive power of awareness that would later be said to be that of consciousness’, a more careful consideration of its ancient (and medieval) manifestations gives an indicatively more nuanced picture.⁴¹ Of course it cannot be said that classical literature is ‘lacking in characters who express a clear awareness of’ themselves, that ancient philosophers did anything less than furnish ‘the history of thought’ with many of the most thorough accounts of self-reflexivity, nor that medieval thinkers did not wonder ‘about the awareness that a living soul has of itself’.⁴² Such instances cannot, however, Heller-Roazen stresses, be taken as early testimonies of self-consciousness.⁴³ When discussing the nature of (self-)awareness, Greek and Latin writers, Heller-Roazen describes, give the impression of being

not especially inclined to speak in terms of knowledge – or ignorance, for that matter – and... seem to have done without any general conviction that the phenomena in question were particularly cognitive in nature.⁴⁴

The vocabularies of both languages in their ancient and medieval usage, Heller-Roazen advises, ‘admit of no single term that corresponds with any exactitude to our “consciousness”’ in the ‘current and well-established sense’ of that word.⁴⁵ Unlike the modern implication of (self-)awareness as a form of cognition, of a ‘that which has been made known’ (as in the post-

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 22-23.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 22.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Solmsen, ‘*aisthesis* in Aristotelian and Epicurean Thought’, as quoted by Heller-Roazen, *ibid*, p. 24.

⁴¹ Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, p. 22.

⁴² Ibid, p. 21, and “Ships of Theseus”, p. 24.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

eighteenth-century German expression *Bewußtsein* (that language's (now standard) 'equivalent of the Cartesian *cogitatio*')), ancient and medieval manifestations of this phenomenon, Heller-Roazen emphasises, accord 'no special place to the rational being that speaks and makes a claim to knowledge'.⁴⁶ They suggest, rather, something more like a sense of, than a consciousness of self.⁴⁷ Though unspecifiable, such a sense is nonetheless unmistakable; hence the immediacy and conspicuousness of our aesthetic encounters.

It is this very nuance, of having a sense of (one's) being that is nevertheless beyond the grasp of (self-)knowledge, that is here claimed to be a key contributing factor to the unique communicative value that we find in, or are given access to by means of the aesthetic dimension. It also serves to account for the difficulty that we inexorably have in attempting to gauge with any accuracy, or to give faithful expression to the experience(s) that the aesthetic dimension affords. It was presumably an awareness of (something like) this that persuaded James to withhold from an admittedly futile attempt to discourse upon the subject, and which prompts Shusterman to describe it with no more specificity than to ascribe to the aesthetic some undisclosed and unnameable but nonetheless identifiable qualities. It is made clear in the writings of such authors that the aesthetic dimension of existence cannot be restricted or reduced to, nor rendered in the necessary 'definite what' of 'conceptual frames', at least not without (a degree of) infidelity or falsification.⁴⁸ Rational thought and language both are inadequate to the task. To borrow James's words, aesthetic experiences are 'pent in by no such definite limits' as 'our conceptual substitutes for them' are confined.⁴⁹ Intellectualisation and verbalisation, with their shortcomings, 'pitfalls and possible misrepresentations', are ineffectual in the face of the aesthetic.⁵⁰

In this regard, the words that one commentator employs to characterise the Jamesian corpus could apply equally to the aesthetic dimension. G. H. Bird writes of James, whose rather idiosyncratic practice of what might be called philosophical psychology stands as a bridge not only between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also between what was later to become two distinct disciplines:⁵¹ he 'who himself disliked labels, cannot be simply labelled.'⁵² Such labels and the habit of aspiring or resorting to them, James explicitly reprobated. Referring to them 'disparagingly' as 'solving names', he admonished their tendency to conceal rather than to

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 22, and 'Ships of Theseus', p. 24.

⁴⁷ Heller-Roazen, 'Ships of Theseus', p. 24.

⁴⁸ The 'definite what' is James's expression. See his *Radical Empiricism*, quoted here from Ruth Anna Putnam, 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 7. See also Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 165.

⁴⁹ James's *A Pluralistic Universe*, as quoted by Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 165.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 166.

⁵¹ Margaret Knight observes that James 'stands at the point of transition from a Psychology which was in fact a branch of Philosophy with some scientific trimmings to a genuinely scientific psychology with some philosophical entanglements'. 'Editorial Foreword' to *William James: A Selection from his Writings on Psychology* (Penguin, 1950), p. 7.

⁵² G. H. Bird, 'Introduction' to William James, *Selected Writings* (J. M. Dent, 1995), p. xxi.

resolve the problems that they are called upon to address.⁵³ James's consequent sceptical cautiousness gives rise to what Bird applauds as one of the 'most congenial aspects' of his thought; namely, 'the extent to which it subverts many of the standard classifications in philosophy'.⁵⁴ Such a subversiveness of, or rather imperviousness to 'the standard classifications' may also be ascribable to the aesthetic dimension.

As numerous commentators on the subject have in some way noted, 'aesthetic apprehension of the world' often proceeds 'quite independently of the intellectual apprehension' thereof.⁵⁵ Aesthetic 'fitness' is frequently divergent from, and 'more generous' than 'logical consistency'.⁵⁶ The requisites of each domain differ from those of the other. For the logical-intellectual, to know what one means and to 'follow the rules whereby meanings are validly combined' is paramount.⁵⁷ It must be conceded, however, that occasionally a thinker will not, and possibly 'may not know what he means, in the sense that he can fully and exactly express what he experiences'.⁵⁸ He may nevertheless possess sufficient certainty or clarity of a different (alogical) kind.⁵⁹ Such a distinction, between the (albeit inadequately so-called) logical-intellectual and alogical-aesthetic (as will later be suggested, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive), may be 'difficult to understand in an age like ours, dominated by philosophy and science', as Herbert Read was compelled to concede already in the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁰ Read's presentiment was preceded a full century earlier by the comparable outlook of Jacob Burckhardt. Reflecting also James's slightly later conviction that beyond the grasp of propositions there must be left 'another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from pedantic scruples and indulge its own [being] at its own risks' (yet another description that could serve as an approximate encapsulation of the aesthetic dimension),⁶¹ Burckhardt's writings as a whole suggestively lament and decry 'that waning sense of significance' which, according to Erich Heller, he ascribed to (or for which he laid the blame on) 'the modern mind'.⁶² The latter had, Heller gauges Burckhardt's opinion, 'cast aside the "immeasurable wealth" of available experience(s), and ceded 'to that sort of empiricism which, in its passion for

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Bird adds that 'this holds true' even in those cases where James appears to have sought 'to improve on, rather than simply reject, previous philosophical traditions'. Ibid.

⁵⁵ Herbert Read, *Icon and Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness* (Faber and Faber, 1955), pp. 88-89.

⁵⁶ Howard L. Parsons, *Man East and West: Essays in East-West Philosophy* (B. R. Grüner, 1975), p. 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 71.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Read, *Icon and Idea*, p. 89.

⁶¹ In accordance with the context of James's discussion, the original quotation has 'faith' where I have (in accordance with the thrust of my own argument) substituted 'being'. I concede, therefore, to having arrogated the gist of James's point. The quotation is cited from Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 159.

⁶² Erich Heller, 'Burckhardt and Nietzsche', in *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 43.

concreteness, paradoxically reduced [such] experience to a purely abstract notion of measurable data'.⁶³

In preference to, and apparently as a result of a recognition of the insufficiency of 'the dominant modes of discourse' in his (post-Enlightenment) era, Burckhardt shaped his own work around what John Roderick Hinde dubs (by means of a subtle oxymoron) an 'aesthetic understanding' of things.⁶⁴ Burckhardt's own word here is *Anschauung*. 'I am lost', he wrote to a correspondent about his practice as a historian, 'where I cannot begin with *Anschauung*.'⁶⁵ As Heller explains, this 'Goethean word' is 'hardly translatable', but means, roughly, and with connotations of the visual, the 'process by which we spontaneously grasp' things (in general) 'through observation aided by intuition'.⁶⁶ By way of explication, Heller adds that 'Goethe uses it as the opposite of analysis,' the habit of mind that he (too) 'feared would establish itself' as the dominant attribute of 'an age fascinated by Newtonian physics'.⁶⁷ Of the contrast between the two 'mental approaches', Hinde notes that in the work of someone like Burckhardt (and, one may add, James), it is not that the aesthetic is simply 'opposed to rational, conceptual thought'.⁶⁸ Indeed, the latter is deemed not to exist 'in and of itself' and in isolation from the former, but rather to rest on or arise from a fundamentally aesthetic inclination (say, a proclivity for 'order and coherence', or some such characteristics).⁶⁹ Therefore, while the 'aesthetic apprehension of the world' might still be said, as was claimed above, to proceed 'quite independently of the intellectual apprehension' thereof, this formula, according to the likes of a Burckhardt or a James, does not apply the other way around.⁷⁰ Intellectual apprehension is said to derive and follow from the aesthetic. Hence that 'feeling of the sufficiency of' the moment and the 'absence of all need [and potential] to explain' or 'account for it' that, according to James's suggestion, attends the immediate realisation of intellectual as of aesthetic experience.⁷¹

In its suspicion of an overly abstract rationalism and, more evidently, its insistence on a 'temperamental factor' in any individual's intellectual and philosophical positions,⁷² James's viewpoint finds corroboration in the writings of Nietzsche. The latter's *Beyond Good and Evil* avers: 'Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy hitherto has been:

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ John Roderick Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 27.

⁶⁵ Burckhardt's letter to Willibald Beyschlag, June 14, 1842, as quoted by Heller, 'Burckhardt and Nietzsche', p. 44.

⁶⁶ Heller, 'Burckhardt and Nietzsche', p. 44.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 27.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Read, *Icon and Idea*, pp. 88-89.

⁷¹ Of course, in both cases, one may *thereafter* seek to explain, account for, or justify it (this point is further discussed below). James's words here are cited from Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 146.

⁷² See Bird, 'Introduction' to William James, *Selected Writings*, p. xx and p. xxi.

namely, the self-confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unaware memoirs'.⁷³ '[T]here is', Nietzsche continues, 'nothing at all that is impersonal' in or about the philosopher; his philosophy 'testifies decidedly and decisively as to *who he is*'.⁷⁴ The general point being made here is borne out more substantially in the specific judgements that Nietzsche, in *The Genealogy of Morality*, renders upon his predecessor Schopenhauer, whose philosophy he suspects to have arisen from particular psychological (dis)inclinations.⁷⁵ Nietzsche infers from *The World as Will Representation* that Schopenhauer's theory of the arts, his stipulated separation of aesthetic contemplation from corporeal inclination, and his whole 'will-representation dichotomy' are the upshot of an apparent (personal) penchant for the mortification of natural volitions.⁷⁶ Nietzsche unreservedly maintains that Schopenhauer's expressed views on and valuation of the aesthetic rest on the latter's (presumed) capacity to counteract 'sexual interest, like lupulin and camphor'.⁷⁷ Schopenhauer is said to have imagined, incessantly glorified, and presented 'as the great advantage and utility of the aesthetic state' the possibility of 'escape from the 'Life-Will''.⁷⁸ Nietzsche's assessment is not unfounded. Something like this is quite justifiably the impression gained from the discussion in Book Three (volume one) of *The World as Will and Representation*, wherein Schopenhauer writes, among other things, of that (imagined) 'blessedness of will-less perception'.⁷⁹ The particulars of this problem will be returned to below. For the moment, the 'noteworthy point' is the attention that Nietzsche draws to the fundamentally, inexorably 'psychological character' of (an individual's) philosophy.⁸⁰ What is so subtly momentous about this point, as Havelock Ellis observes, is that it is only via the acknowledgement of it 'that the eirenicon of philosophies... can ever be found'.⁸¹ Ellis explains the decisive implication:

The philosopher of old said: 'This is *my* conception of the universe'; it was well. But he was apt to add: 'It is *the* conception of the universe', and so put himself hopelessly in the wrong.⁸²

It is, Ellis suggestively expounds the claim, as improper 'to think another man's philosophy as to wear another man's cast-off clothes'; and as with a philosophy, so, it is argued here, with an aesthetic experience: it can only fit the individual to whom, one might say, it has manifested.⁸³

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Gut und Böse)*, I, §6. German text available via Project Gutenberg: e-book #7204 (2005).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ See Dale Jacquette, 'Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming', *History of European Ideas* vol. 18, no. 3 (1994), p. 375.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 373.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*, as quoted by Jacquette, *ibid*, p. 374.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, Book III, §38, translated by E. F. J. Payne (Dover Publications, 1958), p. 198.

⁸⁰ Havelock Ellis, 'Nietzsche' (from 'Affirmations'), in *Selected Essays* (J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936), p. 46.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

Despite the inscrutability, inexpressibility, and unavoidable individuality thus far ascribed (here) to the aesthetic dimension of existence, the experiences that it affords should not be (mis)understood to be (as per the general meaning of the term) solipsistic. Like the sense of being to which they are claimed uniquely to communicate, such experiences are fundamentally relational. To paraphrase James F. Brown, aesthetic experience ‘is not just a personal or private affair’; it constitutes and is constituted by the whole ‘manner in which’ an individual is both present in and open to the world.⁸⁴ While an aesthetic encounter may be undergone or experienced only by an individual, such encounters and experiences necessarily refer to something other than the individual. There is a vital ‘dynamic tension between the openness of an individual’s being toward the world and everything in it, and whether and how these are held out to or hidden from him.’⁸⁵ Thus, to make a small qualification to the points explored in the preceding paragraph, aesthetic experiences, though they are integrally shaped and influenced by the psychological, are not reducible to it. Exemplified perhaps by the difficulties that we have in attempting to isolate, describe, and (accurately) name the qualities of aesthetic encounters, the aesthetic dimension of existence, again to paraphrase Brown, is no localisable domain or interim disposition. For those to whom it has opened up, it is at once a registering with and a register of that ‘peculiar [and peculiarly enigmatic] mode of being by which and through which a person is oriented to the world’, a mode that embraces everything about who or what that individual is, has been, and will become.⁸⁶ Of course, as already suggested, such a mode, though immediately recognisable, is neither distinctly intelligible, nor in any ways otherwise accessible. To borrow the words of James, the aesthetic dimension ‘so fills the soul that ontological speculation can no longer overlap it and put her girdle of interrogation-marks round existence.’⁸⁷

It must be added here that the communicative potential of the aesthetic dimension is, as it were, one way only. While the (however rare) possibility remains open to the individual that his sense of (his) being-in-the-world might be *engaged* via the aesthetic dimension, there is no equivalent opportunity for its *disclosure*. In other words, one’s sense of (one’s) being-in-the-world, properly speaking, cannot (even via the aesthetic dimension) be either (distinctly) understood or (accurately) divulged. Insofar as that is the case, the only way in which such a sense of (one’s) being may attain to the relationality upon which it depends is to be spoken *to* (however inapproximatively). The possibility of this happening resides exclusively in the aesthetic dimension. For the individual to whom this dimension has (even once) opened up, there will, thenceforth, be a kind of dependency upon it. Given that it cannot be communicated, should such

⁸³ Ellis rather unhelpfully has ‘for whom it was made’. To say ‘*by* whom it was made’ seems more consistent with his preceding points. For the purpose of the argument to be advanced here, and as will be explained further below, it was necessary to replace an active ‘making of’ with a more passive ‘manifested to’.

⁸⁴ Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 148.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 158.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸⁷ James, as quoted by Brown, *ibid.*

an individual's sense of (his) being also remain, for any length of time, uncommunicated *to*, such an existence may be described as aesthetically deserted, and, accordingly, as suggested by the very term anaesthetic: deadening. Aesthetic experience, the crucial 'nameless qualities' thereof, and the hold that these tend to have upon us, all give expression to what comes over the individual when his (otherwise sequestered) sense of (his) being-in-the-world meets, not necessarily approbation, affirmation, or even confirmation from (something in) the world. It is possible for the requisite relationality to take effect even in the negative; that is, such that one's being does not (as it may sometimes be wont to) feel impermissible.⁸⁸ The requisite channel of communicativity opened up by means of the aesthetic dimension, and upon which the individual's sense of (his) being-in-the-world depends, also need not exist in actuality, but even just in possibility.

Of course, given its fundamental relationality, there will always be some shifting of ground (however infinitesimal) of one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world as a result of aesthetic experience. The latter will always involve, in whatever degree, some effect upon or change to one's sense of self, even if that effect is merely the instance of one's (sense of (one's)) being suddenly (and possibly only momentarily) feeling (in whatever degree) spoken to. Beyond such a 'nameless' awareness of this communicativity, however, nothing more may be said of the changes that the aesthetic experiencer might undergo. Anything else, any attempt to grasp, understand, or theorise one's (own) aesthetic experience, or the aesthetic dimension in general, will necessarily be an act subsequent to, and hence thoroughly inapproximate and inadequate to it. Whatever insight or edification one might (subsequently) be said to have gained from the experience (for it is not denied that one may), it must be reiterated that such implications are necessarily parasitic upon, and not fundamental to, nor definitive or characteristic of aesthetic experience. Should such corollaries (thence) be presupposed and demanded of the aesthetic, they are as such antecedent (and hence untoward) demands upon it.⁸⁹ As Israel Knox complains, in his case with specific regard to the three heavyweights of the Continental tradition of philosophical aesthetics (whose thoughts on the subject he claims were subordinated to 'the *Grundlagen* of their systems'), such antecedently determined demands are inevitably 'extraneous' to, and invariably the results of other 'needs' brought to bear upon the aesthetic.⁹⁰ They thus unavoidably involve some degree of distortion, infidelity and injustice to it.

That we continue to associate with the aesthetic what is extraneous, antecedent, or subsequent to it may serve as an explanation for why it often seems to be both (just about) everything, and (yet) never quite (distinctly) anything. 'There is', Knox maintains, 'a manifest and recurrent tendency in the history of culture to convert [the] aesthetic into [or reduce it to]

⁸⁸ The aesthetic dimension is potentially the one and only case where this may pertain.

⁸⁹ This notion is adopted from Israel Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (Humanities Press, 1958). See p. 6, and fn. 14, p.170.

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 5, p. 6, and fn. 14, p.170.

something other than itself.’⁹¹ One need not be thoroughly dismissive of the various extant traditions of thought. Knox himself concedes of the aesthetic theories over which he broods that ‘there are bound to be nuggets of truth in’ them.⁹² This very likelihood, however, he stresses, makes it all the more imperative to highlight in what sense such interpretations might be ‘coloured (and vitiated) by’ gratuitous interests.⁹³ Drawing this suggestion of Knox’s into the argument being advanced here, it seems necessary to add a further stipulation to the above-given account of the relationality of the aesthetic. As aesthetic experience itself must not be (mis)taken to be solipsistic, so the same proviso applies with regard to what is thence claimed to be its fundamental relationality: this (too) cannot be (expected to be) a kind of confirmation of self. It is always, even if in some cases to a greater or lesser extent, receptive.

By way of exemplification of this point, it might be useful to return to the case of Schopenhauer, who, according to a not-unjustifiable assessment like Nietzsche’s, does seem to have subordinated a thoroughgoing aesthetic receptivity to certain, apparently more comforting, self-confirming preferences. Thus Schopenhauer enumerates among the undesirable attributes of aesthetic experience (what he suggests will necessarily debar access to the aesthetic dimension) anything that might excite corporeal or volitional appetites. As Dale Jacquette explicates, what appears to have been anathema to Schopenhauer is that such appetites may be ‘unavoidably summoned’, thus ‘adulterating’ what was to him the (somewhat unfathomable, overambitious, and thus untenable) ideal of pure aesthetic contemplation.⁹⁴ Specifically, Schopenhauer complains first about the painting and sculpting of nude figures, suspecting rather drastically that ‘the whole treatment of’ such subjects is ‘calculated’ in ‘the spirit of subjective, base sensuality’ to ‘excite lustful feeling in the beholder’.⁹⁵ As Jacquette comments, protests like this lend compelling support to ‘Nietzsche’s hunch about the psychological origins’ of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.⁹⁶ Should one seek to defend Schopenhauer’s claims on the basis of, say, the by no means uncommon censoriousness of conventional morality, it is worth noting that he appears to have had just as drastic an objection to still-life paintings depicting ‘edible objects’, which, in the same way that he deemed depicted nudes to provoke lustful feelings, are claimed ‘necessarily’ to stimulate, in this case, the gustatory appetite.⁹⁷ Schopenhauer seems to have found the latter equally untoward. The sole overall criterion for dismissal, according to his philosophy, is that something might incite the (to his mind) aesthesis-prohibiting ‘stimulation’ of

⁹¹ Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer*, p. 3.

⁹² Ibid, pp. 5-6.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jacquette (quoting Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*), ‘Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming’, p. 375.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Jacquette, ‘Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming’, p. 375.

⁹⁷ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, as quoted by Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007). Chapter One available at <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8357.html>

appetitive desires.⁹⁸ Compare, now, Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* to, say, a passage expressing similar concerns in John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, and one might better gauge what Ellis was hinting at with regard to 'the eirenicon of philosophies' being dependent on a (sympathetic) understanding of the necessarily individual-psychological foundations of our experiences of existence.⁹⁹ Whereas Schopenhauer seeks to dismiss from the aesthetic dimension what (apparently) he (personally) could not countenance within it, Dewey concedes that an individual will always bear 'an unconscious but organic bias toward certain aspects and values of the complex and variegated universe in which we live'; and this acknowledgement permits him to allow that 'ordinary associations with bare bodies' might be suspended, that the human nude might be contextually transformed or transferred 'into a new realm' (in the aesthetic dimension, to make this point consistent with the terminology thus far here employed), and that such figures may, therefore, be profitably contemplated, contra Schopenhauer's claims, without (or, perhaps, one may concede, even with) 'pornographic suggestion'.¹⁰⁰ To paraphrase Dewey's subsequent point, the presumption that things have 'fixed and unalterable values' is 'precisely the prejudice from which' the aesthetic dimension may (so rewardingly) emancipate us.¹⁰¹

Included here among the extraneous superfluities claimed to be consequent upon aesthetic experience are those qualities of (adjectival) appraisal typically deemed (with excruciating inexactitude) to be intrinsic to it. What are conventionally referred to (somewhat oxymoronicly) as aesthetic judgements, but which would be more precisely described, on a case-by-case basis, as, for example, discriminations of taste, analytical interpretations, didactic impositions, and so forth, must be understood to refer to qualities determined in the aftermath of (and therefore not, properly speaking, discerned or discernable in) an individual's immediate (and inscrutable) engagement by the aesthetic dimension. Such qualitative judgements are accordingly grouped here together with (as bearing more kinship to) those mental operations belonging to what was earlier described as the logical-intellectual apprehension of the world, both being parasitic upon and inadequate to the aesthetic. To such a categorising, the (attempted) elucidations of this subject offered by Alexander Baumgarten prove surprisingly useful. Though the German philosopher's two forays into the (at his time inchoate) domain of philosophical aesthetics are typically credited with ushering in the difficulty-engendering divergence of the (thenceforth) two main usages of the term aesthetic, Baumgarten actually makes a subtly more congenial discrepancy between the Greek *aistheta* and its contrasting *noeta* than that described above. Reserving the latter designation for the affairs of logic, Baumgarten suggestively leaves

⁹⁸ Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, as quoted by Jacquette, 'Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming', p. 375.

⁹⁹ See footnotes 80-81 above.

¹⁰⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigee Books, 2005), p. 99.

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*

aistheta for the signification *not* of (anything so correspondingly specific as) sense perception, but rather to indicate, by way of contrast, that which lies beyond the grasp of categorical or conceptual distinctness altogether. The drawing of ‘*distinct* conclusions’, that fundament of the logical-intellectual apprehension of things (which here includes the (attempted) apprehension of the aesthetic), is, according to Baumgarten’s suggestion, ‘scarcely’ aesthetic.¹⁰² What is important to *aisthesis*, by contrast with *noesis*, is not the ‘clear and *distinct*’, but rather the ‘clear and *confused*’ (as in con-fused or ‘fused together’, ‘not *confusion* in the derogatory sense’, as Baumgarten’s English translators are at pains to point out).¹⁰³ That which partakes of the aesthetic dimension, though conspicuous and unmistakable, resists those operations of ‘discrimination into discrete units’ and reconstitution ‘into distinct representations’ that are ‘characteristic of conceptual thought.’¹⁰⁴

The impression that Baumgarten thus gives of the aesthetic appears to be comparable with, or at least amenable to the kind of irreducible ‘continuity of experience’ thesis advanced by James. By emphasising only (aesthetic) experience itself, James’s thesis congenially avoids the presumption of any discriminations or demands made subsequently upon or antecedent to it. The judgements, appraisals, interpretations, and so forth to which we (try to) subject (aesthetic) experience, are, James stresses, always ‘views taken after the fact’.¹⁰⁵ They are unavoidably ‘retrospective and post mortem.’¹⁰⁶ What is more, the requisite ‘use of [another] language’ thus to ‘take’ and ‘talk of’ (aesthetic) experience necessarily creates ‘a new, second-order experience one step removed from’, and hence neither equateable with, nor adequately representative of that for which it purports to account.¹⁰⁷ In James’s words, ‘all our conceptual handling’ (among which, it must be remembered, the qualitative discriminations of so-called aesthetic judgement are here included) ‘comes as an inadequate second’.¹⁰⁸ It is ‘a transformation’ that experience ‘undergoes at our hands’.¹⁰⁹ To attempt to comprehend, classify, critique, or even just to (try to) convey aesthetic experiences is necessarily, to adopt James’s suggestive metaphor, to dissever them as if with clinical implements, and to immobilise the resultant lifeless pieces ‘in our logical herbarium where, comparing them as dried specimens,’ we (misguidedly) believe that we might be able to ascertain (something of) their nature.¹¹⁰ Such a treatment, again drawing on James’s argumentation, is suspect for supposing aesthetic experience (which, as explained above, is

¹⁰² In this instance, Baumgarten’s term is ‘poetic’. *Reflections on Poetry* §62, translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (University of California Press, 1954), p. 61.

¹⁰³ Aschenbrenner and Holther, ‘Introduction’ to Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 16.

¹⁰⁵ James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, as quoted by Putnam in her ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Eugene I. Taylor and Robert H. Wozniak, ‘Introduction’ to *Pure Experience: The Response to William James* (Thoemmes, 1996), fn. 4, p. xv.

¹⁰⁸ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lecture VI (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), p. 265.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 244.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

associable with no localisable domain or passing disposition) to have ‘already accomplished itself’.¹¹¹ Echoing Knox’s suspicion of extraneously-determined demands upon the aesthetic, James notes that the ‘post-mortem dissection’ and ‘retrospective patchwork’ of our ‘intellectual handling’ is also susceptible to follow ‘any order we [might] find most expedient.’¹¹² Once rendered immobile, as required by the workings of the intellect, ‘an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions’ of a phenomenon might be ventured in the attempt to isolate, fathom, and define it.¹¹³ Should one (attempt to) use such a ‘post-mortem method’ in cases like that of the aesthetic, James suggestively forewarns, one will ‘of course... fail.’¹¹⁴ Though he acknowledges that (an understanding or acceptance of) such a logic-defiant phenomenon is somewhat alien if not anathema to philosophical thinking, James nevertheless recommends that it would be worth the latter’s while at least to try to seek a more ‘living understanding of’ (aesthetic) experience, rather than ((continue to) attempt) to ‘follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results.’¹¹⁵

In order to highlight the problem(s) with conceptual discriminations and qualitative judgements being subsequently determined and (thenceforth) antecedently demanded of the aesthetic, the example of Schopenhauer might once again prove useful. As Jacquette suggests of *The World as Will and Representation*, the latter’s remarks about (and stipulations made based on) the undesirable compulsion of appetitive impulses in aesthetic experience seem to imply but ‘a few unflattering hypotheses’.¹¹⁶ The first is that Schopenhauer merely elevated his own weaknesses or failures in the presence of (especially realistically-depicted) ‘renderings of foods and nudes’ to the status of a comprehensive ‘limitation’.¹¹⁷ In other words, Schopenhauer appears to have sought for the cause of, and hence to lay the blame for his own aesthetic impasse in the face of such objects elsewhere than *his* inability to find in the encounter therewith anything but ‘the mundane call to appetite’.¹¹⁸ Jacquette also hypothesises that Schopenhauer might simply have disliked such objects, and ‘not articulating precisely his dissatisfaction with them’, seized the opportunity ‘to berate them, despite glaring exceptions and inconsistencies, by twisting his [philosophy] in such a way as implausibly to exclude them’.¹¹⁹ In others words, Schopenhauer appears to have built his theories around what Jacquette compellingly suspects to have been inadequately scrutinised ‘preferences and prejudices’.¹²⁰ Thus, Jacquette notes by way of justification, Schopenhauer makes inexplicably ‘*ad hoc* exceptions and adjustments in

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 262.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 263.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 264.

¹¹⁶ Jacquette, ‘Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming’, p. 376.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

unexpected ways' (for example, admitting depictions of fruit where other foodstuffs are declared intolerable).¹²¹ His purported principles therefore seem to provide, Jacquette concludes, 'nothing more than an inventory of personal... likes and dislikes'.¹²² Were Schopenhauer merely attempting (albeit with inevitable inexactitude) to share with his readers some impression of what, for him, afforded access to the aesthetic dimension, and (hence) some intimation of his sense of (his) being-in-the-world, this, according to the delineation of the aesthetic presented here, would not have been so problematic. To recall Ellis's words, that a philosopher (of aesthetics) should say 'This is *my* conception' is well and good; but should he add 'It is *the* conception', he puts himself and his subject matter 'hopelessly in the wrong.'¹²³

The general argument being advanced here is that no further, more objective or universal claim(s) may legitimately be made about the aesthetic dimension of existence, the experience thereof, or the unique communicativity that it is said to afford. Other than registering as aesthetic, these are not of any fixed or isolatable character or quality, and they withstand all attempts to reduce them thereto; hence the bafflingly intractable persistence of philosophical debates about the nature and qualities of aesthetic experience(s). Properly speaking, it cannot be anticipated when, where, how, or in what way and with what aspects of one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world the aesthetic dimension might register. The experience is not, therefore, *exclusive of* any of the attributive terms that have heretofore been claimed for it; but these cannot be made a condition, criterion, or even a confirmable consequence thereof. All that the aesthetic may be said to encompass or afford is that unique (and perhaps unusually acute or particularly heightened) registering with one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world, of whatever quality and to whatever (if any) consequence that may be (it may be of no discriminable quality and to no discernible consequence other than the intrinsic one just posited of it). To (re)deploy Dewey's words here (with a slightly different connotation): the presumption that aesthetic experiences and the objects with which they might be associated 'have fixed and unalterable values' is 'precisely the prejudice from which' the aesthetic dimension may emancipate us.¹²⁴ One might also draw here on Baumgarten's terminology and suggest something along the lines of such experience(s) being clear (in the moment) but indistinct (resistant to any kind of post-experiential appraisal).

Insofar as some attributes *might* be postulated of an aesthetic experience, these must also be (as they have typically not been) permitted to run the full gamut of affectivity. An aesthetic experience bears just as much *potential* to be genuinely painful, sad, or hurtful as it does joyful or comforting, insofar as such an experience might speak to the parts of oneself bearing any of those characteristics or associations.¹²⁵ It might afford insight just as much as it might confuse

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ See footnote 82 above.

¹²⁴ See Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 99.

¹²⁵ It ought also to be emphasised that the unmistakable "hold" that the aesthetic dimension is said to have upon us must likewise not be presumed to be necessarily positive or appealing.

and unsettle. In other words, it is open to any and every adjectival ascription as well as to none at all, for any such ascription will already inevitably involve, in attempting to attach a label to that which cannot be labelled, some distortion or betrayal of its inexorably inscrutable character. Our language of concepts, qualities, judgements, and so forth, as Mark Johnson explains, is just our way of saying that we feel able to identify various traits and patterns in our experience(s) ‘in a way that permits us to recognise something that is *the same* over and over across’ their variety.¹²⁶ Such a *consistent* recognising and identifying of traits and patterns, however, is just what is defeated in the aesthetic dimension. It should also be noted here that such conceptual and qualitative discriminations are said to entail the recognising, or rather the making of distinctions *within* the flow of existence.¹²⁷ Insofar as the aesthetic is, as described earlier, at once a registering with and register of that ‘peculiar mode of being by which and through which a person is oriented to the world’, a mode that embraces everything about who or what that individual is, has been, and will become, it is irreducible to the kind of distinction *within* the flow of existence just mentioned. The aesthetic is (ever (potentially)) part of that flow itself. It is, again to repeat another observation made earlier, not a localisable domain or interim disposition. It is always already there. It is a dimension *of*, not a dimension *within* existence. To philosophise about the aesthetic, therefore, ought to entail a concern not with the debatable (and dubitable) quality or qualities of its experience or engagement, but whether (or not) there is, in individual cases, such experience or engagement at all.

Another important factor to note about the aesthetic dimension (and one that further highlights the divorce between it and the qualities that are often (presumptuously) ascribed to it) is that an engagement by, or experience of the aesthetic cannot be sought. While one *may* seek (or indeed seek to avoid or escape from) that which might be deemed to bear the qualities that are typically ascribed *to* the aesthetic, one cannot in like manner summon (nor evade) the communicativity to be found *in* it. To borrow a notion from the work of Leslie Farber, aesthetic engagement cannot be willed.¹²⁸ It (is something that) happens *to* the individual. The aesthetic dimension cannot be entered; it is encountered. This aspect also underscores the potential fragility of an individual’s sense of (his) being-in-the-world in its relative dependence upon the (exclusive) communicativity of the aesthetic dimension. As discussed earlier, whether it may be found to occur momentarily (and never again), or (somewhat) dependably,¹²⁹ only the aesthetic dimension can speak to that something in or of one’s being that is not accustomed to finding itself addressed or engaged by anything or anyone. To gain a better understanding of what is meant here, that particular “something in or of oneself” said to be addressable exclusively by the

¹²⁶ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 88.

¹²⁷ See *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ The reader may note that numerous insights in the following disquisition have been drawn, with an admittedly quite liberal interpretation, from the literature of (fringe) psychiatry.

¹²⁹ One cannot, of course, ever expect thoroughly or exactly to recapture an aesthetic experience.

aesthetic dimension is contrastable with what might be called, for convenience's sake, one's socially-adapted *personae*. To draw on the informative etymology of this term, in its original Latin usage *persona* was the noun given to the masks worn by actors in ancient theatre.¹³⁰ Though its applications broadened over time to include, first, the actor's role, and then, later, an individual's 'social role or public function', in all its subsequent denotations the term retains all that is suggested by its original signification.¹³¹ What the reader might notice here as the gradually emerging psychological implications of the word culminate in Jung's conception of 'a split between our inner and outer selves, an authentic psychic reality versus the mask' of social conformity.¹³² Discussing this evolution of the term, Camille Paglia makes a further observation that is most useful for the purposes of the thesis to be advanced here. What Paglia describes as 'our sense of possession of' an 'inner self' despite its 'personae' is, she suggests, something vulnerable.¹³³ In some individuals more so than in others, it will now be ventured, there is a greater incidence of such susceptibility.

To reiterate some relevant points already made, it was explained above that the only way in which one's sense of (one's) being may attain to the relationality upon which it depends is to be spoken *to* (however inapproximatively); and that the possibility of this happening resides exclusively in the aesthetic dimension. Aesthetic experience, the crucial 'nameless qualities' thereof, and the hold that these tend to have upon us, were all said to give expression to what comes over an individual when his (otherwise sequestered) sense of (his) being-in-the-world meets, not necessarily approbation, affirmation, or even confirmation from (something in) the world, but even just such that one's being does not (as it may sometimes be wont to) feel impermissible; and that this need not exist in actuality, but even in mere possibility. Finally, it was noted that should such an individual's sense of (his) being remain, for any length of time, uncommunicated *to*, such an existence may be described as aesthetically deserted, and, accordingly, as suggested by the very term anaesthetic: deadening. Hence, for the individual to whom this dimension has (even once) opened, there will, thenceforth, be a kind of dependency upon it. Taking into account the additional insights afforded in the preceding paragraph, regarding the discrepancy between one's, so to speak, *core* (sense of) self and one's (socially-adapted) *personae*, some further points must here be made.

Those objects, experiences, endeavours, and so on to which one especially attaches or devotes oneself in life tend to be pursued, valued, and so forth because they will be found to have cast a line and hooked onto something in one's self that has neither any other means of reaching out to, nor being reached from the external world. Now, only a truly anaesthetic (non-aesthetic) existence can be lived entirely sequestered from the (external) world. As implied by

¹³⁰ See Camille Paglia, 'Sexual Personae: The Cancelled Preface', in *Sex, Art and American Culture: Essays* (Penguin, 1993), p. 102.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

the very term anaesthetic, however, this would entail either death, or a comatose existence as close to death as might be approached by an individual still deemed (medically) to be alive. Those moments or longer spans of time when one might *feel* sequestered from anything outside of oneself (that is, outside of one's core self, not one's socially-adapted personae) are, we may say, particularly unaesthetic. One *can*, it must be said, subsist for long stretches of time without ever encountering anything particularly aesthetic. Consider, say, the case of an office manager in a busy corporation who has many responsibilities and many colleagues to which and whom he is both dependent and depended upon. All of this might make such an individual overwhelmingly (sometimes overbearingly) connected to the (or at least an) external world. Unless it is the case that such work and its environment speak uniquely acutely to something of this individual's core self (which is not to say that it may not), such interconnectedness will not, however, be noteworthy aesthetic. The more or longer one feels one's (sense of (one's)) (core) self to be unaddressed by (anything in) the external world, the closer to here-so-called anaesthesia one drives. The resultant circumstance may be likened to that of the depressed individual who speaks of unfeeling, when, honestly, he or she might be feeling most acutely. As this acute affectivity, however, has no way of being (sufficiently) communicated, and insofar as it continues to go uncommunicated *to*, such an individual's existence will continue to be and to feel aesthetically deserted. Should something speak, however softly and momentarily, to however small and submerged a part of this individual's (core) self, this would be at least the first clearing of a path towards (a communicative channel with) the aesthetic dimension. Should the spark of something (an idea, an object, an endeavour) be pursued, and provided that the spark that originally spoke does not fall silent, the individual in question might even find the opening up of larger and/or other aesthetic dimensions, ones that speak more and/or differently to him, perhaps ones that he finds can be relied upon to continue to provide such channels of communication (though not, of course, the *same* channel, for even the same object, endeavour or experience will each time speak (however slightly) differently to him). To paraphrase James again, but with a little additional adaptation, the argument for the aesthetic being advanced here is that there must be left 'another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from [societal] scruples and indulge its own [being] at its own risks.'¹³⁴

That aesthetic engagement or experience cannot be sought, created, forced, willed, or approached at will is not to suggest that one might not come to possess, either by nature or by experience and discipline, an increased openness or susceptibility to it. One may, that is, endeavour to make oneself more receptive to or for its possibility. Such a receptiveness, however, it must be emphasised, still cannot guarantee that any aesthetic engagement or experience will occur. In some cases, with some individuals, this circumstance might therefore give rise to that peculiarly problematic predicament (to draw on Farber's insightful formulation) of trying to will what cannot be willed; and, in due course, to the rather unique kind of anxiety

¹³⁴ See footnote 61 above.

that such futility provokes. As Farber explains, the general problem here ‘lies in our recurring temptation’ to exploit the will in instances where it cannot be harnessed.¹³⁵ I may will ‘knowledge, but not wisdom,’ Farber elaborates, ‘going to bed, but not sleeping; eating, but not hunger;... self-assertion or bravado, but not courage;... reading, but not understanding.’¹³⁶ ‘The list’, he notes, could go on; but the critical point is that in such instances the will cannot ‘in its utilitarian way’ achieve anything more than (perhaps) ‘to capture through imitation’ the ‘public face’ of its object(s), the latter’s ‘manner or style’ only.¹³⁷ If, say, ‘I try to will my admiration of another,’ Farber further exemplifies this state of affairs, all I may ‘grasp is the visage or posture of admiration: its actuality will elude me’.¹³⁸ Likewise, should ‘I try to will another to admire me, I shall self-consciously select only those gestures... coercive of my end’, and ‘regardless of my powers,’ my friend ‘would have to be gullible indeed to be won by such manipulation.’¹³⁹ To make clear the consequences of such pitiful pursuits, Farber adds: ‘To the extent that one continues to try to will what cannot be willed, one fosters a kind of anxiety’.¹⁴⁰ Borrowing thus from Farber, the main ambition of this dissertation is to enlarge upon a somewhat unaccustomed instance of this will-confounding phenomenon; namely, that wherein an individual may be said to be or become particularly preoccupied with (attempting to) maintain an unusually copious and constant connectedness to the aesthetic dimension, and, given that this cannot be willed, whose existence comes to be characterised by a corresponding kind of anxiousness. Insofar as this peculiar preoccupation is accordingly said to result in, or indeed to necessitate an unusually acute and exacting (set of) compulsion(s) on the part of such an individual, it is here considered to be a kind of ascesis (discipline); and, hence, the individual in question is described as being ascetic.

Of course, such a description is a mere convenience for the sake (here) of philosophical discussion. As James so neatly captures by way of metaphor in the first lecture of his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, thereby giving literal expression to his elsewhere-aired antipathy to the ‘solving names’ of labels: a crab would probably ‘be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it... as a crustacean... “I am no such thing,” it would say; “I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone.”’¹⁴¹ One might well also ask why the individual to be discussed here, given his above-described peculiar preoccupation and compulsion or discipline, would not be (better) dubbed an aesthete, rather than ascetic. The question is instructive. Despite the ostensibly greater etymological kinship between the aesthetic and the aesthete, the latter’s existence is (here)

¹³⁵ Leslie H. Farber, *The Ways of the Will: Essays Toward a Psychology and Psychopathology of Will* (Constable, 1966), p. 15.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 41.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 42.

¹⁴¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Lecture I (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), p. 9.

deemed to be more suitably designated as artistic. It is characterised by a creative, productive, externalising imperative. The aesthete seeks to embellish and impose upon (his) existence, to make things different. What one might call the ascetic's aesthetism, on the other hand, is receptive; the ascetic essentialises rather than embellishes, he endeavours (only) to see and experience or receive things differently, not to make them so. His own physical being notwithstanding (that is, his body (and mind, if the two are imagined somehow to be discrete) in a most basic, biological sense (i.e., such that it does not extend to fashion or style, which is the aesthete's domain)), the ascetic does not (wish to) transform external things. The distinction of the ascetic from the aesthete encompasses also his peculiar and peculiarly exacting compulsion, in that he is compelled to make the flow of existence (thoroughly and unceasingly) *provide* aesthetic value, *not* (as in the case of the artist or aesthete) himself to create something or other from *within* the flow of existence that might afford such value. One might, therefore, cast the difference thus: the ascetic aspires ever to see existence and the world as though it always already occupies a frame; the aesthete forces nature and life into that frame, hence 'the commitment to artifice', the 'life entirely artistic and artificial' by which the latter is typically characterised.¹⁴²

The ascetic (as here delineated) is said to value aesthetically not (just) *within* the flow of existence, but to value aesthetically that flow (existence) itself. His peculiar preoccupation and compulsion, to repeat the description given above, is with (attempting to maintain) an unusually copious and constant connectedness to the aesthetic dimension, to ensure that (his) existence be consistently and compellingly afforded aesthetic communicativity or value, and hence the concomitant imperative to restrict his existence only to that which might confidently be expected to assure him of this.¹⁴³ Ordinarily (that is, outside of the ascetic's orbit), aesthetic value (whatever its origin, extent, presumed quality and/or expected consequence) will tend to be encountered only (but acceptably) at intervals *within* the flow of existence, and the latter (life as such) will be found to offer other kinds of value by which it may be upheld (say, to consider again the earlier-cited example, the reputable responsibilities and rewards of a busy office manager's role). For the ascetic, however, such alternatives are neither acceptable nor available. In this way, odd though it may seem given Nietzsche's (in)famous antipathy to (religious) asceticism, the ascetic (as here delineated) is claimed to abide by or embody in a rather exemplary manner the German philosopher's pronouncement that 'it is only as *an aesthetic phenomenon*' that existence is justified.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Nicholas Shrimpton, 'Ruskin and the Aesthetes', in *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, edited by Dinah Birch (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 143, and Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Vintage Books, 1991), p. 431.

¹⁴³ Such a restriction of existence is, of course, perhaps the one characteristic most commonly associated with asceticism. The disposition being ascribed to it here, however, is, like the very adoption of the term ascetic, rather idiosyncratic.

¹⁴⁴ For reasons that the earlier-made discrepancy between the aesthete and the ascetic ought to make clear, it is taken as significant that Nietzsche's phrase does indeed read '*aesthetic*' ['*ästhetisch*'] and not artistic

In its most basic signification, *ascesis* denotes discipline. This may be taken to suggest an instrumental value, and typically the term does carry this connotation. Hence we find, most commonly, reference to asceticism as religious discipline. As James underscores in his lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, however, the terms ascetic and asceticism may be ascribable to motives and conduct ‘originating on diverse’, often inseparably co-effective, and not necessarily religiously-influenced ‘psychological levels’.¹⁴⁵ James himself enumerates several types of (non-religious) *ascesis*. The inclinations to temperance, simplicity, austerity, and chastity typically cited as characteristic attributes of the discipline, along with the ‘mortifications’ of its more severe incarnations, James suggests might be ‘a mere expression of organic hardihood, disgusted with too much ease.’¹⁴⁶ They might be ‘fruits of the love of purity,’ chary of ‘whatever savours of the sensual’.¹⁴⁷ They could also originate in ‘pessimistic feelings about the self,’ possibly combined with (non-religious) ‘beliefs concerning expiation’; in other words, the ascetic might feel, again without any (necessary) religious motivation, that he can escape ‘worse sufferings hereafter, by doing penance now.’¹⁴⁸ There is also what James describes as the case of ‘psychopathic persons’, whose ascetic compulsions are ‘entered on irrationally, by a sort of obsession or fixed idea which comes as a challenge and must be worked off,’ for only thus may such an individual (feel that he can) set ‘his interior consciousness... right again.’¹⁴⁹ There are of course religious instances of these types. The ascetic’s praxis could serve a sacrificial purpose made to or in accordance with an acknowledged deity or doctrine, while his self-directed pessimism might be ‘combined with *theological* beliefs concerning expiation’, thereby granting a corresponding significance to his feeling of buying himself free, of ‘escaping worse sufferings hereafter, by doing penance now’.¹⁵⁰ Such religious affiliations or implications, however, are not intrinsic to the phenomenon.

Another congenially counter-conventional contribution of James’s taxonomy is its avoidance of a further (stereo)typical characterisation of asceticism; this time, of its being untowardly punitive. This particular (pre)conception is especially pronounced in Enlightenment-era estimations of the ascetic’s life and legacy; hence, perhaps most famously, Edward Gibbon’s brazen ‘indictment’ of the phenomenon in chapter thirty-seven of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁵¹ In a ‘terrible and gross’ exaggeration that Henry Chadwick later described as ‘one of the most strident specimens of sustained invective and cold hatred... found

[*künstlich*] phenomenon. The quoted words appear alternatively in ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’ §5 and *The Birth of Tragedy* §5. Shaun Whiteside translation (Penguin, 1993), p. 8 and p. 32.

¹⁴⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 296-297.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 296-297. My emphasis.

¹⁵¹ See Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 12.

in English prose', Gibbon pronounced the early ascetic movement to be disparagingly distinguished by 'a cruel, unfeeling temper' and thereby defiant of 'all we understand by civilisation and culture'.¹⁵² Two centuries later Gibbon's enraged exasperation was echoed by E. R. Dodds, whose own exposition of the early ascetic movement ends with the interrogative exclamation: "Where did all this madness come from?"¹⁵³ The emerging picture here finds expression also in Nietzsche, with his apparently cherished argument that the ascetic is driven by an unconditional 'aversion to life'.¹⁵⁴ Ascetic discipline, however, is not (necessarily) punitive, nor (necessarily) driven by an unconditional hatred of or aversion to all (aspects of) life. As Caroline Walker Bynum has made a point of emphasising in her studies of the Middle Ages, probably of all eras the most likely to have assigned a retributive role to asceticism, interpreting the ascetic impulse in this way, even where some of its more severe manifestations and practices are concerned, 'does not do justice' to the phenomenon.¹⁵⁵ Ascesis, she advocates, is better understood as something like 'a systematic, disciplined, determined self manipulation' rather than 'self-punishment'.¹⁵⁶ Echoing James, Bynum also stipulates that such practice, far from being reducible to motives of dualistic degradation, likely arises from and entails 'a complex web of motivations and ideas'.¹⁵⁷

The evincing of such examples of vehement antipathy as given above, extreme in their views but not in their incidence, is intended to demonstrate that the ascetic is too readily declared to be a travesty of (his) humanity by his supposed ambition to destroy, defeat, or do away with it, whether punitively or (somehow) by (attempted) avoidance (in the latter case, it may be suggested that the ascetic is erroneously conflated with the mystic). Consider by way of (counter)example a documented ascetic like Bernard of Clairvaux, however, and the ventured criticisms lose some of their conviction. As purported by several scholars of his life and work, Bernard's ascesis seems to have been of a noteworthy exacting kind due *not* to an aversive disposition, but rather to an extremely sensitive one.¹⁵⁸ The irony to which this gives rise is perhaps best exemplified by the Cistercian reformer's famous denunciations of the distractions of artistic imagery in his '*Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem*', wherein his admonitions are matched in their fervour by the vividness with which he attends to the subject of his polemic. Few readers of the *Apologia*, notes Umberto Eco, fail to detect that its author 'has a lively

¹⁵² Chadwick (quoting Gibbon), 'The Ascetic Ideal in the History of the Church', in *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, edited by W. J. Shiels (Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 6-7.

¹⁵³ Dodds's *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, as quoted by Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, §28, translated by Douglas Smith (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 136. See also Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 19.

¹⁵⁵ Roberts (citing Bynum's *Fragmentation and Redemption*), *Contesting Spirit*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Christopher Brooke, *The Rise and Fall of the Medieval Monastery* (The Folio Society, 2006), p. 142. Brooke acknowledges in fn. 10, p. 275 that this point had been emphasised by Dom Jean Leclercq in his *S. Bernard et l'esprit cistercien*.

appreciation of the very things that he denounces'.¹⁵⁹ If Bernard appears to be 'contemptuous', Eco suggests, it is 'paradoxically so, for his analysis of what he rejects is extraordinarily fine.'¹⁶⁰

This very dynamic, between, as it were, a determined sensitivity or susceptibility and an equally determined disciplining thereof, is here claimed to be the rather paradoxical peculiarity of the ascetic. Hence the apparently incongruous mix of "rejoicings in" with (severe) "restrictions of" that one finds, for example, in the culture of many monastic-ascetic movements in the Middle Ages. Admittedly, as Christopher Brooke observes, in some cases only the 'narrowest of margins' separated the "sanctioned" ascesis of such movements from the more vindictive worldviews to which some self-professed practitioners sought to harness it.¹⁶¹ That there have been and continue to be conspicuously conflicting claims to the discipline on the part of both practitioners and appraisers is suggestively indicated by James's appeal for a 'more careful consideration of the whole matter', one that judiciously differentiates ascetic praxis from the various 'vagaries' into which some of its 'historic manifestations' might have allowed it to 'wander'.¹⁶² The (stereo)typically inimical characterisation of the phenomenon cannot be, as it overwhelmingly has been, indiscriminately claimed for all cases. Thus one might take the denunciations of a certain nineteenth-century detractor, for whom the ascetic was but

a hideous, sordid, and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain¹⁶³

and constructively contrast them with the following, more equitable consideration from Brooke:

If we ask what unites St Basil in the fourth century, the Irish hermits of the sixth and seventh centuries, St Bruno in the eleventh century, Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the first answer might be... their devotion to the ascetic life.¹⁶⁴

But, Brooke adds, as if addressing the abovementioned critical (mis)conceptions, 'one might equally find it' in their natural affection.¹⁶⁵ The alternate answers, in other words, are not, as they have so (stereo)typically been thought to be, mutually exclusive. Indeed, at those very times when ascetic movements experienced their greatest potency, Brooke substantiates his claim, the preoccupations of their participants, evidenced by the practical works they undertook, indicate what critics would presumably see, were they cognisant thereof, as an ostensibly incongruous concurrence of (purported) depreciative chastisement with compassionate cultivation and conservation. Even before Bernard bestowed to posterity his attentive observations of

¹⁵⁹ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press, 1986), p. 7.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Brooke, *The Rise and Fall of the Medieval Monastery*, p. 109.

¹⁶² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 362, p. 364, and p. 371.

¹⁶³ W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, as quoted by Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁴ Brooke, *The Rise and Fall of the Medieval Monastery*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

contemporary artistry, depictions of flora and fauna distinguished by the most affectionately vivid observation were already gracing the pages of monastery-produced manuscripts in the early eleventh century.¹⁶⁶

Such stereotype-correcting evidence is suspiciously overlooked by the likes of Gibbon or Dodds. As Chadwick notes of *The Decline and Fall*, its author appears ‘most reluctant to acknowledge the agrarian and educational achievements’, among others, of many monastic-ascetic orders.¹⁶⁷ Gibbon seems willing only to grant that such orders might have ‘produced by accident some unintended good’, which all the same ‘could have been better achieved by [what were to his mind] more sensible and direct means.’¹⁶⁸ As opposed to the judicious judgement of a commentator like James, Gibbon displays what Chadwick dubs a rhetorically-motivated ‘refusal to distinguish’ between the actualities and ‘abuses’ of early asceticism.¹⁶⁹ Dodds, too, though perhaps less explicitly ‘fierce’ in his denunciations, seems to display a similarly indiscriminate attitude.¹⁷⁰ As Douglas Burton-Christie points out, Dodds’s *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* is also suspectly selective in its citation of examples, passing as it does over the relatively ‘restrained and moderate picture’ of ascetical practices evidenced in documents like the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in favour of the heavily ‘hellenised and dualistic’ *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius, without any hint of there being a ‘distinction’ between such alternatives.¹⁷¹ Even the relatively recent (re)appraisal by Robin Lane Fox, as Burton-Christie remarks, all but ‘continues Dodds’s legacy’, portraying as it does the ‘complex’ ascetic impulse rather simplistically as something that ‘impoverishes human existence.’¹⁷² One might, therefore, like to juxtapose here a more sympathetic assessment like that of Schopenhauer, who took the relative ubiquity of, and unanimity among instances of asceticism across time and cultures as ‘proof’ that in it ‘is expressed not an eccentricity and craziness of the mind, as optimistic shallowness and dullness like to assert’, he writes as if decrying the likes of the above-cited accusations, ‘but an essential side of human nature.’¹⁷³ With seemingly similar sympathy, and again in starkest contrast to the likes of Gibbon, Dodds, Nietzsche, and Lane Fox, the writings of Ellis and James regard asceticism respectively as a ‘wise’ art, and a ‘profounder way of handling... existence.’¹⁷⁴

There is perhaps an element of the chicken-versus-egg dilemma in the ascetic’s seemingly incongruous mix of “rejoicings in” with (severe) “restrictions of”. While some

¹⁶⁶ See *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Chadwick, ‘The Ascetic Ideal’, p. 7.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, p. 13.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, fn. 32 p. 27.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, Fourth Book, §68, Payne transl., p. 389.

¹⁷⁴ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* vol. 6, Chapter V (F. A. Davis, 1927), p. 126, available via Project Gutenberg: e-books #13610-#13615 (2004), and James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 364.

accounts of ascesis intimate that its practice prompts or provokes a kind of heightened perceptiveness (and concomitant appreciativeness (or obsessiveness)), James suggests the converse; that it is a heightened susceptibility, an, as it were, innately-enhanced ‘sensitiveness’ that predisposes an individual to the discipline.¹⁷⁵ Just as it was earlier claimed that the ascetic is too readily declared to be unworthy of, or a betrayal to (his) humanity by his supposed ambition to destroy, defeat, or do away with it, so also there is a too easy animosity directed towards the being-in-the-world of the ascetic, insofar as he is (mis)deemed to attempt to close himself off *entirely* to a good deal of existence and experience. As Eco maintains, however, ascetics are far from ‘unaware’, nor even seek to be so; ‘if anything’, he, like James, proposes, they may be said to be all the ‘more keenly’ aware.¹⁷⁶ The (conventional) view of the ascetic as one who punitively or avoidantly endeavours to deny so much of (embodied) existence and experience would result in his occupying a position of the greatest remoteness from the aesthetic dimension; yet that is precisely the opposite of what is (here) claimed about the phenomenon. Ascetic being-in-the-world was said here to give expression to the endeavour to be as (consistently) close as possible *to* the aesthetic dimension, and the difficulty of achieving this (insofar as it cannot be willed or guaranteed) was said to shape the (distinctive) severity of the ascetic’s discipline. Given this imperative aspiration and compulsion towards such an extreme of aesthetic openness and susceptibility, the ascetic does *not* (for he could not afford to) seek to close himself off to all (possible) worlds of experience. What he *will* aspire to do is to cultivate only a very particular kind of engagement therewith; that is, a restrictedly aesthetic one. The ascetic, one might characterise the distinction, wishes to *see* but not to *be*, to *entertain* but not to *enact*.

To make this point clearer, it might be useful once again to draw on yet another common characterisation of the discipline, whatever its alleged instrumental motivation. The ascetic endeavour, generically speaking, is said (in this case suitably) to entail a readiness to renounce a ‘primary... in exchange for a secondary’ experience.¹⁷⁷ In the typically cited cases, the discipline might thus be valued for what it is thought to afford its practitioner in terms of (for religious types) salvific guarantees or (for those non-religiously motivated), say, mental or existential equilibrium. Unlike such familiar cases of instrumental ascesis, however, in the case of the (non-instrumental) ascesis delineated here it is not so much a matter of renouncing a primary for a secondary experience, but rather, if one can forgive the initial (apparent) illogicality of the statement, a forgoing of (an) experience for the sake of (that) experience. It is the enactment of, and consequent measure of indelible identification with (a particular) experience that, it is here claimed, cannot be countenanced by the ascetic. (The) experience must remain ever a prospect or possibility. Anything else would constitute a regression of or from the aesthetic dimension. To arrogate yet another useful formulation from the literature of (fringe) psychiatry: ‘There is

¹⁷⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 274 and p. 290.

¹⁷⁶ Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, p. 6.

¹⁷⁷ Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints’ Stories and the Western Imagination*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 81.

something final and definitive about an act, which this type of person regards with suspicion', notes R. D. Laing, for action 'is the dead end of possibility'; and if it 'cannot be utterly eschewed', every act must then at least 'be of such an equivocal nature' that the 'self' in question can never be or feel trapped therein.¹⁷⁸

What is offered by, and what the ascetic individual so especially values in the aesthetic dimension is that it should (continue ever to) *present* to him experiences that *speak to* his (sense of) self, but that do not (necessarily) become a(n) indelible part thereof, that do not (necessarily) become identified or identifiable therewith. To draw this point into relation with the earlier-made distinction between one's (core) sense of (one's) being-in-the-world and one's (socially-adapted) personae, it could be said that, of necessity in the ascetic individual, the former (core sense) takes (peculiar and peculiarly extreme) precedence over the (socially-adapted) latter. As Laing intimates, '[w]hat are to most people everyday happenings,' and therefore 'hardly noticed because they have no special significance,' for the ascetic necessarily become unusually 'significant'.¹⁷⁹ For such an individual, 'the elements of the world' come to have, 'or have come to have, a different hierarchy of significance'.¹⁸⁰ 'External events no longer affect him in the same way as they do others'; not, that is, 'that they affect him less; on the contrary', Laing describes in words that resemble the observations of ascetics advanced by Eco and James, 'frequently they affect him more'.¹⁸¹ It is *not* necessarily the case, as typically presumed, that the ascetic individual is or has become 'indifferent', indignant, vindictive, or 'withdrawn'.¹⁸² As it has already (hopefully) been made clear, the ascetic's peculiar preoccupation and concomitant 'compulsive nature' are both the cause and consequence of a heightened sensitivity or susceptibility;¹⁸³ and it is due to this idiosyncratic hyper-acute awareness, which causes significance to turn 'top-heavy', that the ascetic's way of perceiving and receiving 'the world about him can be said to be aesthetic',¹⁸⁴ albeit not quite as one is accustomed to find that term employed.

Contrary to the (stereo)typical portrait of him, it is not the case that the ascetic endeavours to exclude or escape from existence or experience. He is both unable thus to escape, given his hypersensitivity, as well as uninclined thereto, given their vital potential for nourishing his excessive aesthetic demand. As already suggested, the ascetic individual cannot afford to dispense with the aesthetically communicative capacity of (exposure to) a variety of experience(s). At the same time, however, he cannot countenance becoming identified therewith.

¹⁷⁸ Laing is of course, in accordance with the context of his own discussion, talking about a different 'type' of person. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin Books, 2010), p. 87.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² The quoted words are Laing's. *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁸⁴ See Farber, *The Ways of the Will*, p. 108 and p. 113. On hyper-acute awareness, see also Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 89.

The point of distinction of the ascetic (as here delineated) is, therefore, in the nature of his engagement. He aspires always (only) to entertain (all) things aesthetically. There is, it should perhaps be emphasised, also no attempt on the ascetic's part to appraise the experience(s) in question, as others are wont to do subsequent to the communicative immediacy of the aesthetic dimension. The latter is, in both the purposive and locative implications of the term, the (overriding) *end* of his being; and actuality and conceptuality alike threaten a closing off of it. Insofar as the ascetic's existence or experience may be (as it is conventionally) said to be limited, restricted, or deprived, it is only in its evasion of what, to him, threatens a kind of experiential finality and, consequently, aesthetic nullity. One might hence draw here (perhaps, it must be admitted, quite liberally) upon Nietzsche's ascription to asceticism of a certain "preserving" instinct; 'in it and through it', he writes in the *Genealogy*, 'life struggles with... and *against* death'.¹⁸⁵ For the ascetic, as here delineated, what is not aesthetic is truly anaesthetic; it is, for him, a kind of death. His discipline, therefore, is said to consist in an unceasing effort to ensure a consummately aesthetic existence. Recalling Nietzsche's other famous pronouncement, it is only in and by the aesthetic that the ascetic's being can (to himself) be justified.

¹⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Third Essay, §13. Smith transl., p. 99.

Chapter Two

There is a deliberate, subtle “bilaterality” to the foregoing assertion that the (self-)justification of the being-in-the-world of the ascetic is aesthetic. Two separable but mutually reinforcing implications are intended. Ascetic being is claimed to be aesthetic not just in its *objective* (its compulsion for a constant and copious connectedness to the aesthetic dimension), but also in its *objecthood* (its (re)presentation of (and hence proffering of potential communicativity to) this type of being).

As scholars of asceticism (particularly of the early (Christian) manifestations of the movement) have noted, a fundamental contributing factor to the possibility, practice, and perpetuation of ascesis is that the phenomenon should have an audience.¹ Insofar as the ascetic discipline might be harnessed to religious, ethical, or some other kind of instrumentality, its objecthood may in such cases be said to serve an exemplary function. Such purposefully conspicuous exemplarity is particularly well evidenced in the Christian tradition, with its striking utilisation of both textual and visual media to publicise ascetic practices and practitioners. In the early years of the movement especially, ‘narratives and biographies’ were particularly ‘privileged’ carriers of its communicativity,² joined in later eras by the increasingly popular (in both meanings of that term) presentation of the phenomenon via the visual arts. As demonstrated by such determined dissemination, the claims of ascesis, like the aesthesis upon which they (are said here to) depend, are not and cannot be ‘a private affair’.³ Indeed, there seems to be ‘something endemic to’ the discipline that ‘requires an audience’.⁴ As one recent commentator remarked, suggestively corroborating the contention of this thesis (that ‘only as *an aesthetic phenomenon*’ is the ascetic’s existence (to himself) justified): it is as if ascetics must ‘be seen (either literally or metaphorically)’ in order to exist.⁵

Given that the being-in-the-world of the ascetic, in both its *objective* and *objecthood*, is treated *here* first and foremost as a matter of aesthetic import (and not (at least not fundamentally) of religious, ethical, metaphysical, epistemological, or other instrumental concern), the claim to be made for its representation, its “exemplarity”, is in this case that it may serve as an important (potentially vital) source of aesthetic communicativity for the ascetic(ally-inclined) individual. There is, as it were, a mutually reinforcing relationship between the *objective* and *objecthood* of the ascetic’s being; between the, so to speak, compulsion for and conduit of the aesthetic communicativity that both dictates and is dictated by his peculiar discipline. This is not to suggest that the ascetic is dependent *exclusively* on such (types of)

¹ See Elizabeth A. Castelli, ‘Asceticism – Audience and Resistance: Response to the Three Preceding Papers’, in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 186.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

representations. Insofar as his (sense of (his)) being-in-the-world is, as contended here, governed only by that compulsion for a constant and copious connectedness to the aesthetic dimension, anything at all may serve as a potential channel of the requisite communicativity. To repeat from Chapter One, it cannot be anticipated when, where, how, or in what way the aesthetic dimension might register with one's sense of (one's) being; nor can such communicativity be sought, created, forced, willed, or approached at will, though one might (endeavour to) possess, as the ascetic does, an increased susceptibility or receptivity to its possibility (the very essence of his endeavour is to optimise just such a receptivity to a maximum variety of experiences, even if these are to be experienced by him only aesthetically). It is contended here, however, that the representation of ascetic being, or what manifests to the ascetic as such, might be of especially unique communicative value to him.

Given the (likely, perhaps even necessary) rarity of manifestations of ascetic individuals, whose discipline, as Schopenhauer intimates, is 'quite unsuitable to the great majority of people',⁶ (re)presentations of ascetic being are almost exclusively contingent upon (what remains of) the written and/or visual record of their existence. Schopenhauer thus sums up the rather paradoxical scenario faced by the ascetic: his being-in-the-world, though predicated on conspicuous exemplification, is 'really nothing but the quiet and unobserved conduct in the life of such a man'.⁷ The precious challenge that this poses is again well encapsulated by Schopenhauer, who explains that the 'history of the world' will perforce 'always keep silence about the[se] persons', for 'the material of world-history is quite different therefrom, and indeed opposed' thereto.⁸ Thus recourse must be made (in Schopenhauer's case, for the sake of philosophical reflection; in the case argued here, for the sake of the aesthetic communicativity vital to the ascetic's sense of (his) being-in-the-world) to those extant (literary and/or pictorial) 'accounts of the lives of' such persons.⁹ Regardless of how 'badly written' and 'mixed up' as these occasionally might appear to be 'with superstition and nonsense', as Schopenhauer remarks of the written records, or of how aesthetically and artistically inadmissible the various visual depictions of ascetics have heretofore been judged (as will be discussed below), the incomparable and rarity-intensified 'importance' of such 'material', as Schopenhauer emphasises, must take precedence.¹⁰

Such claims as are made here for the potentially crucial aesthetic communicativity afforded by (records of) ascetic existence, and the corresponding call for the (continued) availability and acknowledgement of its representation, are necessitated by the latter's having remained relatively unregarded (both ignored and/or deplored), especially within the tradition of philosophical aesthetics. For reasons already hinted at in the previous paragraph, which are

⁶ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, Fourth Book, §68, Payne transl., p. 386.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

applicable to both the literary and pictorial record as well as characteristic of both scholarly and popular estimations of and degrees of (in)attention to the ascetic, the (representation of the) ascetic's being has, for just about the entire duration of the phenomenon's existence, seemed to swing between the extremes of passing relatively unnoticed and provoking radical hostility. What follows is an attempt to explain such extreme reactions. In accord with the specific concerns of the subject here, an endeavour is made to offer explanations without recourse to the typical religious, ethical, cultural, or other instrumental justifications; that is, to account for them only on here-so-called aesthetic terms. In so doing, it is hoped, first, to propose some clarificatory insights into the (stereo)typical (anti-aesthetic) collective reception of the (image of the) ascetic; and second, consequently to redress to some extent the latter's relative neglect and/or (attempted) dismissal by and within the traditional of philosophical aesthetics.

The kind of (stereo)typical animosity long directed at or incited by ascetic being-in-the-world has already been evinced here (in the preceding chapter) by means of the examples of Gibbon, Dodds, Nietzsche, Lecky, and Lane Fox. As recently attempted (re)appraisals of the phenomenon are at pains to point out, such estimations have for too long and without sufficient justification tended to characterise the 'general thrust' of both scholarly and 'popular understandings of, and prejudices against' asceticism, its practitioners, and their representation.¹¹ Thanks, most likely, to all those 'images of emaciated, verminous hermits', as one scholar rather severely describes the (stereo)typical picture, there seems to be 'something about' the 'general tendency' to asceticism that, in James's vivid expression, frequently makes the 'gorge' of a man rise.¹² Part of the problem is of course the inability or unwillingness among appraisers to discriminate between the extremes and the routines, the actualities and the abuses of the discipline and its image. Given the instinctive conspicuousness of the phenomenon, it is not surprising that it should be the severely (stereo)typical *imagery* of the ascetic that seems to do the most damage to its reputation, as indeed the above-cited quote suggests. That the (stereo)typical prejudices might be particularly pronounced in *popular* estimations of the ascetic is thus readily explained by the greater accessibility and pervasiveness (especially in the Christian tradition) of the visual record of his being. The influence of this pervasive pictoriality on the depreciation of the phenomenon may also be said to be, as will be argued here, significantly exacerbated (if not caused) by the subjection of such pictorial representations to traditional aesthetic (as artistic) appraisal. It is worth emphasising once again that the problem is not just a scholarly one. To repeat from Chapter One, the prevailing 'ambience' of the academic tradition of the fine arts and its philosophical appraisal has so permeated and predisposed even

¹¹ See the collected papers in *Asceticism*, edited by Wimbush and Valantasis. The quoted words are from their 'Introduction', p. xx.

¹² Roberts, *Contesting Spirit*, p. 19, and James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 371.

the educated layperson's views and vocabulary that we (in the west) have been (and are (even if unwittingly)) 'embroiled' in its mindset.¹³

Bound as such tradition (for it is nothing more than a tradition) has been to a relatively strict set of conditions for the judging of what is artistically and aesthetically admissible (as regards both objects and responses), it is perhaps not surprising that it should have had difficulty accommodating (representations of) the ascetic. From roughly the (post-)Renaissance onwards, whence the advent of the (Systematisation of the) Fine Arts and the conception of modern (that is, post-medieval) philosophical aesthetics (as a philosophy of those Fine Arts), both art and aesthetics became increasingly (if somewhat counter-productively) conformed to and constrained by untowardly strict criteria, categorisations, and customs of critique; that is, 'to conventional rules'.¹⁴ The institutions of and around the (Academic) artworld from this period onwards, as Herbert Read submits, instigated what might be called a rising hyper-refinedness in both the creation and contemplation of art and the aesthetic.¹⁵ Such a(n attempted) restricting and requisitioning of the remit of the aesthetically admissible is, however, as the arguments here so far advanced ought to have made apparent, an impertinent and impermissible imposition. To reiterate the relevant point, it cannot be anticipated when, where, how, or in what way and with what aspects of one's sense of self the aesthetic dimension might register. Furthermore, what may, within that dimension, be found to register with one person might not do so with another, and perhaps, for the time being, will register with no one at all, though it may bear the potential to. What to one individual might thus be of no aesthetic value (insofar as it does not register with his sense of (his) being-in-the-world) may yet be of the utmost aesthetic (communicativity and (hence)) value to another. What might serve one individual as a vital channel of such communicativity might be to another individual the surest means to its silence. This would not, however, (and cannot be permitted to) sanction the latter's denying the (potential) aesthetic value of the object, experience, or encounter in question. No one or other possible instantiation of the aesthetic may be deemed (aesthetically) inadmissible. To repeat again from Chapter One, apart from the unique communicativity that it is said to afford, no more particular, objective or universal claim(s) may legitimately be staked about the aesthetic dimension of existence, the experience thereof, or (the supposed quality or consequence of) its communicativity.

Given the above-described state of the arts and aesthetics in the modern (post-medieval) west, it is, to say again, not surprising to find that the (stereo)typical animosity towards and depreciation of asceticism evidenced in writers like Gibbon, Nietzsche, Lecky, and Lane Fox readily finds its analogue in the reception and appraisal of the phenomenon's artistic representation. There appears to be a relative (and relatively widespread) disinclination in the relevant literature to consider, or if so, only in a depreciatory way, depictions of the ascetic. This

¹³ See Chapter One, footnote 17.

¹⁴ See Read, *Icon and Idea*, p. 87.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 106.

seems to be due, in part, to this so-called subsector of art (like the existence to which it gives expression) being considered, in the first case, unbeauteous (and therefore in-artistic or un-aesthetic according to traditional criteria).¹⁶ It might also be (again according to traditional criteria) that such artworks have been and continue to be indiscriminately classed among or (dis)regarded as being (more) akin to the applied (as opposed to fine) arts or craft, especially given their (perceived) original, functional subordination to, in most cases religious, but possibly other kinds of instrumental exigencies, which also would have influenced their disentanglement to membership of and consideration by the systematised Fine Arts and philosophical aesthetics. In many cases, the above-described habit of evasion or elision of artworks dealing with ascetic subjects extends (presumably by association) to those (also relatively neglected) arts most heavily populated by such portrayals; that is, the medieval (Christian) pictorial arts in general. Presumably for the same reasons as those already provided, there is a noticeable (relative) dearth of consideration of such arts (and/or a (too) easy dismissal thereof) in the deliberations of philosophers of aesthetics. The idea of medieval art as inescapably subordinate to functional exigencies is, however, here deemed to be no longer acceptable as a justification for their neglect, in much the same way that it was argued that asceticism may not be considered exclusively in terms of the various extraneous exigencies with which it might have originally or at various times been considered indistinguishable. The seemingly intractable association of asceticism and its artistic representation with the contingently instrumental (religious) instantiations of such phenomena have made both ascetic being-in-the-world and the art in which its image attains predominance too readily denied aesthetic admissibility.

Once again it ought to be obvious from the arguments already advanced here that such a(n attempted) denial of aesthetic admissibility or viability is both untoward and unfeasible. There is always the possibility that the (representation of the) ascetic's being bears the (however insignificant) potential to be a vital source of aesthetic communicativity for some (even if only one) individual's sense of (his) being-in-the-world. Insofar as such images might be found to communicate the (sense of) being-in-the-world *of* the ascetic *to* the ascetic, they are potentially of the most especial aesthetic value to him; and hence, for the very sake of the ascetic(ally-inclined) individual's sense of self, it is most imperative to permit aesthetic viability to such representations.¹⁷

That such permissibility falls victim to a more eagerly advocated aesthetic inadmissibility is (further) argued here to be due to errors enacted by critics who, it is claimed,

¹⁶ As in Hegel's pronouncement on portrayals of martyrs, whose 'distance from beauty' was considered by him 'too great to allow any healthy art to select them as its subject-matter.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 1, p. 545.

¹⁷ It is worth adding here, transplanting the points made in Chapter One, that the uniquely valuable intra-aesthetic encounter *of* the ascetic *by* the ascetic is not suggested to constitute a mere solipsistic confirmation, approbation, or encouragement of his sense of (his) self; indeed, the experience may well comprise or in some way entail a painful or uncomfortable confrontation therewith. (For more on the quality of this encounter, see Chapter Four).

have an insufficiently-comprehended tendency to, first, misapprehend the register of their responses or reactions, and, second, to misconstrue and therefore misapply the terminology of their appraisals. As maintained in Chapter One, all so-called aesthetic judgements ought to be grouped together with (given their greater kinship to) those mental operations said to belong to the “logical-intellectual” apprehension of the world, for both must be distinguished from the aesthetically immediate, to which they are necessarily consequent and insufficient. Nevertheless, although such “aesthetic” appraisals are necessarily subsequent upon the aesthetic encounter or experience, insofar as they are an (however inadequate) attempted assessment thereof, the categories and terms to which they resort (provided that it is an honest employment) are acceptably accompanied by the adjective aesthetic. It is contended here, however, that there is an insufficiently-identified obstacle to the honesty of such terminological employment. When appraisals of aesthetic objects, encounters, or experiences are ventured, as they are commonly wont to be, the appraiser thereby puts himself at risk of perpetrating a further degree of infidelity or injustice to the object of his appraisal; that is, by misunderstanding the register of that object’s communicativity, and hence misattributing to which categories and subcategories of experience the latter subscribes and by means of what terminology it ought to be expressed.

The first, most crucial error made by critics is that of mistaking a discrepancy between the non-aesthetic and the aesthetic to be a question of intra-aesthetic appraisal. As argued in Chapter One, philosophising about the aesthetic ought to entail not, at least not at first, a concern with the debatable (and dubitable) quality or qualities of its experience or engagement, but rather with whether (or not) there is such experience or engagement at all. Traditionally, however, the emphasis seems to have been the other way around; and when the latter question does come into consideration, it is erroneously confused or conflated with the concerns of the former. In the case of the (representation of) ascetic being-in-the-world, such critical circumstances have resulted in what might have been (though, as will shortly be explained, is not) a legitimate register of non-aesthetic apprehension being perversely presented as a judgement of aesthetic inadmissibility.

If the aesthetic dimension is (as it is said here to be) that which instantiates a (rarely otherwise encountered) communicativity with an individual’s sense of (his) being-in-the-world, it follows that anything that does *not* instantiate this may by the individual in question be considered (for him) non-aesthetic. As the earlier-discussed example of Schopenhauer’s expressed artistic preferences ought to have made clear, such a discrimination of the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic may be applicable only by and for the individual making that discrimination. That Schopenhauer might have deemed (especially realistic) depictions of foods and nudes to be aesthetically inadmissible is all well and good *for Schopenhauer* (and, it could be supposed, anyone sufficiently like him), but his (or any individual’s) verdict does not sanction the aesthetic inadmissibility of such depictions *per se*.

To the extent that a particular object, experience, or encounter has spoken to or registered with one’s sense of (one’s) being, whether amenably or unwelcomely, one must

concede that one has been aesthetically engaged by it. The important point to note here is that this engagement effectively rules out the possibility of discounting the aesthetic viability of that object, experience, or encounter. If the latter has done anything more than either pass unnoticed or impel avoidance it will defy such attempts to discount its aesthetic admissibility. However much the likes of a Schopenhauer might try (counterproductively) to argue otherwise, his very dedication to a(n often impassioned) discussion of the objects of his disparagement already gives the lie to their being in possession of (the utmost) aesthetic viability and even value. *Were* the convinced critic to (try to) claim the aesthetic insignificance of an object that he *had* merely passed by or (sought to) avoid, such a claim might well be merited in his own case but not in any other's. That is, should a particular object or encounter fail or cease to speak to or register with one's *own* sense of (one's) being-in-the-world, one may not dismiss that object or encounter *per se*, for one must concede that it bears the potential to afford another (even if only hypothetical) individual the aesthetic communicativity that it has not afforded oneself. It is worth noting that an honest claim to the aesthetic insignificance of an object, experience, or encounter would necessarily preclude the possibility of engaging in any lengthy discussion of it. Thus many critics, like Bernard in the *Apologia*, (unwittingly) give the lie to their aesthetic engagement. This is not to suggest that the critic may not claim to find a particular object, experience, or encounter, for example, ugly or disturbing. To do so, however, would be to attribute to it a term of legitimately aesthetic appraisal, and hence to concede its aesthetic viability. The aesthetic viability of an object, experience, or encounter is contingent upon its sustaining rather than threatening or curtailing one's aesthetic engagement, and the same criterion applies to the terms of appraisal to which one might resort.

Insofar as critics attempt, as they frequently do, to refuse aesthetic permissibility to a particular object, experience, or encounter by means of an aesthetic appraisal, such a critic is, in the understanding of the aesthetic dimension offered here, contradicting himself. The critic cannot claim the aesthetic inadmissibility of an object, experience, or encounter by means of an appraisal that gives the lie to his already having been aesthetically engaged thereby. In his (attempted) doing so, the critic is effectively (albeit possibly unwittingly, or else simply dishonestly) conceding to having been in or engaged by the aesthetic dimension. He may therefore be said to be, first, misapprehending the problem, and, second, misconstruing and hence misapplying the terminology. If the critic had been so honestly affected as his use of such terms of aesthetic appraisal would suggest, the object, experience, or encounter in question is not, despite his claims thereto, aesthetically inadmissible to him. Were it truly as much, it would not compel any such appraisal. It would not register aesthetically with him in any way at all. This could entail the relevant object, experience, or encounter being either of such a nature that the appraiser wishes only to seek to escape from it (and hence would not be in a position to (wish to) talk about it). It could also mean that it affords him only a non-aesthetic (instrumental) value of some kind; or else it would pass more or less unnoticed by and be of no value at all to

him, unless he were perhaps compelled by extraneous circumstances to attend to the object in some (again non-aesthetic) way. It should be stated here that the latter (non-aesthetic) kinds of ways in which one might be compelled to attend to and appraise an object or experience include those of *artistic* appraisal or judgement (that which is conventionally referred to as aesthetic judgement, but which is here considered to be different). One may appraise the artistic (or some other kind of qualitative) merit of something *without* a necessary (or necessarily concomitant) aesthetic engagement. In such a case, however, one would not (or ought not to, insofar as one is being honest and appropriate with one's chosen terminology) resort to any terms of properly *aesthetic* (as opposed to artistic or other qualitative) appraisal. The attempted application of any aesthetic term of appraisal to an object, experience, or encounter that has been in no way aesthetically assimilable by the appraiser is considered here to be a dishonest or erroneous employment thereof. As was earlier advocated, the appraiser of a (potential aesthetic) object or encounter ought to attend (at least at first) only to the question of whether (or not) there is, in each case, (an) aesthetic experience or engagement. If there is not, it is unfitting that he should thence (attempt to) employ and apply various terms of aesthetic appraisal. If there is, or has been (an) aesthetic experience, then strictly speaking the very viability of employing and applying such terms of appraisal ought to be ruled out. The aesthetic dimension, as was discussed in Chapter One, is antecedent and impermeable to any such intelligible apprehension.

This is not to deny that one might have a legitimate difficulty with various aesthetic objects, experiences, or encounters. The problem must, however, in such a case first be acknowledged to *be* an aesthetic one. That the critic might be compelled to (attempt to) resort to terms of aesthetic appraisal like ugly or disturbing suggests that the object of his appraisal *has* registered with his sense of (his) being-in-the-world (and *is* thereby aesthetic). Any register of such difficulty or trouble is not, cannot be, and may not be claimed to be an indication that the object or experience is unaesthetic (not even for the appraiser himself). That one might, of course, experience various kinds of *non*-aesthetic difficulties with an object or encounter is not in question. What these might be, and how they differ from the aesthetic kind will be discussed further below. For now, the concern is with difficulties or dilemmas of a here-so-called intra-aesthetic kind.

The (attempt to) resort to terms of aesthetic appraisal of (roughly) agreeable or disagreeable suggestion is claimed here to correspond to the (attempt to) give expression to that which has registered as (roughly) commensurate with or disproportionate to one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world. That one's sense of (one's) being may thus serve as the, so to speak, determinant in such appraisals is signalled by one's capacity immediately and unmistakably (though inexplicably) to recognise the appropriate kinds of aesthetic encounters. To elucidate this point by means once again of the example of Schopenhauer, the latter seems to suggest having found agreeable that which facilitated his distance from the appetitive, disagreeable that which did the opposite; and this appears to accord with (at least) the impression of his sense of

(his) being-in-the-world that he attempts (albeit futilely) to share with his readers. Such an individually-determined discrimination could not, however, legitimate a claim to the aesthetic inadmissibility of its objects, given that it is already by such an appraisal (whether of agreeable or disagreeable suggestion) conceding to those objects having registered with or engaged the appraiser's sense of (his) being-in-the-world (and even if such engagement had (in his case) *not* occurred, the appraiser would still have to acknowledge a potential aesthetic communicativity for (hypothetical) others). The non-universalisability of aesthetic claims argued for here also prohibits (or at least undermines) any ventured demand for consensus on what amounts to individual appraisals and (attempted) qualitative attributions. This is not to deny nor refuse that we might aspire to share such individual appraisals and attributions, but merely that we can neither compel agreement with, nor even be sure to have accurately or adequately conveyed our own estimations.

In addition to the typically (if roughly) referred to aesthetic categories of the agreeable and disagreeable, however, there is, it is to be argued here, a third alternative by means of which the aesthetically engaged critic may register his possible difficulty (in this case of neither clearly agreeable nor disagreeable kind) with a particular aesthetic object, experience, or encounter. To do this would accordingly be to register neither a commensuration with nor a disproportion to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world, but rather a thoroughgoing challenge to or destabilising of it.¹⁸ Properly to confront, challenge, destabilise, or subvert one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world, and not just to affect, change, or influence it (as all aesthetic encounters may be said to do), nor to stand in a relation of silence or insignificance thereto (as the non-aesthetic does), is here claimed to be the preserve of a category all its own.

As the several extant (English-language) studies of the subject all emphasise (and exemplify), there is something inscrutably troublesome about the term and category of the grotesque. It presents, in the words of Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'special problems' to those who would seek to examine it.¹⁹ Like the aesthetic dimension within which it belongs, the grotesque, as Harpham attempts to explain, assaults just about all our 'tacit assumptions' about the possibility of inquiry into and discourse about the subjects of our self-assured choosing: that these might be found to have some kind of essence in which all is (or may be rendered) 'tidy'; that, 'however complex', they may nevertheless be conveniently differentiated and described and some core of coherence both supposed and systematically exposed.²⁰ 'The grotesque', Harpham asserts, 'places all these assumptions in doubt.'²¹ Notwithstanding the numerous concerted, if inevitably ill-fated

¹⁸ It is considered noteworthy in this regard that, unlike the agreeable and disagreeable, or the commensurate and disproportionate, there appears to be no corresponding opposite of the grotesque.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'Preface to the 1982 edition' of *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (The Davies Group, 2006), p. xxi.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

scholarly efforts to offer some elucidation of the term and category, an intractable indefiniteness and disagreement pervades the relevant literature. No matter how ‘prodigiously well informed, carefully argued’ and ‘persuasive’ the extant accounts of the grotesque, as Harpham observes, they ‘manage to contradict each other’ on even ‘the most basic’ points.²²

Perhaps the most palpable problem with the word (and associated concept(s) of the) grotesque is the insufficiently distinguished discrepancy between the two forms in which it may be employed. The noun form of the (capitalised) Grotesque, though related to, really ought to be distinguished from the adjectival grotesque. It is the indiscriminate confusion and conflation of these that appears to have caused much muddlement in understandings of and references to the subject. Of the two forms (in English), the nominal Grotesque is relatively definable. Serving approximately as a stylistic or art historical identifier, it is reasonably less troublesome than its adjectival adjunct. It is possible to obtain, as Harpham submits, a comparatively ‘clear account’ of (at least the ‘formative years’ of) its ‘development and applications’.²³ Even if it is still possible to attain only an indefinite description of what constitutes the Grotesque, it has proved somewhat easier and with a greater degree of consensus to discuss *its* origin and evolution, and that to which it was (at least initially) applied. In its original Italian, the term first appears in the late fifteenth century as a means of designating the never-before-seen variety of designs found on the walls of several long-buried ancient Roman buildings excavated around that time.²⁴ Consequently, while the designation is of Renaissance origin, the formal or stylistic traits that it was intended to identify appear to have existed at least as far back as the early Christian era, and possibly had a derivation ‘much older than Rome.’²⁵ Of course, as Wolfgang Kayser observes, Renaissance artists and their patrons ‘eagerly imbibed’ the novelty and its ‘lesson’, such that the freshly-christened forms and features of the ancient style, copied and cultivated by a new generation of artists and admirers, ‘quickly became an object of imitation’, and were thus granted something of a renewed, if not new lease on life.²⁶ In 1502, in what has been acknowledged to be the first documented use of the term, Cardinal Todeschini Piccolomini explicitly contracted Pinturicchio to paint the vaulted ceiling of the library of Siena Cathedral with such ‘arrangements as are now called grotesques’ (*che oggi chiamano grottesche*).²⁷ In the course of the sixteenth and subsequent centuries *grottesche* gained increasing, and

²² Ibid, p. xxiii.

²³ Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 27.

²⁴ Perhaps the most noteworthy instances are the decorative frescoes that were found among the ruins of Nero’s Domus Aurea or Golden Palace, and the murals that adorned the Baths of Titus.

²⁵ See Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (Methuen and Co., 1972), pp. 11-12, and Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 27.

²⁶ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, translated by Ulrich Weisstein (Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 20, and Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 2.

²⁷ Kayser (quoting the Piccolomini contract), *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 20. See also Wilson Yates (citing Frances K. Barasch’s *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*), ‘An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations’, in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, edited by James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 7.

increasingly widespread popularity, both geographically and in terms of the media in which they appeared, from painting and architectural ornamentation to printmaking and the embellishments of books.²⁸

As ought to be apparent from its above-described origins, the signification of *grottesche*, which derives from the Italian word for cave (*grotta*), has less to do with any characteristics of what is actually designated *by* the term than with the circumstances in which the latter first (literally) surfaced. ‘More because of the setting than because of any qualities inherent in the designs themselves,’ explains Harpham, ‘a consensus soon emerged according to which’ these were to be called ‘*grottesche* – of or pertaining to underground caves.’²⁹ Given that these so-called *grottesche* and the buildings in which they were discovered were of course ‘never intended to be underground’ or in any way grotto-like, the ‘naming’ is already something of an anomaly.³⁰ Obviously there were selected formal characteristics considered to be common among the ancient examples, by means of which they were collectively identified and imitated. As to what exactly these were, or rather, how exactly these might be encapsulated in an adequate description (or, with even greater difficulty, prescription) has been a question of considerable contention. The most common starting point for most scholars (in addition, of course, to the evidence of those Roman-era ruins that have survived, and the (post-)Renaissance imitations thereof) is the contemporary commentary and criticism afforded by the Augustan author Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. Though Vitruvius did not, for obvious reasons, employ the term grotesque, nor offer any kind of alternative term of classification, the relevant passage of his *De Architectura* provides a constructive (if conservative) description of the designs and workmanship to which he was witness. (What Vitruvius has to say on the matter will be considered further below). In cases where there is neither such contemporary commentary nor the survival (to a sufficient degree of preservation) of the artefacts themselves, as famously with Nero’s Domus Aurea, scholars have also been able to avail themselves of the works of credibly meticulous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century copyists like (in the latter instance) the French engraver Nicholas Ponce.³¹ From all this evidence, the most common, elementary, and generally agreed-upon characteristic of the Grotesque is what Philip Thomson describes as its ‘confusion’ (or confusion, in the suggested Baumgartian sense) ‘of heterogeneous elements’ all ‘intricately interwoven’.³²

With regard to the specifically English evolution of the term, Thomson explains that early usage appears to have remained relatively restricted to this noun form employed as a designation for the ancient-era designs and their (post-)Renaissance imitations.³³ It was not long,

²⁸ See Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, pp. 2-3.

²⁹ Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 31.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Yates, ‘An Introduction to the Grotesque’, pp. 5-6.

³² Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 12.

³³ Ibid, p. 13.

however, before signs of the takeover of the term by its now-more-typical adjectival form begin to appear. Although this critical conversion did not properly take place in English until the eighteenth century, the gradual ‘extension’ of the word beyond the bounds of its above-described formal or stylistic signification was already apparent in French as early as the sixteenth century when, Thomson evinces by way of example, Rabelais used it with reference to the (functions of the) human body.³⁴ Thanks to such increasingly broad, generalised, and hence (even) more imprecise usage, the word gradually lost what semblance of ‘substance’ it had.³⁵ Formerly a noun of relatively delineateable denotation, and thus a serviceable (even if only approximate) designation for a peculiar visual style and the characteristics that this was considered (again even if only approximately) to comprise, the grotesque henceforth became unfortunately abstracted. The discussions of eighteenth-century aestheticians, at whose hands the term comes to be applied and employed in especially indiscriminate fashion, as Arthur Clayborough insinuates, were perhaps particularly detrimental.³⁶ Far from any (attempt at a) systematic elaboration of its signification and application, to which they sometimes lay claim, the appraisals of such authors seem rather to have served the advancing of a tacit agenda. The ornamental mingling of heterogeneous elements by means of which the Grotesque was once impartially identified comes to be perceived, abstractly and disapprovingly, as an untoward rejection of the ‘natural conditions of organisation’ so confidently counted on by the (post-)Enlightenment era, as well as a flouting of the equally counted-on conventions of artistic representation espoused by the prevailing (Neo-Classicist) Academies of Art.³⁷ That once-neutral noun of relative dependability becomes a collective adjective of unhelpfully vague and unjustifiedly pejorative connotation, variously suggestive of unnaturalness, indecency, distortion, and the like.³⁸

Despite the adjectival grotesque’s deviation from the noun-form’s stylistic denotation, it is still genealogically linked thereto, insofar as the source of its ultimately abstracted censure is generically traceable to the reception of or response to the (various manifestations of the) Grotesque. In this respect, just as the original designs of the Grotesque antedated their designation, so, too, the implicit derogation in the later-instantiated (adjectival) grotesque had its ancient antecedent. The emergence of the style in ancient Rome appears to have been as subject to censure as its (re)discovery in the Renaissance was greeted with enthusiasm.³⁹ Thus it is that Horace’s *Ars Poetica* begins with the author asking what could possibly be made of such composite creatures as were to be found in those designs later designated *grottesche*.⁴⁰ The most (in)famous denunciation of which he have a record, however, is the already briefly mentioned

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Thomson (citing Clayborough’s *The Grotesque in English Literature*), *The Grotesque*, p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

passage in Vitruvius's *De Architectura*. In Book VII, Chapter 5 of the latter work Vitruvius complains that the artists of his age adorn the walls of buildings with monstrous forms (*monstra*) 'rather than definite representations taken from definite things'.⁴¹ He describes:

Instead of columns there rise up stalks; instead of gables, fluted panels with curled leaves and volutes; candelabra support pictures of shrines, on the pediments of which grow clusters of thin stalks... upon whose tendrils, without reason (*sine ratione*), little figures are seated, sometimes... merely half-figures, with either human heads, or the heads of animals.⁴²

Vitruvius goes on to intimate the trouble that he has with such designs:

[H]ow is it possible that a reed could really support a roof, or a candelabrum a pediment with sculpture, or that such a slender, flexible thing as a stalk should support a figure perched upon it, and how is it that from roots and stalks bastard flower-figure forms can grow?⁴³

'Such things', he protests, 'do not exist, cannot exist, and never have existed' (*Haec autem nec sunt nec fieri possunt nec fuerunt*).⁴⁴ Vitruvius's preference is of course for subjects 'copied from actual realities' (*ex veris rebus exempla sumebantur*); representations of the kind that, he lamented, was not holding ground in the face of the new fashions.⁴⁵ Indeed, he rues, such realistic reproduction was being (to his mind unreasonably) rejected (*nunc iniquis moribus inprobantur*).⁴⁶ Arguing against the new vogue, Vitruvius declares in determined defiance that pictures so 'lacking in the principles of reality' (*non sunt similes veritati*), 'even if... technically fine' (*si factae sunt elegantes ab arte*), 'ought not to be approved' (*neque... probari debent*).⁴⁷ He notes that such discernment is sorely in deficit: 'when people see these falsehoods (*falsa*)', Vitruvius deplores the prevailing decadence, 'they do not condemn but are rather delighted' (*non reprehendunt sed delectantur*); they 'do not care' whether any such things 'can exist or not'.⁴⁸ Vitruvius's attitude, as Thomson explicates, 'is one of indignant rejection.'⁴⁹ He is 'the classical-minded critic', who, applying 'the yardstick of verisimilitude', is accordingly 'outraged by the wilful disregard' in such designs 'of the principle of mimesis or

⁴¹ Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 3, alternatively cited from the translations given in Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, p. 20, Yates (citing the Frank Granger translation), 'An Introduction to the Grottesque', pp. 7-8, and as translated by Morris Hicky Morgan (Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 212, available via Project Gutenberg: e-book #20239 (2006). Latin text available at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/vitruvius.html> (source uncredited).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 4, translation adapted from that given in Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, p. 20, and Morgan transl., p. 213.

⁴⁴ Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 4, translation as per Morgan (with my own small abridgement), p. 212.

⁴⁵ Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 3, Morgan transl., p. 212.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 4, Morgan transl., p. 213.

⁴⁸ Book VII, Chapter 5, Section 4, as alternatively cited in Yates (quoting Granger's translation), 'An Introduction to the Grottesque', pp. 7-8, and Morgan transl., p. 212.

⁴⁹ Thomson, *The Grottesque*, p. 12.

realistic reproduction of the familiar world'.⁵⁰ Expressing an attitude that was to become the prevailing (pejorative) connotation of the adjectival form of the term from roughly the eighteenth century onwards, particularly when and where 'classical notions of art and literature' held cultural command, Vitruvius, like his Enlightenment-era counterparts, traduced the trend's perceived 'transgression against the laws of nature and proportion'.⁵¹

Upon the (re)discovery of ancient *grotesche* in the Renaissance, despite the enthusiasm of (many) artists and artistic patrons, its uptake was once again, and for similar reasons, 'controversial'.⁵² Given the (renewed) significance accorded to Vitruvius's treatise in this period, and the intellectual and artistic tastes to which this espousal testified, such renascent reservations are perhaps unsurprising.⁵³ Vitruvius's arguments against the "artistic fashion" of his time were adopted and advanced by art critics in the sixteenth century, and even more determinedly, as already emphasised here, by their 'successors' in the 'classicistic' and Enlightenment-overshadowed eighteenth century.⁵⁴ The trouble with the Grotesque, in just about every era for which we have a record of its reception, seems to have been (and continues variously to be) its perceived affront to or violation of the accepted and 'acceptable' way(s) in which we (think we have) ordered our world(s) and lives, and by which we legitimate (aspects of) them.⁵⁵

Clayborough thus encapsulates the (d)evolution of the term from the Grotesque to the grotesque: as a '*terminus technicus*', he says, the word 'has no emotional colouration, though it may appear in approbatory or disapprobatory contexts'.⁵⁶ As soon as it is applied to anything other than the artistry of which it originally served as an identifier, though, it seems that such neutrality no longer obtains. 'Side by side with', but unfairly divergent from its original application (of the Grotesque in a more or less 'accepted technical sense'), the adjective seems to have developed into something of a(n untoward) term of convenience for the castigation of things deemed (socio-culturally) 'preposterous' and/or 'reprehensible'.⁵⁷ The tendency towards this general (and pejorative) usage (at least in English) appears to have become particularly pronounced, as already intimated, around the time of the Enlightenment and the contemporaneous cultivation of Neo-Classicism in the arts.⁵⁸ The grotesque became in this era increasingly (indiscriminately) espoused as a general term for that which was perceived to perpetrate a rejection of those aforementioned 'natural' or otherwise accepted 'conditions of organisation'.⁵⁹ Frequently the word is used *in order to* 'express disapproval'.⁶⁰ The 'more

⁵⁰ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 20, and Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 12.

⁵¹ Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 12.

⁵² Yates, 'An Introduction to the Grotesque', p. 7.

⁵³ See *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 20.

⁵⁵ See Yates, 'An Introduction to the Grotesque', p. 41.

⁵⁶ Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p. 5. My emphasis.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ See Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

general' connotation to which it was thus condemned is, as mentioned earlier, one suggestive of unnaturalness, indecency, distortion, and the like.⁶¹ Substantiated by the range of definitions supplied in the Oxford English Dictionary, the grotesque has confoundingly come to signify everything from the modestly descriptive to (more commonly and crudely) 'the strongly pejorative'.⁶²

The trouble with the "corruption" of the term grotesque is not just that what was originally a primarily technical term has suffered the unjust imposition upon it of emotional and critical colouration, but also that there has developed over the years an increasing laxity and indiscriminateness in the understanding(s) and application(s) or usage(s) of it. As Clayborough comments, in a 'positivistically-inclined period like the present', when such 'evaluative terms' and 'abstractions' as the beautiful, the ugly, the disturbing, and so forth 'are rightly regarded with suspicion and subjected to rigorous analysis', the talk of the grotesque, especially in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic treatises, 'leaves one with a general impression of incautious generalisation.'⁶³ Perhaps the most important point about the developing (d)evolution of the term, made all the more apparent by comparison with the decline-initiating denunciations of Vitruvius, is that while the latter's critique, despite its determined derogation, still 'contains a detailed description of the style' that is the object of its attack, many later writings do not appear to be equivalently informed.⁶⁴ An attentiveness to, and consistent identification with the 'concrete particulars' from which the term originally derived is increasingly overlooked in the literature of later generations.⁶⁵ As Kayser observes with reference (again) to the (paradigmatic) late eighteenth through nineteenth centuries, the delineations of writers on aesthetics in this period 'comprehended too little of the actual content' and compositions of the Grotesque.⁶⁶ In its adjectival usage the grotesque increasingly became what Harpham calls 'a mental event as well as [if not instead of] a formal property' or set of properties.⁶⁷ In so doing, as already hinted at here, it went from being a relatively (neutrally) definable and discussable identifier of 'concrete particulars' to a deleteriously 'disorderly concept';⁶⁸ and, moreover, one with a distinctly (undeservedly) pejorative overtone. Even if 'still genealogically linked to' the 'concrete particulars' of the Grotesque with which it remained (at least) etymologically connected,⁶⁹ the grotesque accrued by way of its later usages an increasing inaccuracy and inconsistency.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶³ Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p. 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The quoted words are from Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 27.

⁶⁶ Clayborough (quoting Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*), *The Grotesque in English Literature*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Insofar as the noun form of the Grotesque denotes the display of certain formal or stylistic characteristics, it is considered here to be a term of *artistic* identification. This leaves the adjectival grotesque to serve the function of *aesthetic* appraisal. In this respect it is said here to be possible to regard an object as (belonging to the) Grotesque, without (necessarily) regarding it (aesthetically) as grotesque. Indeed, it is considered here to be possible to identify an object as (belonging to or displaying the characteristics of the) Grotesque, without it (necessarily) registering or engaging one *aesthetically* at all, and therefore not being necessarily subject to any aesthetic (as opposed to artistic) appraisal. In other words, one may or may not be aesthetically engaged by an encounter with the Grotesque. Insofar as one employs the adjective grotesque, however, whether or not it is applied to an experience of the Grotesque, one is (or ought to be, if making an honest employment of the word) engaging in an *aesthetic* appraisal (or, to put the point slightly differently, engaging in an appraisal of (what one has registered to have been) an aesthetic encounter or experience). One would thereby, as the above discussion ought to have made clear, be implicitly acknowledging that the object or encounter in question had engaged one aesthetically. Unfortunately, such nuances of usage are typically not observed and, consequently, the term grotesque is frequently (if unwittingly) misinterpreted and (mis)used. Such misuse may be said to occur in one of two ways. In the first case the grotesque (which is properly speaking a term of *aesthetic* appraisal) is employed as if it were (interchangeable with) what is described here to be a term of *affective* appraisal (in such cases an alternative term of (genuinely) affective appraisal would be more fitting). In the second case there is an insufficient acknowledgement of what is here considered to be the distinctive register of the grotesque among other terms of properly aesthetic appraisal; that is, its registering of (what is here called) an *aesthetic-cognitive* as opposed to an *aesthetic-affective* difficulty.

As an adjective of genuinely aesthetic appraisal, distanced not only from (even if related to) the Grotesque as a noun of artistic identification, but also from its own (mis)use as a term of indiscriminate derogation, the grotesque continues to elude attempts adequately to capture its character or signification. Insofar as one might try to provide an acceptable encapsulation of it, the grotesque may perhaps be best described as a register of our response to some thing (object, experience, or otherwise) that, whether in whole or in part, at once bears features discernably ‘rooted in our common world’, and yet which seems to body forth aspects that pose a fundamental challenge thereto.⁷⁰ The balance between these two (sets of) characteristics means that however fundamental the grotesque’s register of an affront to or perceived distortion of (what we consider to be) the way things are (for us), that just-as-fundamental sense of its rootedness in “reality” results in our being unable wholly to reject, excoriate, attempt to eliminate, or even just ignore it.⁷¹ Contrary to the indiscriminate application of the term by conventional critics, the challenge(s) posed by the grotesque may not (if one wishes to be

⁷⁰ Yates, ‘An Introduction to the Grotesque’, p. 40.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*

genuine in one's appraisal) be so readily reduced to a register of mere unwanted and unwarranted affrontery. Harpham helps to make this point a bit clearer when he suggests that objects appraised as grotesque may be said to be 'neither so regular' or familiar that they settle 'easily into our categories, nor so unprecedented that we do not recognise them at all.'⁷² Kayser makes an equally incisive attempt to explain what it is that is captured by the term. The grotesque, he suggests, 'is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves' in the face of those objects, experiences, or encounters to which we ascribe the adjective.⁷³ Perhaps the most succinctly serviceable suggestion, however, comes from Thomson, who appears to have most adequately isolated what might be the closest thing to an essence of the grotesque, and one that congenially maintains a close connection between the term's artistic as well as aesthetic applications. 'The most consistently distinguished characteristic' of the Grotesque, Thomson deduces, is its (element of) 'confusion' (again in the suggested Baumgartian sense of con-fusion) or 'conflation of dispartes', whether this be referred to (Thomson allows for the inevitable inexactitude and insufficiency of concept and language in the face of the aesthetic) as a 'conflict, clash, [or] mixture of the heterogeneous'.⁷⁴ For the purpose of this dissertation, however, what is most significant about Thomson's discussion is its subtle suggestion that the 'unresolved clash of incompatibles' of which the grotesque is a register may be said to be a confusion or conflict present not just in the (aesthetic) object, experience, or encounter in question, but also (with)in the aesthetic experiencer's 'response'.⁷⁵

To elucidate this point it is necessary first to explain further what is being proposed here about the grotesque as a term of *aesthetic* response. To return to the two arguments made above (with regard to (re)assessing the term's (mis)use), it was emphasised, first, that the grotesque ought to be understood as a term of *aesthetic* register or appraisal, not, as it is often (mis)taken to be, one of merely *affective* (non-aesthetic) register or appraisal (and that it is the absence of such a discrimination that has seen the term (erroneously) confused, conflated, or classified together with such registers of (merely affective) response as disgust and repulsion). Secondly, it was maintained that the grotesque is distinguishable from, and unique among other terms of difficulty-registering aesthetic appraisal (for example, the ugly or disturbing) in its being a register not of aesthetic-*affective* but of aesthetic-*cognitive* difficulty or dissonance. To make clear these discrepancies with reference also to the full range of possible aesthetic-affective registers, the various terms of (roughly) agreeable and disagreeable suggestion to which aesthetic appraisers are wont to resort (beautiful, sublime, disturbing, ugly), and which are claimed here to be terms of aesthetic-*affective* register, are, as already briefly mentioned, also claimed here to correspond to the (attempt to) give expression to that which has registered as (roughly) commensurate or disproportionate to one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world. The

⁷² Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 3.

⁷³ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 185.

⁷⁴ Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 12 and p. 20.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 27.

grotesque, on the other hand, is distinguished as being of (what is here dubbed (admittedly more for convenience than correctness)) aesthetic-*cognitive* register. This is because, again as already briefly discussed, it is a signal that something presents as *neither* (clearly) commensurate with nor disproportionate to one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world, but rather poses a thoroughgoing challenge to or destabilising of it. In other words, in addition to the (roughly) agreeable and disagreeable, the aesthetically engaged individual might find himself registering a response of neither clear commensuration with nor disproportion to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world, and that this may be indicated by means of the grotesque. Whereas the disagreeably ugly or disturbing serves as a register of aesthetic-affective dissonance (of disproportion to one's sense of (one's) being), the grotesque is a register of aesthetic-cognitive dissonance (of a confrontation to, or subverting of one's sense of (one's) being). Among aesthetic terms, therefore, the registering of either a commensuration with or disproportion to one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world finds (attempted) expression in aesthetic-*affective* terms of appraisal. The registering of a thoroughgoing challenge to or destabilising of one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world may be hinted at by means of the term grotesque.

Though aesthetic appraisal, like the experience or engagement that it attempts to appraise, may never attain to distinctness, and though the (potential) appraiser may not be able to give adequate or accurate expression to his aesthetic engagement (this very elusiveness identifies it as aesthetic), that engagement and its relation to the (potential) appraiser's sense of (his) being-in-the-world will nevertheless be clear, conspicuous, and unmistakeable to him.⁷⁶ It is by virtue of this conspicuous clarity that the (potential) appraiser so readily (if misguidedly) seeks to give expression to his experience by means of various terms of aesthetic-affective appraisal. Were I to (attempt to) appraise something aesthetically, that I might employ any combination of aesthetic-affective terms (ugly, beautiful, sublime, disturbing, and so on) is because these are an attempt to give (self-justifying) expression to what has registered as clearly, conspicuously, and unmistakeably commensurate with or disproportionate to my sense of (my) being-in-the-world (even if that clarity cannot be communicated or conveyed to another). Though the grotesque is often (again erroneously) conflated with such terms of aesthetic-affective estimation, just as it is with terms of merely affective measure, it is rather (and ought to be employed as) a signal of that peculiarly paradoxical predicament in which something at once registers with, but at the same time poses a challenge to that registering with one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world. The grotesque is, in other words, an indicator of that unique aesthetic experience or encounter wherein the requisite connection to or communicativity with one's sense of (one's) being is clear, conspicuous, and unmistakeable, but *not* clearly, conspicuously, or unmistakeably amenable or disagreeable.

⁷⁶ The aesthetic appraiser is said to be so only *potentially* because, as already briefly suggested, though most are wont to subject their aesthetic engagement(s) to such appraisal, this is neither intrinsic nor necessary to (indeed it has hopefully been made clear that it is rather impertinently subsequent upon) those engagement(s).

Whether it is a register of aesthetic-affective quality (beautiful, sublime, disturbing, ugly) or aesthetic-cognitive difficulty (grotesque), that a term of appraisal is validly distinguishable as aesthetic may be indicated in the following ways: first, by its insufficiency despite our resorting to or relying upon it (for the aesthetic is necessarily beyond (accurate) verbal or even conceptual capture); second, by our inability (adequately) to elaborate, beyond the employment of such a term, precisely what is intended by it (yet another symptom of its being an attempt to appraise something that really cannot be; in other words, the inscrutability of the experience carries over into its (attempted) explication); and third, as explained of the aesthetic dimension in general, so too of the qualities that we (try to) ascribe to it: we cannot summon or seek them.

Aesthetic terms are also distinguishable from (despite their frequent, erroneous conflation with) terms of merely affective register. Where something is alleged to be of, say, (dis)pleasing or (dis)satisfying quality, this should be taken to imply an affective, not aesthetic significance, insofar as it suggests no instantiation of that vitally distinctive communicativity that is (maintained here to be) the hallmark of the aesthetic dimension. Incidentally, the three criteria just given for aesthetic terms of appraisal may also be utilised for the distinguishing of affective terms, albeit in reverse accordance. That is, in contrast to their aesthetic counterparts, affective terms tend to be, first, more accurately representative of what they purport to signify; second, we tend to be able to elaborate what it is that we intend by them; and third, we *are* able to, and characteristically *do* seek out (or seek to escape from) what we find agreeably (or disagreeably) to affect us.

It is the above-described (dearth of) distinction that, it is argued here, has been the particular bane of the grotesque. That something might sit unsurely with one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world ought not to be (mis)taken for something's not registering therewith at all. Unlike the merely affective, the grotesque is a register that the object or encounter to which it is attributed has afforded that vitally distinctive communicativity characteristic of the aesthetic dimension. It is just (hence its distinction from the aesthetic-affective) a signal that the relation in which such an aesthetic experience or encounter stood to one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world was comparatively "unsettled". As briefly asserted above, when an attempt is made to employ the grotesque as (in place of) a term of (non-aesthetic) affective appraisal, this is in error. The grotesque is a term of aesthetic appraisal. Honestly to regard something as grotesque is *ipso facto* already (if implicitly) to acknowledge its provision of the requisite communicativity; it is to acknowledge that whatever the object, experience, or encounter to which the term is applied, this has or had in some way (however indistinctly) registered with something in or of oneself.

Where something engages or even compels one's aesthetic attention, but there is a difficulty in determining its relation to one's sense of (one's) being, one must concede that, regardless of this immediately registered difficulty, one *is* aesthetically engaged. One may not, therefore, (attempt to) dismiss the object, experience, or encounter in question as aesthetically

inadmissible or unviable on the basis of this difficulty. One may especially not venture such a dismissal by the use of any non-aesthetic terms of appraisal (including an attempted employment of the grotesque (mis)taken as being of the latter kind). Such an attempt would, as it were, be paradoxical. One must accept that by one's reference to the grotesque, one will (be taken to) have implicitly acknowledged the aesthetic communicativity, viability, and even value of the object, experience, or encounter to which one ascribes the term. To try to claim by the use of this term that something is aesthetically inadmissible would be a contradiction. If the problem *were* merely an affective one, as in the case of saying (suitably) that one finds something disgusting or repulsive, this would be to indicate an absence of aesthetic communicativity or engagement; it would be to suggest that the latter failed to be afforded by the object, experience, or encounter in question (and possibly, therefore, one's wish to escape from that which prompted such an unwelcome response). Insofar as there is in such a case no aesthetic communicativity, the object, experience, or encounter in question would be, for the individual concerned, aesthetically insignificant. It would either have compelled an utter unresponsiveness, or (should) have registered as of some non-aesthetic affective quality like repulsive or disgusting. By means of such terms as these one would accordingly, in counterexample to the grotesque, be indicating an absence (for oneself) of aesthetic communicativity or value (and possibly one's desire rather to avoid or escape from the source of that response).

In contradistinction to such non-aesthetic affective terms of register, the grotesque, it must be emphasised, does not compel avoidance; one does *not* seek to get away from the grotesque. This, to the apparent obliviousness of critics, who in many cases resemble the Bernard of the *Apologia* by evincing an unwitting enthusiasm for the object(s) of their attack, is why the grotesque has for so long elicited and compelled interest and fascination (and still manages so to do), even if that interest be of a negative, critical, or impassioned-ire-invoking kind. All such responses implicitly indicate their object's having registered with the critic's sense of (his) being (which in the latter cases has obviously been in one way or another provoked). The truly disgusting or repulsive, to reiterate the contrast, would impel aesthetic *disengagement*. A similar distinction occurs at the positive end of the affective and aesthetic-affective spectrum. That which is satisfying or pleasing one tends to seek, and seek again (and again). The aesthetic, however, it must be remembered, cannot be sought. It cannot be willed, recaptured or (re)created; it happens *to* us. To say that something is beautiful, captivating, sublime, and so forth, to ascribe such (agreeable) aesthetic-affective qualities to a particular object, experience, or encounter, that is, to employ terms of *aesthetic*-affective (not *merely* affective) appraisal, if done honestly, would perforce be an acknowledgement that the experience or encounter so described bears not the possibility of being exactly recaptured or even re-sought. The impossibility of seeking things of agreeable aesthetic-affective register is, to turn the tables once again, matched at the other end of the qualitative spectrum. It is perhaps easy enough to concede that one does not even try to seek out things of grotesque or

disagreeable aesthetic-affective register. Given, however, that the distinguishing characteristic of the latter two aesthetic terms from those of merely affective register is (here maintained to be) that the merely affective signals a nullifying of aesthetic engagement (hence its status as *merely* affective), it follows that while there might not be deemed to be anything noteworthy about the fact that one does not seek the grotesque and disagreeably aesthetic-affective (in the way that one *might* seek the agreeably aesthetic-affective), it *is* distinctive that, in contrast to the disgusting and repulsive, one also does not seek to *escape* therefrom. In other words, those objects appraised (honestly) as grotesque or disagreeably aesthetic-affective still captivate and compel our attention (in some cases even more so than those of agreeable aesthetic-affective register); hence our sustained-enough engagement such that we can even come to ascribe to them such terms of appraisal. We gravitate (even if reluctantly) towards the one (the grotesque and the disagreeably aesthetic-affective), but seek to disregard or escape from the other (the merely negative-affective). If the grotesque were equivalent to the likes of the disgusting and repulsive, it would not have endured for so long as a subject of artistic and aesthetic invention and appreciation.

It is also worth noting in this regard that to (try to) say, for example, that something is repulsive or disgusting *and* grotesque would be incoherent. One *may*, on the other hand, suggest that one finds something beautiful, ugly, sublime, *and* grotesque, at the same time and without contradiction, for these are all together terms of *aesthetic* appraisal (though the last is claimed to be unique in its register of aesthetic-cognitive as opposed to aesthetic-affective difficulty). This would also explain why it is that something can register (inappositely but not incongruously) as *both* grotesquely ugly and grotesquely beautiful (and also, differently but relatedly, why there can be both an ugly Grottesque and a beautiful Grottesque). The (mistaken) assumption that ugliness must ‘be a minimal prerequisite’ of the grotesque is, as Harpham explains, ‘a modern prejudice’; ‘the *grottesche* of the Renaissance’, he evinces by way of contrast, ‘was primarily intended to be... beautiful.’⁷⁷ Such qualities are, in other words, not mutually exclusive. That they have been (mis)taken to be, and in what way this is an error, has hopefully been made more apparent here by the suggested commonality yet disparity between them; that is, that they all (the ugly, the beautiful, *and* the grotesque) are terms of aesthetic appraisal, albeit different varieties thereof. As scholars have tried (not always convincingly) to explain, there is a difference between the grotesque and the ugly. Both are terms of aesthetic appraisal, but while the latter is a register of aesthetic-affective dissonance, aesthetic-cognitive dissonance is the preserve of the grotesque.

With the insights afforded by the above arguments, some further explanation may be ventured as to how and why it might be that (the representation of) the ascetic presents such difficulties for its appraisers. It is suggested here that what tends to raise the indignation of so many detractors

⁷⁷ Harpham, ‘Preface’ to *On the Grotesque*, p. xxiv.

of asceticism and its representation is that these present a dissonant affront to such detractors' sense of (their) being-in-the-world. Because of his (perceived) challenge to accepted understandings of human nature, experience and existence, without entirely doing away with his own embodiment thereof, the ascetic, like the grotesque, appears to be both a part of and yet not a part of our (familiar) world. He seems to be something to which we both can and yet cannot relate. Therefore, insofar as the term is (in accordance with the clarificatory stipulations made above) properly employed, the ascetic and his representation may be said to be (quite consummately) grotesque. An association of the ascetic with the grotesque is by no means unprecedented, though thanks to the misapprehension of the latter term such associations have heretofore been emphatically pejorative and misleading. As explained above, the word grotesque has been and is too readily (misguidedly) applied as if it were a register of (merely) affective appraisal. The consequence of this is that an ascription of grotesqueness has been and continues to be (mis)taken to sanction the aesthetic inadmissibility or unviability of that to which it is attached, including the ascetic.

When an individual is confronted with something that he struggles to assimilate, with something that he finds to be either disproportionate to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world (as in cases of the disagreeably aesthetic-affective), or difficult to, so to speak, situate in relation thereto (as in the case of the grotesque), the simplest reaction is for that individual to (attempt to) dismiss the difficulty-provoking object. By virtue of his responding, even negatively, to that object, however, the critic would, if honest, have to acknowledge that there is or has been at least something in it that speaks or has spoken to him aesthetically. That the (stereo)typical reaction to (the image of) the ascetic, together with the grotesque, and the (visual) arts of the (Christian) Middle Ages in which they attain predominance, has been either a conspicuous exclusion from consideration, or an impassioned ire of the kind encountered in Gibbon, Dodds, and Lecky, suggests that these phenomena are far from being aesthetically unviable or inadmissible, as such respondents would have it. It could be contended that even after adjusting his understandings of these phenomena as per the stipulations made here, the determined critic might still not be accommodating of the (representation of the) ascetic. He would, however, have to acknowledge that his difficulty therewith is, insofar as he is passing particular kinds of judgement upon it, viably aesthetic. Such a revising of the typical appraisals also allows a more judicious explanation as to why it is that some individuals (the ascetic and ascetically inclined) may (more readily), where others may not, be accommodating of (the representation of) asceticism and the grotesque. This is because, it is here proposed, the ascetic has a different range or threshold for (what might register with the non-ascetic as) aesthetic dissonance, whether of the aesthetic-affective or aesthetic-cognitive kind.⁷⁸ Given his desire only to have an (ever) open channel, as it

⁷⁸ Given that the ascetic does not discriminate amongst his aesthetic encounters or experiences, for these are not subject by him to post-experiential appraisal, such intra-aesthetic discrepancies (between the aesthetic-affective and the aesthetic-cognitive) in his case do not apply; it is only the *non*-aesthetic that the ascetic cannot countenance.

were, to the aesthetic dimension, the ascetic is more, indeed utterly accommodating of what the latter might impart. The only question (for him) is whether something does or does not afford (him) aesthetic communicativity and, hence, value. If it does not, it will, for the ascetic(ally-inclined individual), be insignificant. The ascetic will also not attempt to appraise his aesthetic experiences, encounters, or the objects with which they might be implicated. Aesthetic communicativity, in its necessary instantaneity, is the only (overriding) end of his being. In its consummate preoccupation with the aesthetic, the being-in-the-world of the ascetic entails a concern not with the debatable (and dubitable) quality or qualities of its experience or engagement, but only with whether (or not) there is such experience or engagement at all.

As proposed in Chapter One, the aesthetic dimension of existence may be described as at once a registering with and a register of that ‘peculiar [and peculiarly enigmatic] mode of being by which and through which a person is oriented to the world’, a mode that embraces everything about who or what that individual is, has been, and will become.⁷⁹ Though it is not possible accurately to isolate or account for the communicativity that the aesthetic dimension affords, in the subsequent appraisal of it to which all but the ascetic are wont to resort, it may be felt to register with the (non-ascetic) individual in one of three ways: as either commensurate with (agreeable to), disproportionate (disagreeable) to, or fundamentally unsettling of his sense of (his) being-in-the-world. Insofar as the individual in question is ascetic, however, no such divisibility pertains; the ascetic’s (mode of) being-in-the-world is entirely bound up with the aesthetic dimension. That which is aesthetic is *ipso facto* commensurate with his sense of (his) being-in-the-world; to suggest that it might prompt a fundamental unsettling thereof would be incoherent. The ascetic, therefore, is uniquely accommodating of aesthetic dissonance because his core self is dependent only upon aesthetic communicativity (of whatever kind or quality). That which might well pose a challenge to the (sense of being of the) non-ascetic individual cannot, if it registers aesthetically with him, pose an *equivalent* challenge to the ascetic individual because his sense of (his) being is dependent on and delimited by aesthetic engagement.⁸⁰ The ascetic does not, *within* the aesthetic dimension, (seek to) appraise his experiences, encounters, or the objects that give rise to them. Something is, for him, either aesthetic or it is not. Insofar as one’s sense of (one’s) being-in-the-world does not, like the ascetic’s, depend upon so constant and copious an aesthetic communicativity, and hence can afford occasionally to lapse, as it were, from the aesthetic dimension, one may admittedly be less exacting in one’s aesthetic and non-aesthetic appraisals.

⁷⁹ See Chapter One, footnote 86.

⁸⁰ This is not to suggest that aesthetic engagement and experience cannot *in any way* challenge the ascetic(ally-inclined) individual. The case against such an implication is taken up in the next chapter.

SECTION TWO

“The question is,” said Alice,
“whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

LEWIS CARROLL, *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*

Chapter Three

As a brief perusal through various English dictionary editions will reveal, it is not only ambiguous and troublesome words like aesthetic, ascetic, and grotesque that change with time. A sizeable proportion of our vocabulary, to quote Arthur Koestler, ‘consists of old Greek bottles filled and refilled with new wine’.¹ An analogous predicament prevails also with a good deal of our visual and wider cultural vocabulary. Just as dictionaries (at least those attentive to etymology) endeavour to keep us informed of the (supposedly) original and evolving meanings and usages of words, so other institutions make similar efforts for the arts and artefacts to which they attend; hence, for example, the performance programmes provided by music halls and theatres, or the guidebooks and information panels presented by museums and galleries. Such efforts to apprise audiences and visitors of the (ostensibly) relevant historical and contextual information about different cultural objects, to indicate or intimate (where applicable) the (original) uses thereof, and to (attempt to) explain any iconography suggested therein, is of course a necessary corollary of those objects’ inevitable decontextualisation (inevitable either as a consequence of the mere lapsing of time and tradition, or of some kind of deliberate displacement). They are, in other words, a move to inject via logical-verbal means what no longer readily flows, so to speak, in the collective cultural lifeblood. That one’s learning about the (ostensibly) relevant historical-contextual, functional, and iconographical details of various art and artefactual objects may be important to a historico-political and socio-cultural understanding thereof would by most people be, if not explicitly emphasised, at least implicitly acknowledged.² What is perhaps less (explicitly) discussed is the equivalent importance of such learning for one’s (potential) *aesthetic* engagement with those objects. Even more rarely considered is the important bearing that such gathered learning may have on (the scope of) an individual’s (collective) aesthetic experience(s) in general.³ The latter two points will be the focus of the following chapters.

To suggest that historical-contextual-iconographical learning is vital to aesthetic engagement or experience is not to say that it is either a necessary or sufficient condition. This is highlighted by the fact that one may, in the absence of such learning, still have what might be called a legitimate (if perhaps of lesser quality) aesthetic experience. That I happen to know little of the history or iconography of an object will not necessarily prevent it from affording the communicativity requisite to aesthetic engagement. It might also be the case that any historical-contextual or iconographical understanding that I do (claim to) have about an object will stand

¹ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (Penguin/Arkana, 1989), p. 642.

² “Object” here is intended in the grammatical sense, and therefore should be taken to encompass, in its denotation, more than strictly physical objects (for example, performances).

³ The reader is asked to keep in mind that aesthetic experience(s) here are inclusive of, but not equivalent to artistic experiences.

side by side with, yet have little *discernable* bearing on my aesthetic experience of that object.⁴ It is of course also possible, and in many cases likely, that one may (continue to) learn (a great deal) about an object that nevertheless does not, has never, and continues not to engage one aesthetically. This kind of learning, however, insofar as it is and remains untouched by the aesthetic, is, it will be argued here, of a particular quality, distinguishable from the kind of learning that takes place within and is uniquely characteristic of the aesthetic dimension.

With specific regard to artistic and certain other kinds of artefactual objects, the prospect of such a viable divorce between the so-to-speak two kinds of (potential) engagement with them has caused consternation to some concerned individuals over the years, especially in the two-and-a-half centuries or so since the advent of the modern museum. The major concern of such critics is with what is usually declared to be the detrimental (if not destructive) and by all accounts unbecoming decontextualisation that the relevant institutions are alleged to effect upon the objects that (and hence in a purported travesty of their very purpose) they are or were called upon to conserve. In some cases the deleterious influence is suspected of extending to the individuals who may visit these indicted institutions or partake of their activities. The latter are therefore further accused of cultivating what might be described as bowdlerised and anaemic habits of artistic and aesthetic appreciation. Something of this position is well encapsulated in the expressed attitude of Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, the art, architectural, and archaeological theorist whom Didier Maleuvre designates as the first exponent, in France, of the so-called ‘antimuseum critique’.⁵ Writing in the early nineteenth century, Quatremère did not, as Maleuvre explains, ‘see the museum as preserving art or culture’.⁶ He rather accused museological practice of ‘wrenching [art and artefacts] out of their original contexts’ and thereby depriving them ‘of their cultural lifeblood’.⁷ Forever plucked from their native settings, Quatremère complains in his *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l’art*, museum-displayed objects inevitably revert to ‘mere matter’, their vitality indelibly destroyed by the act of ‘disassembling... and then reconstituting’ the resultant ‘debris’ in so-called ‘Conservatories’.⁸ ‘Once removed from its environment in the church, the temple, or the agora,’ Maleuvre explicates Quatremère’s thesis, the art or artefactual object is inexorably ‘neutralised, washed of its cultural, political, religious, spiritual functions’;⁹ and ‘[t]o what wretched destiny do you condemn [art and culture]’, Quatremère asks, if its products are no longer tied to the immediate needs of society and if its religious and socialising uses are curtailed?’¹⁰ ‘You must stop pretending’, the author appeals to his audience, that artworks and artefacts ‘are preserved in

⁴ That it cannot help but have *some* bearing will hopefully become clear in the course of this chapter.

⁵ Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l’art*, as quoted by Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 16 and p. 15.

⁹ Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Quatremère, *Considérations morales*, as quoted by Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 15.

those depositories’, for though you might carry there ‘the material hull... it is doubtful you transferred the network of ideas and relations that made the works alive with interest’.¹¹

There is an important implication in Quatremère’s conclusion here. The ‘network of ideas and relations’ that, as suggested earlier in this chapter, might well be fundamental to an (attempted) historical-contextual-iconographical understanding of art and artefactual objects are also presumed to be essential to their aesthetic value. It appears inconceivable to Quatremère how, without that network, any object could (continue to) be ‘alive with interest’, especially (one might imagine the situation worsening with the lapsing of time and tradition), for individuals exposed to them in distant eras and cultures. The ‘essential merit’ of those now-museified objects, Quatremère continues his argument,

depended on the beliefs that created them, on the ideas [and circumstances] to which they were tied... But now who may tell us what [they] mean, purposeless in their attitudes, their expressions turning to caricatures, their circumstances turning into enigmas?

‘What do those effigies, which are now mere matter,’ he asks the crucial question, ‘mean to me?’¹² For critics like Quatremère, once such objects are, as they are considered destined to be in such an environment, ‘[d]eprived of experiential content’, they are (deemed to be) ‘mere vessels of dead knowledge, of alienated contemplation’, lying in the museum (and museological mindset) ‘as corpses in an ossuary.’¹³ The museum (and affiliated mindset) stands testimony to the absence of, and/or failure to obtain ‘an immanent rapport with’ (the material legacy of) the past.¹⁴ ‘Despite the respect and awe’ that they may command in (modern) museum and gallery culture, the past and its products are accused of being thus ‘emptied of experiential value’.¹⁵ In the museological environment and mindset everything ‘is kept dead’, rendered relevant only insofar as ‘it safely pertains to what is no more’.¹⁶ The kind of alienation that Maleuvre describes here, is, however, it ought to be acknowledged, inevitable, and, hence, it must be said, rather pointlessly rued. Maleuvre himself hints at this when he maintains that the modern mindset invented ‘the principle of cultural authenticity as, actually, nostalgia for authenticity.’¹⁷ The problematic predicament presented by modern museology is, therefore, not the (in any case inevitable) decontextualisation and concomitant semantic disconnect of the (potential aesthetic)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 16. The “museological predicament” is now so widespread, and so accustomed have audiences become to it that it may be possible to speak, as per this sentence, of something like a “museological mindset”. This would accordingly extend the purportedly detrimental influence of museological decontextualisation, insofar as the “museified object” may be *either* one that is literally housed in a physical museum, *or* one that is or has been subject to the above-described institutional influence.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

object (for which it cannot be held entirely responsible), but rather, and more deleteriously, its possible foiling of, and/or failure to foster an aesthetically appropriate (habit of) engagement with such objects.

In the midst of what Maleuvre describes as the museologically-cultivated ‘alienation between a past embalmed... and a present lost in contemplative ennui’, (the potential for) aesthetic experience is, he suggests, replaced or thwarted by a woeful ‘nostalgia’.¹⁸ Thanks to what Maleuvre calls ‘sepulchral museum culture’, the (potential aesthetic) object is ‘only there to be contemplated as a hollow shell of its former life’.¹⁹ The museological mindset and associated curatorial conventions, in other words, tend to encourage ‘a detached, passive attitude’.²⁰ This in turn results in the kind of ‘deadening reification of artefacts’ that we are accustomed to encounter in the modern museum,²¹ and which, it ought to be emphasised, is just as liable for the stifling of (potential) aesthetic communicativity as it may be for the confounding of historical and socio-cultural contextualisation. More considerable and concerning, then, than the charge of cultural destructiveness is the detriment done to (the possibilities for) aesthetic communicativity by the ‘deadening reification’ of (potential aesthetic) objects.

When the decontextualisation of artworks and artefacts (either as result of museification or mere time-and-distance-induced disconnection) are deemed to result in their reversion to “mere matter”, there can be little hope for aesthetic engagement. Such an attitude and outcome, however, are not an inevitability; they are what might be described as a failure of nerve in the face of the (necessary) challenge posed by the aesthetic dimension, an absconding of the onus obliged by it. When the customs of cross-generational cultural conduction are no more, when there emerges that inevitable ‘break in the traditional transmission of the past’ (such that the latter, as a result of such lapses, becomes narratable and exhibitable only ‘as an alienated and de-contextualised object, at once estranged and strange’),²² all there is is (the potential for) aesthetic engagement. The best scholarly efforts toward what might be called a contextual-semantic comprehension of an object, commendable as they are (for reasons soon to be discussed), are destined always to be only approximate and essentially unverifiable. Such a circumstance, to which modern museum culture has accustomed us (not, as its critics maintain, caused), is justifiably frustrating. As already advocated here, though, it is inexorable and, hence, pointlessly rued. Despite the well-intentioned efforts of scholars and curators, the burden of historical and cultural estrangement is simply an insurmountable predicament.

However disconcerting to scholarly, curatorial, and other similarly concerned communities, to the ascetic, ever on the hunt for aesthetic engagement and experience, the above-described circumstance is *not* a regrettable one. The lesson to be learned, as it were, from

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 16.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Maleuvre, commenting on Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*, in *Museum Memories*, p. 5.

the ascetic's example is that, in defiance of the anti-museum critique, the modern (museological) predicament ought not to be a cause for concern, nor for lamentation nor condemnation, but rather, and especially so in the ascetic's case, a kind of rousing invitation. The modern (museological) milieu is not responsible for consigning artworks and artefacts to a reticently enigmatic oblivion, as the likes of Quatremère complain; it merely poses additional, alternative (and, at least or especially to the ascetic, wonderfully obliging) challenges. Where decontextualisation is regarded as resulting in an irredeemable closing off of, rather than (as it ought to) a potential opening up of communicative possibility, it is not surprising that the artwork or artefact (thus considered irrevocably obscure) should be regarded as standing or hanging 'vacantly and meaninglessly' before the (accordingly estranged) individual.²³ When there is (deemed to be) nothing but an insurmountably enigmatic alienation between an object and its observer, the possibility of aesthetic communicativity is understandably (even if improperly) out of the question. The misconception in the anti-museum critique, however, is that of mistaking for a destructive consequence what is actually a determinative precondition. The decontextualisation and "alienation" of the museified object ought to be considered a stimulus towards, not a stifling of aesthetic engagement and experience. That such a position does not prevail among critics is tantalisingly suggested by Maleuvre, who follows his remarks upon Quatremère's *Considérations* with: '[i]t is almost as though, in the museum piece, Quatremère feared the experience of the aesthetic itself'.²⁴ Instead of acknowledging and accepting the aesthetically communicative potential in the decontextualised and "alienated" artwork or artefact, critics like Quatremère defer (all too complacently) to the "deadening", "an-aesthetic" effect of modern museology, to which they seem just as eager to capitulate as to direct criticism and complaint.

When an artwork or artefact, to quote Quatremère's specific concern, is 'no longer tied to the immediate needs of society', when 'its religious and socialising uses [have been] curtailed' or forgotten, when 'the network of ideas and relations that made [it] alive with interest' have disappeared,²⁵ one ought not to receive or reflect upon it with a renunciative mournfulness. That some encounters do end in such a manner is a consequence of the misguided belief that the purportedly original situation and function of a particular object are (to be regarded as) its essence, and that, with the absence of (an understanding of) these, so too goes the (aesthetic) value of that object. Foreignness, functionlessness, and unfathomability, however, need not end in aesthetical unviability. As briefly discussed above, there is or ought to be a practicable divorce or divorceability between the two kinds of (potential) engagement with an art or artefactual object; between the aspiration, on the one hand, to contextual-semantic comprehension, and, on the other, to aesthetic communicativity and significance. Where such a

²³ The quoted words are Maleuvre's. *Museum Memories*, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Quatremère, *Considérations morales*, as quoted by Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 15.

divorce is either completely unapparent or else considered unacceptable, this, one suspects, is due to the individual in question being (untowardly) unable to separate aesthetic valuation from historical, political, socio-cultural, and/or fashionable appraisal. For such an (uninvolved, uninclined, and/or unadventurous) individual, aesthetic ‘value’ is inextricably ‘contextual, dependent on affiliations with use and cultural provenance’, in the absence (or lack of discernment) of which the artwork or artefact cannot but sit or hang ‘vacantly and meaninglessly’.²⁶ The tragedy here is that of the individual for whom aesthetic value remains (as it should not) inflexibly wedded to context and made entirely dependent upon such ‘affiliations’. It is the tragedy of the individual who *expects* that historical-contextual-iconographical knowledge will afford aesthetic value, and, *ipso facto*, that the privation of one guarantees the deficiency of the other.

To turn the tables on the anti-museum charge, such a passively remiss and prematurely mournful view, guiding as it does the individual toward an overhasty relinquishing of aesthetic opportunity, seems equally if not more liable than modern museology to compromise aesthetic engagement and experience, to impede access to the aesthetic dimension, and hence to quash any chance for aesthetic communicativity. The problem with such approaches to artworks and artefacts, as suggested by Maleuvre, is that ‘individuality’ (with regard to both the object and the observer) ‘is no longer put to the test’, but rather ‘enforced *de jure*’.²⁷ The sorry circumstance to which this gives rise is well exemplified in the comments subsequently cited by Maleuvre from the artist Marc Chagall, who regretted that in consequence of the (at his time recent) renovations undertaken at the Louvre, he was now being ‘told what to see’, that suddenly ‘everything is signalled’.²⁸ In contrast to that institution’s previous display arrangements, which, as Chagall fondly recalls, allowed the visiting individual ‘to search and find’, the new design resulted in objects being ‘isolated and shown off’.²⁹ Now, Chagall complained of the newfangled impertinence, observers were being “instructed” to pay due deference to everything on display. Chagall, for his part, ‘liked to search and find’;³⁰ and by virtue of this expressed inclination he serves as something of an exemplar of aesthetic engagement.

What resonates in Chagall’s wistful criticisms of the renovated Louvre is a regretfulness about the way that the new design suddenly inhibited the impulse of the individual who, in Maleuvre’s words, ‘once found amid the clutter of the cabinet d’amateur the opportunity of discovering a piece that would have significance for him’.³¹ Aesthetic value, Maleuvre amenably suggests, is obtained or at least ‘heightened by the experience of its discovery.’³² For (the

²⁶ See Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁸ Chagall, as quoted by Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 104.

³² *Ibid.*

opportunity for) this to occur, however, ‘singularity’ cannot be (expected to be) ‘given immediately’.³³ The significance (for each individual) of the aesthetic object or encounter must, as it were, be compelled to come forth; it must (be allowed to) emerge ‘out of dialectical involvement’, out of that object or encounter’s ‘intimacy’ (whether literal or metaphorical) with others.³⁴ As Chagall noted of the (aesthetically congenial) arrangement of the “old” Louvre, the individual was in that environment (actively) drawn (not obliged) into ‘an engagement, a discovery’ of the works’ (potential) significance (for him).³⁵

There are two important implications to extract from the above-described exemplification of the aesthetic encounter. The first is that, as Chagall’s comments serve well to suggest, there can be no claim to aesthetic experience in the case that no demands have been made upon the individual. This is part of the problem *both* with modern museological practice *and* with the contextually-subservient habits of artistic and artefactual appreciation espoused by its critics. In one corner stands the ‘overexposed’ and ‘sacralised’ museum-displayed object, duly instructing the observer to pay it (an all-too-easily uninvolved) obeisance;³⁶ in the other stands the observing individual who, bathed in a complementarily sacral aura, and (hence) rendered (unfittingly) submissive, eschews the requisite challenge of the aesthetic encounter, exchanging its demands for the so-called “comforts of the catalogue”.³⁷ As Koestler explains of the latter type of encounter with a potential aesthetic object, what is in such instances derived therefrom is derived not from the object itself, which is consequently perceived ‘in a borrowed light’, but rather, as already implied, ‘from the catalogue’; it is, in other words, guided more by ‘rank or celebrity value’ than by (potential) communicative significance.³⁸ This is the problem, as Koestler intimates, with the individual whose (artistic) appreciation of things has ‘become conventionalised and stagnant’.³⁹ There is an echo here of Read’s plaintive observation (cited in Chapter Two) of the increasing (hyper-)refinedness in both the creation and contemplation of art and the aesthetic from roughly the (post-)Renaissance onwards, whence both became increasingly (if somewhat counter-productively) conformed to and constrained by untowardly conventional criteria, categorisations, and customs of critique.⁴⁰ The individual who subscribes to such aesthetically unaccommodating conventions will tend to prefer ‘the familiar to the unfamiliar’, the traditional, canonical and authoritative to the untried, tentative, adventurous and exploratory.⁴¹ In a gross misapprehension of the nature and demands of aesthetic experience, such an individual sees no problem with, indeed he finds most favourable the fact that the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 104-105.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 105.

³⁶ See Maleuvre (paraphrasing Chagall), *Museum Memories*, p. 105.

³⁷ See Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 408.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 407 and p. 408.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 336.

⁴⁰ See Read, *Icon and Idea*, p. 106 and p. 87.

⁴¹ See Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 336.

familiar, traditional, canonical and authoritative present no ‘challenge’ to him, demand no resourceful or imaginative ‘effort’ from him.⁴² They are, in other words, safe. The obvious price, though, of such stagnant security is aesthetic privation.

There is, to concede the point to Quatremère, an understandably legitimate cause to his expressed concern that ‘museified art invites a detached, passive attitude toward artworks’.⁴³ To his “tradition-bound” view, however, the anxiety appears to be mostly about the anticipated consignment of artworks and artefacts to enigmatic incomprehensibility by their decontextualisation and “despiritualisation” in the museum environment. As contended here, however, this circumstance, far from being exclusively caused by (though perhaps in some cases exacerbated by) museological habits, is inevitable and, hence, to say it again, pointlessly rued (or even ruminated). The greater concern is (or should be) the inducement of an aesthetic passivity and detachment, as of the kind hinted at in the preceding paragraph. In this respect the “traditionalist”’s *expectation* of contextual-semantic comprehension (and his consequent defection from, or dismissal of that which fails to accommodate such an expectation) may actually be said to be *part* of the problem, insofar as it may (threaten to) replace (and preclude) both the cultivation of, and receptivity to aesthetic communicativity.

So as not to be thought to contradict the claims made in Chapter One, it is necessary to state once again that while aesthetic communicativity cannot be sought, one can (as the ascetic characteristically (and exemplarily) does) do his utmost to ensure the greatest probability of the greatest number of possibilities for its eventuation, and the greatest degree of his receptivity to it. The ascetic’s (constant) endeavour to achieve this so-called consummate receptivity, as was hopefully made clear in Section One, determines and defines his characteristic discipline. The attaining of such a degree of receptiveness, readiness or ‘ripeness’ for aesthetic communicativity, to borrow, in the latter case, a term from Koestler, is of course ‘merely a necessary, not a sufficient, condition’.⁴⁴ It appears, however, to be a necessity too easily overlooked. Whether it is the case that the authoritative artefact imposes itself (too) inflexibly on the individual, or the individual who impertinently imposes (too much of) himself on the (potential aesthetic) object, experience or encounter, the consequence is much the same: the curtailment of aesthetic communicativity and significance.

The problem is, therefore, a double-edged one. On the one hand, as Koestler (echoing Read) cautions, conventions may ‘tend to harden into rigid formulae’, making us, to the great misfortune of our (potential) aesthetic encounters ‘ignore those aspects’ that may not appear to us (at first) to ‘fit’.⁴⁵ We thereby hamper the (optimum potential for) aesthetic communicativity and significance otherwise profferable by our encounters, experiences, and the objects of our attention. On the other hand, as Koestler also makes clear, ‘[w]ithout certain conventional rules’

⁴² Ibid, p. 336.

⁴³ Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 108 and p. 109.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 378.

(most of which are acquired by learning ‘but function unawares’), we would not (be able to) ‘make much’ of anything.⁴⁶ One can, that is, no more do without the one than without the other. Some kind of balance, it seems, needs to be struck. Just as the dilemma posed by the aesthetic dimension is a double-edged one, then, so too is the proposed remedy. The onus obliged and discipline demanded by the aesthetic encounter and requisite to aesthetic experience is twofold.

This is the second important implication to be extracted from the earlier-given exemplification of the aesthetic encounter: that some prerequisites must be in place for the aesthetic demands upon the individual to be (best) fulfilled. While aesthetic value is, properly speaking, not (to be) conclusively determined by contextual-semantic comprehension, nonetheless, for an individual sufficiently to be drawn (not obliged) into ‘an engagement, a discovery’ of an object’s significance (for him),⁴⁷ there is need for a sufficient acquaintance with what might be called that object’s pre-aesthetic significations and associations. Just as the *expectation* of contextual-semantic comprehension (and the defection and dismissiveness to which it gives rise) is obstructive to aesthetic communicativity, so a similar “silencing” of potential aesthetic communicativity is threatened by its opposite; that is, by the complete absence of any (effort towards) contextual-semantic understanding. In order, therefore, for the significance (for each individual) of an aesthetic object or encounter to emerge, in order to facilitate the process of dialectic and discovery (not disclosure) upon which aesthetic communicativity and value depends, the individual needs to have a sufficient, though also sufficiently flexible, degree of contextual-semantic learning.

The communicativity afforded by the aesthetic dimension is, as Catherine Elgin explains with specific regard to the arts, symptomatically ‘nonpropositional’; it does not, even where seeming to sway us in the profoundest of ways, contain any argumentation or convey any ‘justification’.⁴⁸ However compelling a particular aesthetic object, experience, or encounter, the most that it may achieve is to move (rather than persuade or convince) the individual who might engage with it.⁴⁹ The effecting of such an influence upon the aesthetically-engaged individual is, it ought to be said, just as much to the potential peril as to the potential profit of both the individual in question and the particular object, experience, or encounter concerned. Because the latter conveys no warrant, as Elgin intimates, the ‘danger’ is that its ‘moving’ effect(s) could result in an endorsing of ‘untenable conclusions’.⁵⁰ Elgin answers this worry by qualifying that, yes, if works of art and (other) aesthetic objects ‘were supposed to make the entire case for a conclusion’ such anxiety ‘would be apt’.⁵¹ At best, however, such objects serve to ‘highlight features, point up patterns, [and] show or suggest unsuspected aspects of things that enable us to

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 378. My emphasis.

⁴⁷ The quoted words are Maleuvre’s. *Museum Memories*, p. 105.

⁴⁸ Catherine Z. Elgin, ‘Art and Education’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, edited by Harvey Siegel (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 320.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 330.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

frame hypotheses'.⁵² This, indeed, is their unique (and, the implication seems to be, relatively innocuous) value. Making explicit what ought to be obvious, Elgin emphasises that frequently an aesthetic object may admit of multiple significations and interpretations.⁵³ This, it will be argued here, is both and at once the great burden and blessing of the aesthetic dimension.

So much has been and, it often seems, can be made of the various art and artefactual objects that we encounter. Frequently the different receptions, impressions, readings or interpretations ventured of a particular item appear to be equally viable, interesting, and attention-worthy, though none can, properly speaking, ever be considered conclusive. In a non-aesthetic (for example, scholarly) context, it may be acceptable for an offered interpretation to be considered relatively unworthy of consideration, as indeed some occasionally are. Taking into account *every* interpretation of which one is (or could be) aware is hardly considered crucial to, say, an (art-)historical appraisal or (attempted) socio-cultural comprehension of a particular art or artefactual object; nor, it may be said, need it be essential even to an *artistic* appreciation thereof. It *is*, however, (or ought to be) considered essential to an *aesthetic* engagement therewith, especially to what might be called an ascetically adequate one. This latter point may help to explain some of the attributes ascribed (earlier) here to the ascetic, including a tendency towards “hyper-keen” and “over-inclusive” awareness, and, as intimated in Chapter Two with regard to his unique accommodation of the grotesque, a ‘hyper-tolerance of ambiguity’.⁵⁴ Such traits contribute to, and hence help to exemplify the ascetic’s especial aesthetic aptitude.

It is perhaps necessary to emphasise again that the ultimate end of the aesthetic endeavour (which, as just suggested, is exemplified in the extreme by the ascetic) is not (intelligible) meaning or understanding but aesthetic communicativity and significance. Although, as just argued, (some effort towards) a degree of comprehension of a potential aesthetic object plays a (necessary) part in the process of attaining that communicativity and significance, ultimately (intelligible) meaning and understanding do not themselves partake of it. The *ultimate* separability of these domains (of signification and significance, of comprehension and communicativity) helps to explain how and why there can be both meaning without significance, and significance without meaning. There are, one may readily acknowledge, many aspects of existence that fail to afford or accommodate meaning. Many also pass us by without bearing any significance. Much that we (claim to) understand (that is, to which we attribute meaning) may bear for us little (aesthetic) significance. In many cases we claim to (be able to) comprehend things with which we feel we have had little to no genuine (significance-driven) engagement. The distinction being drawn here is rather well captured by Mark Twain’s suggestion that the (unwilling) pupil may be “schooled” in many things that will nevertheless have but little “educational” effect upon him, or, one might in this case say, that will afford him

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 329.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Stanghellini, ‘Psychopathology of Common Sense’, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* vol. 8, no. 2/3 (2001), p. 213.

no (aesthetic) communicativity.⁵⁵ As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, an individual's efforts (or claims) to know (a great deal) about a particular object will not guarantee its aesthetic significance (to him).⁵⁶ His learning *will*, however, (provided that it is learning and not mere schooling) contribute to the communicative *potential* of that object. Indeed, his learning will contribute not just to the communicative potential of the particular object with which it was originally associated, but to the communicative potential of any and every object, experience, or encounter with which that individual might at some stage be confronted.

Between meaning-full understanding and aesthetic significance there may be some interaction or interconnection, but not necessarily.⁵⁷ One may believe oneself to have made some gain of meaning-full understanding without this either originating or culminating in aesthetic significance (though this would, as will shortly be argued, entail a relative reduction in the educational or existential consequence of that supposed gain). Likewise, the obtaining of aesthetic significance may be nondependent on any construal of meaning. This distinction is not intended to imply that meaning-full understanding and aesthetic significance may be entirely disassociated. Something of the latter may, either en route or subsequently, give rise to meaningful understanding, as can meaning-full understanding pass over into less intelligible aesthetic significance. Indeed, it must be said (and will be more substantially later in this chapter) that each is likely to be all the more fruitful as a result of such interaction. There is, nevertheless, often a reluctance to allow for such interpenetration. Those devoted to the propagation of meaning-full comprehension, along with the more fastidious among (Fine) Art connoisseurs, tend to be wary of the potentially meaning-less (and hence supposedly integrity-threatening) significances of the aesthetic dimension.

Pictures, images, and words, in whatever form(s) or context(s) they appear, have what E. M. Adams calls 'semantic content'.⁵⁸ They cannot (or ought not to) be taken merely 'to be a sign of' something 'by virtue of some nonsemantic relation that holds, or is believed to hold, between' them and that something.⁵⁹ Adams's point is made clearer by the instructive contrast that he subsequently draws between these human "constructs" and, for example, various configurations in the natural environment. '[R]egardless of how physically similar they may be to written words or drawings', Adams says of such natural landmarks, 'and regardless of what they are taken to be by observers', they are 'simply physical objects that resemble [or evoke]... other things'.⁶⁰ Though 'they may call to mind' these 'other things', Adams goes on to explain,

⁵⁵ Twain purportedly once quipped that "[he] never let [his] schooling interfere with [his] education."

⁵⁶ As explained in Chapter One, aesthetic experience cannot, by any means, be willed or sought.

⁵⁷ The hyphenated forms of "meaning-full" and "meaning-less" adopted here are intended to indicate that these words are to be taken in their literal, not judgemental connotation.

⁵⁸ E. M. Adams, *The Metaphysics of Self and World: Toward a Humanistic Philosophy* (Temple University Press, 1991), p. 60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

‘they have no semantic content about which one could be right or wrong.’⁶¹ ‘[W]ords, pictures, and images’, on the other hand, he says, ‘are not that way’; they ‘have a semantic content’.⁶² To offer a small challenge to Adams’s argument, there do appear to be some cases in which the ‘semantic content’ that he would have us (try to) grasp is or has in one way or another been rendered so obscure as to make the possibility of doing so, without resorting to anything that might justifiably seem like the nonsemantic relation of which Adams complains, extremely remote. This might be the case, for example, where the semantic content of a picture, image, or (set of) word/s has been lost (as with much of the art and artefactual patrimony from the (distant) past). It might also be that the semantic content of the picture or image in question was *intentionally* obscured, or at least rendered utterly equivocal (as is suspected of the (otherwise inexplicable) work of some (in)famously enigmatic artists).⁶³ The object may in such cases, it is here proposed, be deemed justifiably meaning-less; that is, devoid of discernably deliberate or decipherable signification. Such an absence obviously has a deleterious impact upon the efforts of those desirous of (some kind of) contextual-semantic comprehension of the object/s in question. It does not, however, have such an effect upon (and may even have the opposite effect upon) the aesthetic potential of that object. In other words, in spite of (or perhaps because of) an object, experience, or encounter’s failure to convey intelligible meaning, it may yet be of aesthetic significance. Correspondingly, while an object, experience, or encounter may perhaps be (regarded as being) of little or no historical, political, socio-cultural or scholarly value, it may yet be (regarded as, even if only by one (hypothetical) individual) of aesthetic value. The aesthetic, in other words, is that dimension of existence and experience in which we can, uniquely, find significance without meaning. The moment that something begins to take on intelligible, conveyable meaning, it has (and with it we may be said to have), properly speaking, departed from the aesthetic dimension. Should something, even in spite of the aesthetic claims of others, fail to bear for us any significance, it, so long as it remains as such, will be of relatively little aesthetic consequence or concern.

This recognition of the aesthetic possibilities inherent in even the most enigmatic of art and artefactual objects ought to explain the counter-argument advanced in this chapter against the anti-museum attitude. Though the position espoused here shares with the latter attitude an acknowledgement of the inexorable effects upon art and artefactual objects of museological displacement and decontextualisation, it does not share the (now-seeming untoward) mournfulness of the anti-museum critique. Indeed, it is argued here that the conditions cultivated by the museological milieu ought to be considered to be a most welcome incitement to (all that is earnestly obliged by) aesthetic engagement, even if (or perhaps rather *because*) they are particularly challenging. The called-for receptiveness to conditions elsewhere criticised is,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ For some examples of these, see Chapter Four.

unsurprisingly, a characteristic especially pronounced in the ascetic individual. The very end of the ascetic's (overwhelmingly aesthetic) endeavour is not (greater) knowledge, nor (deeper) meaning-fullness, whatever such (ultimately peripheral) gains might be (felt to have been) made, so to speak, in the process, but rather the facilitating of ((ever) more (potential)) aesthetic significance(s). Because the latter may be obtained in the absence of meaning, the ascetic, as explained in Chapter Two, bears a uniquely accommodating capacity to do without intelligibility; hence, for example, his (unusual) acceptance or embrace of the grotesque. Where the *non*-ascetic individual is concerned, the prospect of the meaning-less (exemplified with particular acuteness by the grotesque) tends to be ill received; it is typically unwelcome, if not unbearable. Insofar as meaning-lessness is not at all synonymous with aesthetic insignificance, for the ascetic this is not the case. For the ascetic, the demand for communicativity and significance outweighs the "need" for (intelligible) meaning.

These latter points should also help to justify the claim made here for the greater amenability to the aesthetic endeavour (exemplified in the extreme by the ascetic) of the threat (or, to the ascetic, challenge) presented by the decontextualisation and "alienation" of art and artefactual objects in the modern (museological) milieu; that is, in other words, the threat (or challenge) of meaning-lessness. Rather than effecting a ruinous stifling or "silencing" of the (potential aesthetic) object, as per the (mis)conception of the anti-museum critique, the meaning-lessness engendered or exacerbated by the museological predicament may afford the adequately prepared and appropriately inclined individual endless potentialities for aesthetic significance. This effectively makes such conditions of the greatest potential for nourishing the ascetic's idiosyncratically excessive aesthetic demand.

None of the above is intended to suggest that attending to an individual's demands for communicativity and significance is all that is entailed by an aesthetic encounter. As explained in Chapter One, aesthetic experience 'is not just a personal or private affair'.⁶⁴ Despite their inscrutability, inexpressibility, and unavoidable individuality, such experiences are not solipsistic. They are fundamentally relational. While an aesthetic encounter may of course be undergone or experienced only by an individual, such encounters and experiences necessarily refer to something other than the individual, and must take sufficient account thereof. The act of making of something whatever one wishes is *not* aesthetic; *were* it so, one would be at complete liberty at all times to, as it were, self-generate aesthetic experiences. The peculiar nature of the aesthetic encounter is, however, characterised by the *unexpected* engagement of communicative immediacy, the *unanticipated* significance to one's sense of (one's) being that it affords (and for which it is (as a result thereof) especially valued). It is, in other words, not the case that "anything and everything goes", even in the aesthetic dimension. Indeed, the individual would, it is argued here, do an injustice both to the object, experience, or encounter in question, *and* to the latter's potential aesthetic communicativity to, or significance for him should he not do his

⁶⁴ Brown, *Affectivity*, p. 148.

utmost to take into consideration all foreseeably pertinent, indeed all possible and even potential sources, significations and interpretations thereof. While it may be quite readily acknowledged that the less one bothers to ascertain of an object, experience, or encounter, the more injustice is done to that object, experience, or encounter, it ought also to be acknowledged that by the same indifference the individual reduces by degrees the potentiality of that object, experience, or encounter to register or resonate aesthetically with him. The more that may be suggested by or in a (potential) aesthetic object, experience, or encounter, the greater the possibility that it (or something in it) might (aesthetically) “speak” to the individual (to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world). The cultivation of these “powers of suggestion”, therefore, may be said to be at the core of the ascetic’s imperative and discipline. Once again, there is perhaps something of the “chicken-versus-egg dilemma” about (the difficulty of) determining the distinct derivation of these characteristic demands. On the one hand, what might be called the ascetic’s existential imperative prompts him to be ever on the hunt for potential aesthetic significances, and, therefore, to maximise the potentiality of, and his receptivity to their eventuation. On the other hand, as per James’s suggestion, it might be that a kind of congenital (hyper-)sensitiveness already predisposes the ascetic to his idiosyncratic (hyper-)awareness of everything around him. The fundamental impulses of his being and endeavour, in other words, appear to be utterly mutual.

While it is perhaps unclear as to quite what is cause and what consequence, the ascetic’s endeavour does cultivate a particular set of distinguishing features. These include a determinedly disciplined pursuit of, and especial aptitude for the amassing of what is here described as an overwhelmingly rich repertoire of (potential) references and resonances. It might well be contended that a sufficient degree of research or “repertoire gathering” is inherently obliged by every occasion of our encounter with a particular (aesthetic) object, especially where one aspires to a contextual-semantic comprehension thereof. It was conceded at the very beginning of this chapter that an awareness of the (ostensibly) relevant historical-contextual, functional, and iconographical details of various art and artefactual objects may be important to historico-political and socio-cultural understandings thereof, and that this would be, if not explicitly emphasised, at least implicitly acknowledged by most people. The case being made here, however, is that such reserves of reference material are (though it has been insufficiently (explicitly) acknowledged that they are) also vital to maximising the potential for, and potential of one’s aesthetic engagement with such objects. By maximising the potential significations and suggestions in a particular aesthetic object, experience, or encounter, an individual may raise the chances of it affording him some measure of aesthetic communicativity and significance. What is more, though also, it seems, more in need of emphasising, is that such avidly gathered reserves may also have a crucial bearing on (the scope of) an individual’s (collective) aesthetic engagement(s) and experience(s) in general. This is because, insofar as the aesthetic dimension is concerned, such reserves are not exclusive to any one aesthetic encounter, but build

successively and collectively into a reciprocal whole, thus to afford the greatest potential for their constant (re)combinations in the service of aesthetic communicativity. The greater amenability of some objects to this process, or the greater facility with which they may be said to propel it, also explains why such objects (as will be discussed in the next chapter with regard to a specific selection of artworks) may be said to be of especial value to the ascetic(ally-inclined) individual.

As stipulated earlier, it is of course not the case that “anything and everything goes” in the aesthetic dimension. The potential references and resonances in one’s gathered repertoire are not there to be drawn upon indiscriminately. The earlier-recommended degree of accommodation and liberality as regards our reception and readings of (potential) aesthetic objects, experiences, and encounters is not to be taken as recommending an unrestrained or arbitrary divergence therefrom. In order to do justice both to the object in question and to the individual concerned, every aesthetic encounter must entail, on both accounts, ‘a delicate balance of... firmness and flexibility.’⁶⁵ The process (one which effectively serves to exemplify the activity of the ascetic in the aesthetic dimension) is rather well encapsulated by the somewhat oblique analogy of the action of the poker chips that salesmen sometimes place into the transparent drums of washing machines in order to display to a potential buyer the movement of water within them.⁶⁶ The reserves of reference material that the attentive individual gathers in the course of his aesthetic endeavours act like the water within the machine, while each successive aesthetic encounter is akin to the machine’s mechanism. The latter will, as it were, ‘churn up’ those reserves, possibly throwing new elements into the mix, and here and there new (potential) significations and significances will surface, just as happens with the poker chips in the transparent drum of the washing machine. From whatever (known or unknown) wellsprings they might originally have come, the various images, associations, significations and significances (constantly) churned up in the aesthetic dimension flow forth (again just like the poker chips in the washing cycle) appearing, disappearing, and reappearing in different combinations at every turn.⁶⁷

It must be emphasised here that of the latter three actions or motions, those of the disappearing and differently reappearing of the various images, associations, significations and significances encountered in the aesthetic dimension are just as crucial to aesthetic communicativity as is any appearing of them. Just as much as one requires, in order for something to be made of one’s aesthetic encounters, a sufficient (and in the ascetic’s case copious) store of potential resources, references, or resonances, one needs equally to have the capacity to, where and when necessary, lay those reserves (or at least part of them) (temporarily) aside. That is, a degree of flexibility, even to the point of (seeming) forgetfulness, is necessary to

⁶⁵ Elgin, ‘Art and Education’, p. 329.

⁶⁶ This analogy has been adopted (and adapted) from Virginia Pitts Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation: A View from the Third Millennium* (Parkstone Press, 2012), p. 248.

⁶⁷ See *ibid.*

facilitate aesthetic experience. That sometimes (what we (presume to) know of) the history, iconography, and so forth of a particular object may nevertheless (appear to) have little effect upon our aesthetic engagement therewith bears testament to the place of a certain putting aside, in the aesthetic moment, of those particular pertinences. It must, on the other hand, be acknowledged that aesthetic engagement, communicativity and significance are unlikely to occur or be obtained *without* that background being there to begin with. Indeed it is *this*, it is contended here, that is the (potential) tragedy of the modern (museological) predicament; not, as is the typical complaint, that we might lose the means to understand, interpret, or engage with the (art and artefacts of the) past, but rather that we might, without a sufficiently rich aesthetic repertoire, lose the capacity to look upon, to see in, and to make, not (necessarily) sense, but merely something of the present, potentially (as the ascetic's example attests) with infinite richness.

What is typically perceived to be a renunciation, evasion or ignorance of, or insensitivity to things on the part of the ascetic ought, therefore, not to be conceived as such, but rather as what might be described to be a kind of informed (selective) amnesia. The ascetic's aesthetically ambitious discipline involves his always and incessantly seeing otherwise, differently, potentially. It therefore entails the rather paradoxical coincidence in him of an all-encompassingness with (momentary) "forgetfulness". The ascetic aspires to have at his disposal the greatest number of possibilities and potentialities, but also to have the disciplined discernment to filter through these, in order thereby to ensure the greatest facilitation of aesthetic communicativity, significance, and experience. Thus Koestler explains the importance of the discipline, or indeed, as he calls it, 'the art of forgetting... at the proper moment, what we know': without this art, Koestler observes, 'the mind remains cluttered up with ready-made answers, and never finds occasion to ask the proper questions.'⁶⁸ Koestler's complaint is similar to that directed by the likes of Chagall at the modern museological predicament, which, by its simultaneous sacralising of both the (art and artefactual) object and the observing individual, is said to result in a 'deadening reification of' the former and 'a detached, passive attitude' in the latter.⁶⁹ As described earlier in this chapter, the consequence of this sorry circumstance is that the 'individuality' of both the object and the observer is no longer 'put to the test', but rather 'enforced *de jure*'.⁷⁰ Gone is the crucial encouragement to search, to find, to discover, which lies at the very heart of the aesthetic enterprise.⁷¹ There is, it may therefore be said, something of a paradox about the decontextualisation of the (potential) aesthetic object in the modern (museological) milieu. On the one hand it presents something of a hurdle to the very research and repertoire gathering suggested here to be important not only to seekers of contextual-semantic comprehension but also to the (optimum effectuality of the) aesthetic endeavour. On

⁶⁸ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 190.

⁶⁹ See Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 102. See above, footnote 27.

⁷¹ See *ibid*, p. 104.

the other hand, a degree of decontextualisation appears to be necessary to (the facilitation of) aesthetic experience, for as essential as that recommended research is to the process, so too is its (occasional, temporary) “forgetting”. To put the abiding principle in aphoristic terms: first to factor in, then to filter and/or “forget”. Because of this necessity, however disconcerting it may be to those seeking contextual-semantic comprehension, (the predicament posed by) the decontextualisation of art and artefactual objects in the modern (museological) milieu is, to the ascetic, ever on the hunt for aesthetic engagement and experience, not a regrettable but rather a most welcome circumstance. It is not, to challenge the anti-museum charge, a cause for regret or reproach, but is (or ought to be) rather a kind of rousing invitation, a wonderfully obliging challenge.

It may be worth adding here that, in the case of the ascetic, unlike (or at least more so than in) the case of those seeking contextual-semantic comprehension, there is necessarily far less definitiveness and determinativeness about, and hence more freedom to forget, as the occasion may suggest, one’s collected reference material. The gathered information, insights, and other potential significance-enriching potentialities, however vital they may be to the aesthetic endeavour, are not necessarily as influential to each individual aesthetic encounter as, for example, a non-aesthetic imperative (such as an (art-)historical assessment) would dictate. As suggested earlier, one may very well (continue to) engage with, and find (an enduring) aesthetic significance in an object, experience, or encounter despite one’s (accumulation of various) historical, artistic, and other non-aesthetic appreciations of it; even, it must be said, in possible defiance or contradiction thereof.

Notwithstanding the freedom subsequently to be (more) selective with it, an informed attentiveness is just as (if not even more) crucial to aesthetic as to critical and scholarly engagements with art and artefactual objects. With his particularly excessive aesthetic demands, his compulsion to ensure a constant and copious supply of communicativity and significance, which in turn requires a repertoire-gathering of responsible richness, the ascetic effectively serves as an exemplar (in the extreme) of the aesthetic “process”. It ought to be apparent from the foregoing discussion that the latter is (or at least involves in part) a process of *learning*, and one just as demanding, if not (in its necessarily more extensive compass) even more demanding than that obliged by the striving for contextual-semantic comprehension. It is contended here, therefore, that the example served by the ascetic may bear exemplary implications not just for the aesthetic, but also for the educative process, to which, it is also argued here, the aesthetic is intimately, reciprocally tied. The aesthetic dimension, and the discipline that, embodied by the ascetic, endeavours to ensure its greatest effectuality, may, in other words, be of consequence beyond the bounds of its conventionally perceived domain.

The ascetic’s propensity to amass a responsibly rich repertoire of potential references, resonances, significations, and significances, and his finely-tuned discernment to filter, find among, and, if need be, “forget” these with each aesthetic occasion bears some important lessons

for the educative process in general. Part of the example served is to show that disciplined learning, which in the ascetic's case ultimately serves an aesthetic end, is no less noteworthy nor steadfast for its being occasionally (that is, at the dictates of one or other (aesthetic) encounter) "forgotten". Though not every aspect of an individual's collective learning will have a (discernable) bearing on his every aesthetic encounter or experience, this does nothing to diminish the vital importance of those reserves of *potential* resonances, references, significations and significances. Despite, or rather because of the involuntariness of the so-called aesthetic moment, it is up to the individual best to prepare the ground, so to speak, for its eventuation. In the (potential) service of aesthetic communicativity, nothing is ever redundant.

Thomas Docherty, in an article entitled 'Aesthetic Education', stakes a similar claim to that being advanced here for the reciprocal entwining of the educative and aesthetic endeavours. The key to the formative influence of the latter upon the former is, according to Docherty's suggestion, its facilitation and cultivation of the so-called imaginative faculty.⁷² The growth in or of learning, as Elgin also emphasises, depends upon what she describes as the formulating or framing of 'hypotheses', and this (or something like it) is, she contends, uniquely facilitated by the aesthetic dimension.⁷³ The inclination and aptitude to imagine 'the possibility that [things] might be otherwise than they are' is at the heart of both the aesthetic and educative processes.⁷⁴ One must in both cases, in the words of Étienne Souriau, have the willingness and capacity (constantly) to 'think aside'.⁷⁵ Once again the ascetic affords an exemplar of just what is involved in or required by this process. His disciplined endeavour to maintain an optimal potentiality for aesthetic significance depends upon just such a capacity always to think, or rather see (potentially) differently. Substantiating the claim for the reciprocity of the aesthetic and educative processes, this capacity in turn requires that the (ascetic) individual have a sufficient(ly rich and varied) repertoire of potential significations to serve, as it were, as fuel for that function; and this, in its turn, requires a sufficient effort or investment on the individual's part in the learning process(es) that supply and sustain that repertoire. The capacity always to think or see (potentially) otherwise, and thus to be adequately 'prepared' for (the possibilities of) aesthetic communicativity and significance, is, to paraphrase Louis Pasteur, dependent upon 'patient study and persevering efforts'.⁷⁶ A (perpetual) preparatory learning and repertoire gathering process is, in other words, essential to the obtaining of, even if ultimately extraneous to aesthetic communicativity and significance.

There may be said to be a distinctiveness about the gathered learning that serves and sustains the aesthetic endeavour, even if it does not culminate exclusively in aesthetic

⁷² Thomas Docherty, 'Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience', in *The New Aestheticism*, edited by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 31.

⁷³ Elgin, 'Art and Education', p. 330.

⁷⁴ Docherty, 'Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience', p. 31.

⁷⁵ As quoted by Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 145. See also p. 181.

⁷⁶ As quoted by Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 145.

communicativity (or if its contribution thereto goes undiscerned). It is differentiable from both erudition (bookishness) and wisdom (which is the (potential) fruit of (particular kinds of) lived experience, not (or at least not only) aesthetic experience). It is distinguishable therefrom because of its necessary origin and/or (potential) culmination in a special “connectedness” to one’s sense of one’s being-in-the-world, as well as the greater degree of “flexibility” to which it is (or allows itself to be) subject. In this regard, the learning discussed here bears instructive comparison with what has in a different context been dubbed, in contradistinction to the Enlightenment approach(es) to things, a (more) ‘poetic’ mode of engagement. The identification of this mode, and the corresponding (re)valuation of its Enlightenment opposite(s), has been attributed to the eighteenth-century Italian polymath Giambattista Vico, who appears at least to have been one of its earliest espousers.⁷⁷ Thus Joseph Mali, discussing Vico, describes the distinction made between the two modes: while the espousers of the Enlightenment regarded learning as a gradual process in which the individual comes to see things ‘as they really are’, Vico, in contrast, saw that the process ‘owed as much to the human capacity to see the things *not* as they are’.⁷⁸ This is the capacity claimed here to be exemplified by the ascetic, whose peculiar compulsion (what might be called his ascesis towards aesthesis) involves just this kind of seeing (potentially) otherwise, so best to increase the possibilities for that constant and copious connectedness to the aesthetic dimension upon which his sense of (his) being-in-the-world rests. The distinctive characteristic of the learning discussed here, of the repertoire of potential references and significations that serves and sustains the aesthetic endeavour, is its functioning within the aesthetic dimension as material by means of which to think or imagine *with*, not *of* or *about*.

Once again Koestler affords some useful terms for the explication of this peculiar functioning of the aesthetic dimension (and hence, perhaps, the demystification to some extent of the supposed enigma of aesthetic experience). The communicativity in which the latter culminates (and which gives to it its characteristic value) is but the fruition of a special kind of synthesis, what Koestler calls ‘the bisociative click’, a synthesis that is dependent upon the ability and inclination to ‘think aside’.⁷⁹ Recalling the description given earlier here by means of the machine-spun-poker-chip analogy, Koestler suggests how with each aesthetic encounter the ‘previously unconnected matrices’ of one’s pre-gathered repertoire of potential significations and significances are prompted to surface, (possibly) to forge fresh and varied combinations, and thus to facilitate that crucial ‘bisociative click’.⁸⁰ Koestler also offers some suggestions as to just what kinds of ‘patterns’ and ‘matrices’ may be most conducive to the facilitating of those

⁷⁷ See Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico’s ‘New Science’* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 182.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 181.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

aesthetically vital (and potentially ‘inexhaustible’) ‘bisociations’.⁸¹ It is to be noted that many of the traits that he identifies are conspicuous features both of the grotesque (as discussed in Chapter Two) and of or in those artworks argued here to be (for that very reason) of especial value to the ascetic(ally-inclined) individual (see Chapter Four). The identified traits include similarities and affinities ‘detached from meaning’ and (familiar) function; the ‘unearthing of hidden analogies’; the making of ‘links’ that in other contexts would not be made; the ‘condensation’ in one link-idea or -image ‘of several associative contexts’; and the use of concrete devices to stand for the ‘nascent’ and unverbalisable.⁸² Underscoring just how and why the grotesque is uniquely accommodated in the aesthetic dimension (and hence by the ascetic), Koestler also identifies what he describes as the feature of ‘double identity’, the fact or appearance of something being one thing and yet ‘something else at the same time’ (even to the extent, as exemplified in the Grotesque, of animal-vegetable-mineral cross-fertilisation).⁸³

Alongside these there are also, it has to be said, the myriad unavoidable, sometimes even unwelcome, and often idiosyncratic connotations that various words, images, objects, and encounters may (without being either verbalisable or visible) carry for an individual. On whatever level of consciousness, with whatever degree of deliberation, we all inevitably make associations between things. While there are of course constraints upon such association-making (‘free association is never entirely free’, as Koestler glosses on Hobbes), it *is* ‘free’ to the extent that there are always ‘alternative choices between permissible moves’.⁸⁴ Everything we encounter, Koestler explains, whether word, image, concept, or otherwise, may be simultaneously ‘a member of several connotative matrices’.⁸⁵ The ‘vertical, abstractive hierarchy’ that gives us something like ‘the dictionary definition’ is not immune to the ‘aura of connotations’, to the various other resonances, significations and significances that a particular item or encounter might have for or suggest to the individual whom it engages.⁸⁶ Nor is it insusceptible to being further, indeed constantly (re)shaped by that ‘multitude of matrices’ that may be found to ‘intersect in it’.⁸⁷ Definitions and connotations both ‘are unstable and subject to change’.⁸⁸ One ought readily to acknowledge that one’s concepts, understandings and explanations of particular things rarely remain the same across time, even when the verbal labels attached to them do.⁸⁹ Every word, image, idea and encounter inexorably brings with it an inextricable ‘associative context’.⁹⁰ Needless to say, the greater the number and richness of

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 376.

⁸² Ibid, p. 179.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 646.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 642.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See *ibid*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

these, the ‘richer and more multi-dimensional’ the associative and, hence, communicative potential of the item or encounter to which they attach;⁹¹ hence, once again, the vital importance to the ascetic individual of maximising (the potential for) such associative abundance. Calling to mind once again the machine-spun-poker-chip analogy marshalled earlier here, Koestler suggests that every one of our experiences or encounters brings with it a likelihood of some ‘excitation’ of some (even if only very peripheral) connections and connotations, of some ‘fleeting, fringe-conscious stirrings’.⁹² The emergence of such undercurrents of communicative potential are, as Koestler recommends, a ‘minor, permissible’, and, insofar as the aesthetic is concerned, likely even necessary ‘kind of distraction’.⁹³ To an aesthetic demand as excessive as the ascetic’s this would indeed seem to be the case; hence, to belabour the point, his embrace of, and endeavour to maximise the potential for just such “distracting stirrings”. Thus, in the same way that the ascetic has here been described as flouting the conventional uncountenanceability of the grotesque, so too may he be described as entertaining an unusual enthusiasm for these “distracting” connotations. Commonly considered (by the non-ascetic individual) to be an unwanted encumbrance upon his or her engagement with a particular object or encounter, those very “fringe stirrings” are, to an aesthetic demand as excessive as the ascetic’s, rather most valuably opportune.

Part of the broader implications of the ascetic’s discipline, part of the lesson or example that he may serve for the educative process, is that such a generous embrace of any and all potential pertinences to this or that object of one’s attention may be vital not only to (the facilitation of) aesthetic engagement and experience, but also to the learning that at once serves and is served by that experience. All the processes involved are, in other words, as ought now to be apparent, mutual. There may, therefore, be some commonality or interaction between an aesthetic engagement with an art or artefactual object, and a scholarly, curatorial, or other similarly concerned kind of engagement therewith. There is a no-less-than-equally important onus upon the individual sufficiently (or, in the ascetic’s case, abundantly) to acquaint himself with all conceivably relevant contextual-semantic information about the object of concern. No matter what the *ultimate* end of one’s endeavour, no less than an equal degree of learning is (or rightly ought to be) demanded and undertaken in the process of engaging with such objects, though it may be said that, given the more exacting demands of his endeavour, and the greater accommodations that it entails (by contrast with the often conventionally restricted allowances of the scholarly-curatorially concerned), there is in the ascetic’s case a greater striving (commensurate with the extremity of his discipline) to acquaint himself with *all possible*

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, p. 645.

⁹³ See *ibid.*

approaches, (mis)interpretations, and even hypotheses to which the object in question might have at one time or another been subjected.⁹⁴

Because, properly speaking, anything and everything may be of potential aesthetic significance to an individual, in order for that individual to assure the greatest likelihood of a regular “unlocking” of this potential (as the ascetic, given his characteristic aspiration, is acutely aware) certain disciplined demands are required. The ascetic’s uniquely exhaustive educative pursuits (albeit directed, of course, to an ultimately aesthetic end) are in this way at once a great onus of, and yet assistance to his endeavour. That the process is a responsibility ought to be obvious to anyone who wishes to (attempt to) do justice to any “thing” that exists outside of them, while the great assistance afforded by the obligatory exhaustiveness of the process ought to be obvious from the foregoing discussion. The more that something (potentially) “says” to us, the more it might “speak” to us. Of course, on the one hand it is inapt to say that an aesthetic object “speaks” at all. As was hopefully made apparent in Chapter One, aesthetic objects cannot (be expected to) “speak” in anything like the logical-verbal manner to which we usually ascribe that term. Were it possible to conceive or express by rational means what is conveyed to us aesthetically, the latter would no longer bear any claim to being legitimately aesthetic. On the other hand, there is some aptness about the well-known aphorism that a picture (or in this case an aesthetic object) “speaks a thousand words”, for, as just suggested, the more that an aesthetic object, experience, or encounter (metaphorically) “says” to us, the more it may (aesthetically) “speak” to us; that is, the greater the *potential* for aesthetic communicativity, the greater its prospect. The means to maximise this potential is of course the above-discussed gathering of a fittingly rich repertoire of latent significations and significances. The greater the depth and diversity of the resources at an individual’s disposal, which function both as the (necessary) instrument of, and as an (unavoidable) influence upon his perceptions and interpretations of, and (inter)connections among (potential) aesthetic encounters, the greater the (ongoing) promise of (a sufficiently copious supply of) aesthetic communicativity. The greater the number of potential resonances and significations, of (potentially) interconnecting “matrices” and ‘multiple attunements’, the greater the chances of aesthetic communicativity and significance.⁹⁵ In other words, the richer our repertoire, the greater the likelihood of a higher number of aesthetic encounters and experiences. This ought to justify the greater freedom and indeed onus upon the ascetic to embrace even those elsewhere-considered-outlandish-and-disreputable interpretations of some art and artefactual objects, especially when compared with many individuals of primarily scholarly-curatorial concerns, for whom such readings, which may yet serve the

⁹⁴ Properly speaking, insofar as the aesthetic dimension itself is concerned it is of course not plausible (to ascertain) that a particular reading of a particular object might be an erroneous one. In the aesthetic dimension, everything is always only (to be entertained as) of possible (aesthetic) communicativity and significance.

⁹⁵ See Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 643 and p. 644.

ascetic as potentially *aesthetically* informative, tend not to be considered worthy of (scholarly-curatorial) attention.

The process of, as it were, attaining aesthetic significance via aesthetic appreciation is and must be a mutually informative (and corrective) one. In proportion to our not taking on the responsibility of the requisite repertoire gathering, we do an injustice both to the object, encounter or experience in question *and* to ourselves (by curbing the chances for aesthetic communicativity). The obtaining of (aesthetic) communicativity or significance is, therefore, as already hinted at here, (to some extent) dependent upon the striving for contextual-semantic comprehension. That the latter can only be strived for and not obtained is indicated by the difficulty of being sure when (or of being sure of the point at which one can be sure that) such comprehension might be adjudged successfully attained. It is rarely even clear if and how the process of approaching such comprehension ought to be conducted, and whether or not it is thereby at all correct, accurate, or even appropriate. To reiterate some of the earlier-discussed consequences of our cultural condition, the lapsing of time and tradition inevitably and inexorably effaces our familiarity with, and (hence) our chances of accurately understanding art and artefactual objects, as does the apparently inherent absence (or possibly deliberate creator-driven obfuscation) of any discernable signification in them. Once that assurance (though not, it ought to be emphasised, authority) of cultural habitation and/or habituation has passed out of possibility, all there is (to hope for), it seems, is aesthetic communicativity. The crucial point is that the obtaining of this communicativity makes the same (if not even more encompassing) demands as the striving for contextual-semantic comprehension (without, it must be said, the burden of the latter's (prospective or inevitable) futility). There is of course no more guarantee of aesthetic communicativity than of contextual-semantic comprehension, but there is (or should be) also no equivalently focused expectation. In other words, there is far more flexibility in the ascetic's aesthetically inspired educative endeavour than there is in the, say, scholarly-curatorial one. The 'laws of disciplined thinking', as Koestler describes, tend to demand that one 'stick to a given frame of reference and not shift from one universe of discourse to another... from one matrix to another'.⁹⁶ Just such shifting(s), however, as the above argumentation ought to have made clear, are crucial to the (optimum) attainment of aesthetic communicativity and significance, and are accordingly indispensable to the ascetic.

Two additional points must be made about the educative process said here to be essential to, and distinctive of the ascetic's aesthetic endeavour. First, although the process itself will (or should) demand and entail (a significant degree of) learning, the end that it ultimately serves is not to be (mis)taken for, or regarded as a gaining of understanding. That this is the case ought to be accountable for by reference to the explanation, first given in Chapter Two, that the overriding aim of the ascetic endeavour is the obtaining of (ever more, but always mere) *possibilities*. There cannot be, for the ascetic, any "finality" to any experience (including that of

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 178.

learning), for this would entail an inextricable identification with it, and, hence, a regression of or from the aesthetic dimension. Though explicability might not necessarily be considered an essential criterion of understanding, it is perhaps also worth re-emphasising that the intimations, connotations, and other “covert” communications that comprise the meaning-less significances of aesthetic experience are, for all their inevitability and individual conviction, typically inexplicable. The second important point is that, as already (briefly) mentioned in this chapter, there is a distinctive reciprocity between the (ascetic) individual’s learning and the aesthetic end that it ultimately serves. As crucial as the educative process is to the (potential) obtaining of aesthetic communicativity and significance, so is the aesthetic dimension crucial to learning.

In his article on ‘Aesthetic Education’, Docherty (with explicit allusion to the arguments in Montesquieu’s *Essay on Taste*) hints at just such a crucial connection between learning and the aesthetic dimension.⁹⁷ As already discussed here, Docherty suggests that one way in which the aesthetic has a formative influence upon learning is its facilitation and cultivation of the imaginative faculty, the willingness and capacity to ‘think aside’.⁹⁸ The inclination and aptitude to imagine ‘the possibility that [things] might be otherwise than they are’ is vital to both the aesthetic and educative processes.⁹⁹ Evoking the description of the (ascetic) dynamic given earlier here (that is, the dynamic between the educative endeavour and the ongoing, self-perpetuating aesthetic appetite that it both serves and sustains), Docherty (discussing Montesquieu’s *Essay*) describes how our engagements with aesthetic objects ‘lead us always and inexorably further onwards’ in a restless searching ‘for more and more [in the ascetic’s case, aesthetic] experience’, and that through such endeavours we admit the possibilities to ‘imagine things undreamt of... or,’ as Docherty maintains by way of Montesquieu, that we are able to ‘learn.’¹⁰⁰ The two endeavours are thus acknowledged to be mutual. Education, Docherty explicates Montesquieu’s thesis, ‘depends on... aesthetic experience’,¹⁰¹ just as much as, according to the argument advanced here, an individual’s aesthetic fortunes may be said to thrive in proportion to his educative efforts.

Because of the reciprocal entwinement of the aesthetic and educative endeavours, the stipulations made earlier in this chapter with regard to the gathering and potentially unfettered intermingling of a sufficiently (or in the ascetic’s case superlatively) rich and varied repertoire of (potential) references and significations are intended to apply not just to the former but also to the latter. One might therefore quote here the congenial advice of Vico, who in a 1732 oration encouraged students to ‘Devote yourselves, during your study time, to nothing but a continuous comparison among *all* the things [that] you are learning, so as to create... a connection among

⁹⁷ See Docherty, ‘Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience’, esp. p. 26.

⁹⁸ The quoted words here are Souriau’s. See above, footnote 75.

⁹⁹ Docherty, ‘Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience’, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

them'.¹⁰² According to Vico the individual ought to take 'as his province... the entire curriculum'; the whole 'cycle', he advocated, 'should be gone through completely.'¹⁰³ Just such an aspired-for comprehensiveness, albeit for ultimately aesthetic ends, is of course at the very core of the ascetic's imperative and discipline. The ascetic's exacting capacity for the especial receptivity and resourcefulness required to maximise aesthetic communicativity and significance is at once the great blessing and burden of his being. It may also be said to be, as will be contended in the next chapter, the characteristic demand placed upon or solicited from him by those (aesthetic) objects, experiences, and encounters to which he attaches most value.

Notwithstanding the reciprocal entwinement of the aesthetic and educative processes, the two endeavours do, especially as regards their embodiment in the ascetic individual, *ultimately* serve different ends. Learning (and the contextual-semantic comprehension to which it might be felt to give rise), though crucial to, is not the ultimate end of the aesthetic endeavour. Whatever might serve (part of) the process of attaining aesthetic communicativity or significance is ultimately extraneous thereto. As explained in Chapter One, the communicative immediacy of the aesthetic dimension is the (overriding) end of the ascetic's being. There is, therefore, a further distinctiveness about his peculiar endeavour(s). What may constitute for the non-ascetic individual (merely) an educative (and aesthetic) imperative is for the ascetic (always ultimately) an existential one. For the ascetic, the learning process, both in its origin and end, is never *only* educational; like the aesthetic endeavour that, in his case, it ultimately (exclusively) serves, it is fundamentally, all-encompassingly existential. The ascetic has a compulsive dependence upon (a constant and copious connectedness to) the aesthetic dimension; he cannot countenance the non-aesthetic. He (therefore) has a disciplined preoccupation with ensuring an utmost receptivity to any and every object, experience, or encounter, insofar as they all bear the potential to afford aesthetic communicativity and significance. Guided by this imperative, the ascetic's discipline entails, as stipulated earlier in this chapter, the assembling of a fittingly rich and sizeable repertoire of potential significations and significances. In the process of gathering these reserves, a significant degree of learning will be demanded of, and obtained by the ascetic, even if such educative implications serve, in his case, as means to a more fundamental (existential) end. This (ultimate) end of the ascetic's aesthetic endeavour is not (only) signification but significance, not (only) comprehension but communicativity. The educative imperative that drives the seeker of contextual-semantic comprehension is for the ascetic, in his endeavour to obtain a superlatively constant and copious connectedness to the aesthetic dimension, always ultimately an existential one.

¹⁰² Vico's *Della mente eroica*, as quoted by Giorgio Tagliacozzo, 'General Education as Unity of Knowledge', in *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, edited by Tagliacozzo, Michael Mooney, and Donald Phillip Verene (The Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 138. My emphasis.

¹⁰³ Donald Phillip Verene, 'Introduction: On Humanistic Education', in Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)*, translated by Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee (Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 6.

Although, as far as the ascetic's own being is concerned, no separation can ultimately be made between the educative and existential implications of the aesthetic process, in the exemplary function that he is said here to serve such a division *can* be made. In other words, despite (or perhaps indeed because of) the inseparability between the ascetic's existential imperative and the educative demands that it makes upon him, some (further) important lessons about or for the learning process in general may be gleaned from his example. As ought now to be clear, though the learning process is by no means *particular* to the aesthetic dimension, it is vital to it. It was also contended here that the aesthetic dimension is (reciprocally) crucial to the learning process. With the additional insights afforded in the preceding paragraph, it may now be explained how and why the ascetic, because of the consummate attainments in this regard to which his peculiar compulsion propels him, may serve as an impressive exemplar of (the essence of) the educative endeavour. This is because, it is argued here, *all* learning (properly so called) depends upon that distinctive connectedness to one's sense of (one's) being that is afforded (exclusively) by the aesthetic dimension (and which is attained most exemplarily by the ascetic). The aesthetic and educative processes are, it may therefore be said, not just mutually informative, but also, it would appear, mutually requisite. The disciplined gathering of (potential) resources is necessary "groundwork" for the obtaining of aesthetic significance. To this process (a fitting degree of) learning is consequential (in both senses of that term). That learning, though, in order for it to take hold as such (and to a degree sufficient to the above-described function), will in turn depend upon one already possessing something of a sense of (one's) being-in-the-world. This sense, however, was of course claimed to be unattainable by any means or modes other than the aesthetic. The determining of a sense of one's being-in-the-world depends upon (the individual's having already experienced one or more instances of) aesthetic communicativity, the facilitating of which will in turn have depended upon that individual's having had in store a sufficient repertoire of resources by means of which to make something of (indeed even to recognise and therefore seize upon) the (potential) aesthetic encounter, which in turn again would have entailed a commensurately requisite degree of learning on the part of that individual. Hence, one ought now to (be able to) discern, the inextricable mutuality of the two processes.

Insofar as a suspected instance of learning lacks that distinctive "connectivity" to one's sense of one's self, it may not be considered sufficiently to have taken hold as such. Something like this argument was advanced by Dewey, who suggested that only where (an instance of) learning were felt to have (had) this kind of individual "connection" could it confidently be taken to have occurred. The absence of such a connection would, according to Dewey, make the material-to-be-learned 'purely formal'.¹⁰⁴ Deprived of significance (and, hence, of both aesthetic and educative (and, in the ascetic's case, existential) value), it would be a dead and barren thing

¹⁰⁴ John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (The University of Chicago Press, 1902), p. 24.

simply to be memorised or stored.¹⁰⁵ Learning (not mere memorisation) requires (at its best a thoroughgoing) assimilation into one's (sense of (one's)) being. Because of this requirement and all that it entails, learning may be said to be (fundamentally) aesthetic. It both depends upon, and ultimately feeds back into (and in both cases to a degree proportionate to) an individual's entertaining (via the aesthetic dimension) a sense of (his) being-in-the-world. Thus it may be seen how the ascetic, in his peculiarly profound preoccupation with such an "entertaining", may serve as an exemplar of (all that is entailed by) this multifaceted process. With his excessive aesthetic demand, and constant, conjoint, acute sensibility to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world and his learning, the ascetic may be said to have more assurance of the latter taking hold as such; that is, of its being adequately assimilated (and thus learned), rather than just memorised (and (likely) soon forgotten). The insatiable repertoire gathering in which the ascetic (necessarily) constantly engages is both the means *and* the result of his discipline, and this is part of the example that he serves. The potential of an individual's encounters to afford aesthetic communicativity and significance will increase and decrease in proportion to his maintenance of a sufficiently rich repertoire of possible references and resonances. Likewise will the degree and durability of his learning fluctuate in accordance with his aesthetic fortunes.

Education, as Docherty explicates Montesquieu's thesis, 'depends on... aesthetic experience'.¹⁰⁶ Montesquieu's *Essay* makes several other points of pertinence to the argument advanced so far in this dissertation. Starting from the presupposition that we are always eager for experience, a principle close to that ascribed here to the ascetic's aesthetic imperative, Montesquieu proposes that people in general (and, it may be said, ascetics most especially) aspire to see (but not, as was made clear in Chapter One, to *be*) 'as much as possible', to extend their view 'as far as possible (or even as far as *impossible*; into [the realm of] the imagination)'.¹⁰⁷ The reader may note the resemblance of this suggestion to what was said earlier here about the ascetic; namely, that his endeavour to maintain as constant and copious a connectedness to the aesthetic dimension in turn compels him to keep a constant and copious store of (mere) *possibilities*, which characteristically entails his forgoing of experience(s) for the very sake of (those) experience(s). 'We are', Docherty (by way of Montesquieu) congenially suggests, always on the lookout for 'more experience'.¹⁰⁸ The discipline of the ascetic is, as contended here, the endeavour to ensure an utmost effectuality in this regard; hence his restriction of all experiences to the aesthetic dimension (in order so to preserve their ever-present aesthetic potential). What Montesquieu ascribes to us all, the aspiration for abundant experience(s), finds superlative instantiation in the ascetic, whose peculiar distinction inheres in his existential dependence upon, and (hence) disciplined pursuit of such (aesthetically) experiential abundance.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 24 and p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Docherty, 'Aesthetic Education and the Demise of Experience', p. 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

It is perhaps worth stating here that the recommended gathering of potential references and resonances said to be exemplified by the ascetic is not to be taken as advocating anything like an indiscriminate application of just any signification. Granted that, unlike in more linguistically circumscribed disciplines such as mathematics, no “answer” is ever attainable in the aesthetic dimension,¹⁰⁹ nonetheless, there is still an onus toward what might be called an informed interpretation of its constitutive objects, experiences, and encounters. What the individual gains by means of his repertoire gathering is not a license to make the (potential) aesthetic object say anything that he might wish it to. As Elgin explains, ‘subjective reactions are not the end of an aesthetic encounter’.¹¹⁰ There is indeed always a risk of too radical an “unmooring” between an aesthetic object and an individual’s engagement therewith. While of course the freedom of such “unmooring” is to a degree essential to aesthetic engagement (as explained above with regard to the (necessary) decontextualisation and alienation of the aesthetic object), so, too, it must be said, is an adequate counter-dynamic. To borrow the words of Koestler, ‘self-assertiveness’ must be ‘harnessed to the task’, and ‘heady speculations... submitted to the rigours’ of informed observation.¹¹¹

In order further to redress any residual suggestion of subjective relativism in the notion of aesthetic significance, it must be remembered that it is not the case that (the pursuit of) contextual-semantic comprehension plays no part in the obtaining thereof. Such comprehension (or, rather, the aspiration thereto) is not “anathema” to the aesthetic endeavour in the way that the aesthetic endeavour is often regarded as being to it. Whereas an aesthetic engagement with a particular art or artefactual object is rarely deemed essential (and is very often deemed ruinous) to a contextual-semantic comprehension thereof, the same cannot be said of the necessity to the aesthetic endeavour of a contextual-semantic awareness and attentiveness. The approbation of (the necessary role of) individual “discovery” and “design” in the (process of) obtaining aesthetic communicativity and significance, as argued for earlier in this chapter, ought not to be taken to advocate a radical unmooring from (what might be gathered about) the particular object of concern. Our aesthetic (re-)interpretations of things should not be (considered to be) a step away from the “facts”. Of course the aesthetic dimension (necessarily) entails a degree of freedom greater than what is available or permissible in disciplines more sharply circumscribed by context and convention.¹¹² Even *within* the aesthetic dimension, it must be acknowledged, an object, experience, or encounter may present itself to the individual with a certain degree of contextual circumscription (hence, for example, the conspicuousness of anachronistic and anomalous interpretations). The difference about the aesthetic dimension, compared to more

¹⁰⁹ See Elgin, ‘Art and Education’, p. 327.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 331.

¹¹¹ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 87.

¹¹² See Elgin, ‘Art and Education’, p. 327.

“circumscribed” disciplines like mathematics, is, as Elgin suggests, ‘a difference in degree, not in kind’.¹¹³

Nevertheless, the individual should not, as Elgin qualifies her verdict on the place of subjective reactions in the aesthetic encounter, ‘leave... subjectivity behind.’¹¹⁴ Indeed, that our aesthetic encounters are inherently ‘reflective’, that ‘our subjective reactions may be indicative of aspects of’ the object of our attention, and that when the latter strikes us in a particular way ‘we consider why’, all make such reactions equally viable and valuable ‘resources’ for an individual’s ongoing aesthetic engagement(s) and experience(s).¹¹⁵ Once again the process or dynamic entailed is an exemplarily educational one. Learning, as Elgin emphasises, ‘is not a matter of moving away from subjective responses’; it is rather a ‘refining’ of them ‘so that, while they remain subjective,’ they become increasingly viable and valuable ‘resources’.¹¹⁶ ‘[L]ike a good judge of character’, the aesthetically proficient individual will be ‘someone whose subjective responses are finely tuned to relevant features of their targets.’¹¹⁷ The individual in the aesthetic dimension learns (or ought to learn) not how to make everything say anything, but rather how better to ensure, through a creative but cautious comprehensiveness, that the references and resonances that he at once gathers from and brings to his aesthetic and educative encounters are both sufficiently rich *and* responsible. With each such (successive) encounter (and, thereby, with each addition to his cumulative repertoire of potential references, resonances, significations and significances) he will (or ought to) find his interpretive and discriminative capabilities growing, in yet another paradox of the aesthetic dimension, at once more rich and more refined.¹¹⁸ The called-for dynamic is of course (claimed here to be) exemplified in the ascetic, whose uncompromising discipline necessitates a constant (simultaneous) counterbalancing of his characteristic demands. Such a counterbalancing is in the ascetic’s case needed to assure both a steady object *for* his aesthetic engagement, and a means of insurance against his entertaining any presumptions of perfect attainment with regard thereto. The consequent (rather paradoxical) dynamic is perhaps best explicated by means of the more conventional conception of the ascetic, according to which his characteristic preoccupation is said to be not aesthetic communicativity and significance, but rather the inherent impulses of his (human) nature. In his efforts to discipline the latter, the (conventional) ascetic is said paradoxically to require the undisciplined eruptions thereof, both as a focus for his efforts, and as a chastening reminder of the constant and uncompromising necessity of those efforts. In a similar manner, when it comes to aesthetic communicativity, direct and considerate engagement compelled by the specific object, experience, or encounter prevents an untoward solipsism,

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 330.

¹¹⁵ See *ibid*, p. 330 and p. 331.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 331.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See *ibid*, p. 327.

which, as explained earlier here, is just as detrimental or destructive to aesthetic communicativity and significance as is a too-slavish expectation of, or adherence to contextual-semantic comprehension. The silence and self-echoing that greet, respectively, the unimaginative scholar and the unseeing solipsist curtail the aesthetic communicativity that is the abiding aim of the ascetic endeavour.

Insofar as the very essence of the ascetic's being is (said here to be) implicated with and dependent upon the aesthetic dimension, so, in turn, is learning of an accordingly altered consequence to him. Because the 'churning up' of potential significations and significances requisite to aesthetic communicativity depends upon, and will attain to a richness commensurable with the resources brought thereto, the ascetic is acutely aware of the necessity to ensure the greatest number and variety of those (potentially) interconnectable 'matrices'. The greater the number and variety of potential significances, the greater the possibilities for further, more comprehensive communicativity; hence the all-encompassing and generously accommodating discipline of the ascetic, whose existential imperative (for a constant and copious connectedness to the aesthetic dimension) necessitates such (extreme) demands. As explained in Chapter One, the ascetic's characteristically acute "sensitiveness" necessarily extends to *all* aspects of existence and experience. To repeat the stereotype-countering contention advanced here, ascesis is *not* an escape from, nor evasion of experience(s), but rather the attempt to maintain to the utmost degree and distinctiveness those very things. To borrow the words of Howard Caygill, whose discussion of what he calls the 'Alexandrian aesthetic' affords a striking encapsulation of both the conventional presumptions about ascetic discipline (which this dissertation has sought both to underscore and address) and a similar suggested line of re-appraisal: ascesis entails 'the liberation *of*, not a liberation *from*' that to which it devotes its attention.¹¹⁹ Such are the resources built up by the ascetic's constant and copious (pursuit of) aesthetic engagement that his example may be said to impart one further noteworthy lesson: that the tragedy of a demise in ascetic discipline, of a failure of nerve in the face of the (obligatory) challenge(s) posed by every aesthetic encounter, is not that we will (as we inexorably will) fail to achieve a contextual-semantic comprehension of various art, artefactual, and other aesthetic objects,¹²⁰ but that we will not (have the resources to) be able to make *anything* of them; nor, consequently, of ourselves.

¹¹⁹ Howard Caygill, 'The Alexandrian aesthetic', in *The New Aestheticism*, p. 104. My italics.

¹²⁰ Though we can of course, and indeed should, as argued here, (continue to) aspire to such understanding(s).

Chapter Four

Although the argument espoused in this dissertation is that the arts are not exclusive carriers of aesthetic communicativity and significance, it is granted that they may serve as a particularly valuable conduit thereof. The striking capacity of the arts collectively to present to the observing individual a seemingly endless multifariousness of (imaginable) experience(s) makes them particularly amenable to the aesthetic endeavour. As the preceding chapter ought to have made apparent, in the service of this endeavour the processes of contextual-semantic, artistic, and aesthetic appreciation are all mutually necessary. The onus of research and learning requisite to an (attempted) contextual-semantic understanding of art and artefactual objects is a responsibility just as crucial to a (potential) aesthetic engagement, as to other kinds of engagement with them. The promise of (what, aesthetically speaking, may be obtained from) an individual's encounter with such objects is proportionate to the resources brought to, as well as the effort(s) expended by the individual in that encounter. An equal degree of informed attentiveness and committed interpretative liberality is indispensable to what might be called an aesthetically adequate artistic engagement. The latter is, therefore, by no means the passive nor necessarily pleasurable pastime that it is often (mis)taken or (mis)represented to be.¹

An impression of just how wonderfully rich but also at times (especially for the disciplined ascetic) overwhelmingly onerous are the responsibilities and demands of the (in the ascetic's case idiosyncratically excessive) aesthetic endeavour is proffered (with specific reference to visual art as aesthetic object) by Brian Sewell. The 'bare bones' of art history, Sewell explains, subtly chastening by that expression those who would claim there not to be anything on those "bones", are 'linear' evolutionary studies, 'the simple first-this-then-that sequence'.² Perusing the collections of the world's great (art) museums and galleries, the subscriber to this 'bare bones' view would accordingly see only something like a sweeping summary of human history. 'With experience,' however, Sewell suggests, some individuals will (or ought to), by whatever path, come to recognise that the history of the world's art 'is far from linear,' that it is often tangled in ways that 'may never be undone'; that it has always been affected by, or implicated with social, political, and environmental forces, with the patronage and propaganda of church and state, with 'theological and philosophical debate', with music, literature, science and the wider currents of (contemporary or later appropriating) cultures.³ Most significant for the argument advanced here, however, is Sewell's concluding comment

¹ There may of course be instances of artistic engagement that do not give rise to aesthetic experience. In such cases the appreciation afforded by the object in question may be considered comparable to, say, the scholar's appreciation of a particular subject. What might be appreciated by one individual merely for its artistic or scholarly merits may for another individual (also) bear aesthetic significance. Likewise, that something might be thought lacking in artistic or scholarly merit(s) will not necessarily have a bearing on its aesthetic potential.

² Brian Sewell, 'Every picture tells a history', *Times Higher Education* no. 2, 102, May 23-29 (2013), p. 37.

³ *Ibid*, p. 38.

that in order to do justice to the task (of engaging with artworks, artefacts, and indeed any potential aesthetic object, experience, or encounter), the individual must (or at least must make every effort to) ‘know almost as much’ about each and every one of these (possible) influences as he does about the artwork or artefact itself.⁴ The artistically and aesthetically engaged individual, properly to have earned that appellation, should (endeavour to) take into his consideration anything and everything of potential pertinence to the particular object, experience, or encounter in his attention. In order adequately to engage with art, Sewell suggests, one must have a sure and encompassing enough informational and interpretative embrace. What is called for is the ‘most inclusive and wide-ranging’ (and hence demanding) of disciplines.⁵ It is and has been the aim of this dissertation to argue that just such a(n extreme) discipline is the imperative (and hence attribute) of the ascetic.

It was briefly stated in Chapter Three (in its discussion of the decontextualisation familiar in the modern (museological) milieu) that some kinds of circumstances may be found more readily to facilitate (the preparatory activities necessary to) aesthetic engagement. Just as there is an inextricable association between the opportunities afforded and the onus obliged by the aesthetic dimension and discipline, so the decontextualisation claimed here to be particularly favourable to that discipline entails an equivalent intensification of those opportunities and obligations. This ought to explain the especial amenability to the ascetic of what to others is (*à la* the anti-museum critique) a cause for concern and complaint. The ascetic has a special dependence upon aesthetic communicativity and significance, the obtaining of which calls for an accordingly constant and copious exercising of his characteristic discipline, which in turn requires (or is at least granted an especially valuable turn by) a set of circumstances particularly favourable to its facilitation. The latter may be afforded by anything that poses a sufficient challenge to the striving for contextual-semantic comprehension and communicative significance (anything that poses a particularly acute challenge thereto will accordingly be of especial value). This is the case with the decontextualisation of artworks and artefacts in the modern (museological) milieu; especially, it would seem, with regard to some objects even more so than others.

The artworks of Hieronymus Bosch are a particularly acute example of both the challenge posed and the onus obliged by the (inevitable) decontextualisation of art and artefactual objects, a fate imposed just as much by the (inexorable) lapsing of time and tradition as by the curatorial practices of (and habits of mind fostered by) modern museology. As is readily apparent from a survey of studies of Bosch’s oeuvre, there is little clue to the contextual-semantic comprehension of the artist’s imagery. In the particular (though by no means exclusive) case of his works, the above-described (inevitable) circumstances appear to be exacerbated by a seemingly deliberate inscrutability invested in the images, filled as they are

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

with ‘obscure wit’ and enigmatic figures (often of confoundingly diverse assemblage),⁶ as well as with iconographic and symbolic elements the keys to which, even if they were at one time intended to be fitted to the imagery, have long since passed out of common understanding as a consequence of the march of time and attenuation of cultural capital. Such inscrutability, while understandably a cause of consternation for those with resolutely scholarly or curatorial concerns, is of course, to repeat the argument advanced in Chapter Three, for the ascetic a most obliging condition.

That observers of Bosch’s art have (often very freely) “obliged” themselves with it is also readily apparent from a survey of the relevant literature. There are few artists whose body of work has given rise to quite such a diversity of attitudes and (often equally compelling, even if considered (by some) to be questionable) interpretations. From the first recorded observations of the artist’s pictures, what seems to have attracted attention thereto, and hence shaped Bosch’s reputation for centuries to come, was their ostensible content. Bosch was the painter *par excellence* of fantastic, frenzied scenes featuring devilish-demonic creatures in hellish settings, all rendered, it was equally noted, in a distinctive style of ‘detailed naturalism’.⁷ During the nineteenth century the latter quality of the artworks’ execution overtook their subject matter as a focus of attention, perhaps, as Virginia Rembert suspects, as ‘a consequence of the realistic impulse’ prevailing in mid-nineteenth-century painting itself, to which contemporaries had begun ‘to look for precursors’.⁸ In the twentieth century focus returned to the artworks’ content, at first with a continued emphasis on the suspected historical-theological sources of or influences upon it, regardless of ‘how novel or even bizarre’ their particular renderings of otherwise conventional Christian subjects.⁹ As in the nineteenth century, however, so in the twentieth interpretative habits followed contemporary trends, and Bosch’s work was duly swept up, in the post-war years, by psychological and psychoanalytical schools of thought, along with other increasingly unconventional and theretofore unconsidered or unheard-of avenues of interpretation. Suspected sources of influence ‘seldom if ever tapped’ before, including ideas from astrology, occult sciences, and gnostic doctrines, were attributed to the artist.¹⁰ Bosch’s pictures were alleged to evidence a devotion to (possibly apocryphal) religious cults, or to indicate a mastery ‘of the arcane lore of alchemy... and other esoterica’.¹¹ They also suffered from various kinds of ahistorical and anachronistic treatments, such as when subjected to psychoanalysis, or when, with equally untoward presumption, they were aligned with the modern surrealist movement.¹² As Irving Zupnick remarks, Bosch’s oeuvre has a habit of luring

⁶ See Irving L. Zupnick, ‘Foreword’ to Dirk Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch: His Picture-Writing Deciphered*, translated by M. A. Bax-Botha (A. A. Balkema, 1979), p. ix.

⁷ See Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 17 and p. 28.

⁸ Ibid, p. 28 and p. 25.

⁹ Rembert (citing the work of Walter S. Gibson), *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Zupnick, ‘Foreword’ to Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. ix.

¹² See *ibid*.

the interpretative efforts of even the most (otherwise) equable observers ‘into mental contortions and ideological acrobatics’.¹³ It seems to be characteristic of the artist’s works at once to confound and yet also to accommodate just about every ventured interpretation, no matter how many are proposed, nor how highly regarded they may (or may not) be, nor how sizeable is the (albeit provisional and still somewhat partial) consensus about one or another of them. Despite the most dedicatedly comprehensive efforts of scholars to try to discover the supposed “key” to the ‘enigma’ of Bosch’s works, as Rembert notes, none has yet been found to provide the much-anticipated clarification, let alone to produce ‘any conclusive results’ as to their (likely) source(s) and signification(s), and there seems still to be (indeed, destined ever to be) ‘much disagreement’ on these questions.¹⁴ In her review of the relevant (scholarly) literature, Rembert observes that some studies (notably Dirk Bax’s) seem to eschew *any* kind of overt analysis or interpretation of the artist’s works, opting instead for what might be described as a careful (and in some cases ambitiously comprehensive) cataloguing and detailed description of them.¹⁵ Others (attempt to) assemble ‘whole libraries’ of supposed source material in their effort to attach the artist’s imagery thereto, and thus to have something relatively demonstrable by means of which to (try to) explain it.¹⁶ Much scholarly effort has been expended searching for Bosch’s supposed sources, on the assumption that, however unconventional or enigmatic his works, they are intended to serve as illustrations of traditional and evidence-supportable subjects, and that ‘with enough study’ the relevant material may ‘be brought to light’ and his imagery made intelligible (regardless of how anathema that very term might (seem to) be both to the artist’s work and, as argued earlier here, to the aesthetic endeavour).¹⁷ Nevertheless, reading all of the admittedly ‘excellent’ studies, as Rembert remarks, ‘one cannot help but wonder... if any have found’ or even come close to finding (anything like) a “solution” to the “riddle” of Bosch’s imagery.¹⁸ Offering an argument greatly agreeable to the one being advanced here, Rembert then suggests that perhaps this is because there never was to be any ‘one answer’, but rather ‘many’ (possible ones).¹⁹ In this way the artist’s works may be said not only to be amenable to, but also themselves to exemplify the ascetic endeavour. They seem, that is, like the ascetic individual, to be especially given over to the obtaining of (ever more, but always mere) *possibilities*. There appears to be no (conceivable) conclusiveness to the interpretation of Bosch’s oeuvre, just as there cannot be, for the ascetic individual, any finality to any experience.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 30, p. 80, and p. 91.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁶ Rembert (quoting Wilhelm Fränger), *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 80.

¹⁷ The quoted words are Rembert’s. *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 31.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 85.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Although every aesthetic encounter necessitates sufficient scope for interpretative freedom, just as much as it obliges a sufficient degree of informed attentiveness, that necessary freedom, as stipulated in Chapter Three, is not (to be (mis)regarded as) a license to, as it were, make everything say anything. As Bax cautions, highlighting the (extra) care that must be taken when considering especially enigmatic artworks like Bosch's, too many observers 'pounce on' the mysteriousness of such works 'and without much study' attach to, or project onto them all kinds of ideas and views seemingly of their own invention.²⁰ Rembert, too, stresses the inappropriateness of such "laissez-faire" approaches, however much the artworks in question might themselves seem to invite it. Quoting Aldous Huxley (who in his case was writing about the art of Francisco Goya, but whose words resonate equally with regard to that of Bosch), Rembert writes that there is quite evidently more to such images 'than meets the eye', but what that "more" might be is a question upon which commentators 'have spent a great deal of ingenuity – spent it, one may suspect, in vain.'²¹ In order to do justice both to the object in question and to the (potential) aesthetic experience of the observing individual, the encounter with such artworks must entail, on both accounts, 'a delicate balance of... firmness and flexibility.'²² One ought, in other words, neither to sanction subjectivity nor (to attempt) a slavish adherence to the ostensibly applicable contextual-semantic evidence. The aesthetic dimension calls for a mutually beneficial, but also mutually corrective dynamic between informed attentiveness and the freedom of the individual to find (in) a particular object (something) that affords him significance.

The challenge posed to the individual to grant comprehensive consideration to every possibility that may be suggested by the object(s) of his attention (in order thus to do justice to the aesthetic endeavour) reaches new extremes in the case of an artistic oeuvre like Bosch's. Once again this underscores the especial value of such imagery for the ascetic(ally-inclined individual). Just how demanding is the requisite discipline, just how much must be taken into consideration in order to do justice to the (aesthetic potential of such) artwork is suggested by Zupnick in his foreword to Bax's monograph on Bosch. One ought to attend, Zupnick commences his inventory, to the works of artistic contemporaries and precursors, which could (and in many cases have already been claimed to) have contributed to Bosch's 'repertory of visual images'.²³ This would (or should) encompass the work not just of other painters, but also of sculptors, illuminators and printmakers, right up to the manufacturers of 'obscure popular prints and broadsides'.²⁴ Not only do Bosch's pictures suggest possible references to other (visual) artworks, but there is also the possible 'influence of late medieval drama', of 'costuming and stage directions', of the 'verses of the Rhetoricians and other poets', and of

²⁰ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 375.

²¹ Rembert (quoting Huxley), *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 105.

²² Elgin, 'Art and Education', p. 329.

²³ Zupnick, 'Foreword' to Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, pp. ix-x.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

contemporary law and literature.²⁵ One ought, therefore, also to include in one's so-called repertoire of interpretative potential, contemporary 'books of learning', 'religious and moralistic works', theatrical plays, and what remains of any (possibly) relevant 'folk literature' and songs.²⁶ Beyond these sources, Zupnick continues his catalogue, exemplifying thereby the claims made by Sewell for the necessary comprehensiveness of the dedicated art observer's attention, one must also take into consideration (the possible influence of) contemporary states of affairs, including 'popular customs, legal practices, proverbs, [and] local idiomatic expressions', any and all of which may have given shape to the language and broader cultural vocabulary that, one might claim, appears in Bosch's art 'transformed into visual equivalents.'²⁷ There does seem to be, Bax concurs with Zupnick, abundant suggestion of the artist's transposing or transmuting into visual forms 'the living language', from which he appears to have 'borrowed... sayings, word-play and symbolic meanings'.²⁸ Encapsulating the (scope of the) onus obliged on the observer of Bosch's art (and thus offering a more material example of what has heretofore been argued largely in the abstract), Bax remarks that from his own earliest acquaintance with the artist's work, 'it became evident' to him that any approach thereto could be made

only by taking pains to orient oneself in the whole field of the language, literature, folklore and cultural history of the Low Countries, as well as in the extensive area of Western European fine art, and all this over the period of, approximately, 1300-1600.²⁹

Insofar as one's imperative is aesthetic, and not, as is presumably the case with Bax, determinedly scholarly, one should (endeavour to) extend in every regard the scope of one's acquaintance, so to take into consideration, for the sake of potential aesthetic communicativity and significance, anything and everything that has been (even suspectly) made of the objects in one's attention. It cannot be anticipated when, where, and in what way or to what aspects of one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world the aesthetic dimension might communicate; hence the necessarily more accommodating embrace of an aesthetic (as against an artistic or scholarly-curatorial) engagement with art and artefactual objects. By contrast, then, with those of more scholarly-curatorial concerns, for the ascetic there is neither an expectation of, nor aspiration to any conclusiveness with regard to the (attempted) contextual-semantic comprehension of an aesthetic object. Indeed, insofar as such conclusiveness is prohibitive to indefinite possibility, it is perhaps the one and only possibility that the ascetic does not (cannot) entertain. There is, accordingly, no hesitation on his part to take into consideration those (interpretative) possibilities considered by others to be only an encumbrance upon (the anticipation of and

²⁵ Ibid, p. x.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 374.

²⁹ Ibid, p. xv.

striving for) contextual-semantic conclusiveness. All that goes into the ascetic's gathered repertoire is always to the potential (however indefinable) enrichment of (his engagement with, and experience of) the objects that he might encounter.

Even more pertinent to the argument being advanced here (the argument for the necessary comprehensiveness of the ascetic's "repertoire gathering") is Bax's subsequent stipulation (in his case with specific reference to Bosch's art) that in cases '[w]here more than one hypothesis exists' about a particular work, 'it is better to enumerate them all' than to present just 'a single theory' or 'point of view'.³⁰ One ought to give due consideration, Bax congenially recommends, to 'what others [have] thought of' the object in question, adding the even more amenable suggestion that an *overabundance* in such matters is actually 'to be preferred'.³¹ One cannot limit oneself 'to a one-sided approach', Bax insists with an implied criticism of those studies that have interpreted Bosch (too) exclusively according to only one or other suspected source of influence or suggested signification.³² Of some such less accommodating articulations and interpretations of the artist's work, Wilhelm Fränger writes that much of 'the confusion concerning' Bosch's pictures may be attributable to those scholars and commentators who have considered them too constrainedly according to conventional content and criteria, who have considered them 'at best as illustration... as a pictorial representation subordinated to a ready-made idea'.³³ The artist's works, as Rembert observes, are clearly not conformable 'to the traditional reference.'³⁴ Though nominally they are depictions of conventional (in most cases religious) themes and subjects, Bosch's images frequently diverge from 'the letter of the text' and 'break with iconographical tradition'.³⁵ The artist's Lisbon triptych of *The Temptations of Saint Anthony*, which also happens to depict possibly the most (in)famous ascetic individual in a scenario that is perhaps the most prevalent of visual portrayals of his discipline (at least within the western (Christian) tradition), is a good case in point. By following the narrative of the life of Anthony given in the two most commonly referred to written sources thereof, one can discern in the painting parts of the traditional story.³⁶ What may appear at first (to the insufficiently informed or inadequately attentive observer) to be of unaccountable superfluosity to the triptych's nominal subject can, with sufficient study, be attributed some intelligible signification. Thus, for example, Rembert explains the saint's otherwise anomalous and outlandish mid-air appearance at the top of the left panel by pointing out that there is a scene somewhat like this recounted in, and thus accountable for by reference

³⁰ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. xvi.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. xv.

³³ As quoted by Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 91.

³⁴ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 220.

³⁵ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 374.

³⁶ Those sources are Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* and the (other) collection of saints' lives known as the *Vitae Patrum*. See Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 7, p. 8 and p. 13.

to Athanasius's telling of the saint's life.³⁷ The latter, according to Rembert's interpretation, suggests at one point how Anthony, 'carried aloft in spirit' by his pious dedication and prayer, was thence beset upon 'in the air' by various 'loathsome beings'.³⁸ Rembert goes on to remark that even Bosch's infamously enigmatic images can in many cases be 'seen to be organised in a logical' manner.³⁹ It does seem possible to offer some "rationalisations" of the artist's "unconventionality", to propose some pragmatically plausible explanations of the apparent oddities in his images; not, of course, that such attempted rationalisations ever seem to do sufficient justice to them. One can evince the (albeit unusual and often covert) connections between the nominal narrative and the artist's idiosyncratic depiction of it. For example, while Saint Anthony is shown in the Lisbon triptych without the hog that customarily accompanies him (traditionally as a symbol of the gluttony and sensuality that he was said to have conquered), Bosch has, seemingly in the latter's stead, given a pig-snouted face to one of the characters featured just behind the saint in the central panel.⁴⁰

Despite the possibilities for such connection-making between the traditional tellings of Saint Anthony's *vita* and Bosch's depiction thereof, the latter, with its rather 'free handling of' the nominal narrative and its inclusion of many figures seemingly unaccountable for by means of reference to other accounts of the saint's life, nonetheless evidently deviates significantly from the conventional 'relation of events'.⁴¹ Even before opening the outer panels of the triptych, as Rembert observes, there are already hints as to the unconventionality of the artist's presentation of his chosen subjects. The grisaille images on the triptych's exterior, which depict the ostensibly familiar, straightforward stories of *The Arrest of Christ* and *Christ Carrying the Cross*, are distinctively 'unorthodox in setting' and the assembled 'accoutrements... are not those of any traditional precedence.'⁴² Rembert notes specifically the 'chalice elevated upon a hillock' in *The Arrest*, and the rat hanging 'suspended upside-down from a tree' in the background of *Christ Carrying the Cross*, as well as the human and animal bones scattered in the foreground of both pictures.⁴³ Such (seeming) superfluties could, Rembert acknowledges in a nod to the frequently insurmountable enigma of Bosch's imagery, be 'cryptic symbols', as indeed they are often, with agonising ambiguity, assumed to be (hence, as described above, the futile efforts of scholars to find the "key" to their anticipated unlocking).⁴⁴ It is also possible, however, Rembert proposes with an agreeable pragmatism, that their presence in the picture 'is

³⁷ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 242.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 247.

⁴⁰ The one clad in black, and carrying a lute. Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 207.

⁴¹ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 13.

⁴² Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 195 and p. 203.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

merely to suggest the desolation of the settings.⁴⁵ In a similar fashion, the ‘burning village in the background’ of the interior centre panel, though it may be (taken to be) merely atmospheric, may also be explicable as a reference to the Fire traditionally associated with Saint Anthony (so named for the monks of his order who treated sufferers of the disease (later identified as ergotism)).⁴⁶ In other words, the artist might not necessarily have eschewed entirely the various traditional accoutrements of his subjects. He appears merely to have rendered them more creatively (and cryptically) than is conventionally the case.

Such efforts towards a rationalisable or evidence-supportable explanation of the Lisbon triptych have also been made by those observers who, though still in apparent pursuit of a contextual-semantic comprehension of Bosch’s work, consider it in the light of less traditional or conventional sources of information (that is, those sources farther afield than the more-or-less canonical tellings and interpretations of Anthony’s *vita*). Thus it is that by reading the images, as do several scholars, in the light of alchemical lore, one may find some unusually novel but nonetheless seemingly rationalisable explications of what would otherwise remain utterly inscrutable. One repeatedly cited justification of the imagery in this regard is its purported employment of the device of rendering literally something otherwise abstract. For example, the designation of the degree at which mercury heats, given in alchemical symbolism as ‘the belly of a horse’, is cited as an explanation for the otherwise incongruous image, in the centre panel, of the horse torso ‘transformed into the vessel in which mercury and sulphur were conjoined.’⁴⁷ Similarly, the alchemical association of ‘any hollow place’ with ‘the matrix of the alchemist’s furnace’ is proposed as an explanation for the figure at the far right of the centre panel, formed by what looks like a portion of a tree trunk with a human face peering out from its hollow.⁴⁸ That an ‘egg-shaped child’ (the alchemical Philosopher’s Stone) appears to be emerging from (in other words, produced by) the hollow, and is cradled in the tree-figure’s arm (and that another appears in the water just below) is cited as further support for this reading.⁴⁹ That the tree-person figure seems to be ‘seated in a sieve’ or some other kind of ‘vessel’ also makes it associable, according to such interpretations, with the instruments used in the alchemist’s ‘Great Work’.⁵⁰ That what looks like its lower body appears to be comprised of ‘a scaly tail’ could also represent ‘the alchemical process’, which, as Rembert explains, is ‘sometimes denoted by the zodiacal sign of Pisces.’⁵¹ Alternatively, Laurinda Dixon notes the tree-like figure’s very marked resemblance to the mandrake plant, which was employed as a curative for ergotism (St

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 215.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 220.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Anthony's Fire).⁵² As well as being added to various elixirs, mandrake roots, with their curious forked shape (resembling two human limbs), were commonly given even more human-like form by being dried and twisted into 'small doll-like figures' that were then 'carried as talismans' against the disease.⁵³ Bosch's curiously 'composite creature' convincingly displays 'the tendrils and woody texture' of these 'mandrake dolls'.⁵⁴ Dixon also offers a related explanation for the lower, fishtail half of this hybrid figure. Cold fish was one among several substances rated highly for their cooling properties and thus recommended by early physicians for the counteracting of illnesses considered to be caused by heat, as in the (extreme) case of the 'Fire' of ergotism.⁵⁵ Also among these were, of course, water and ice, which also appear throughout Bosch's triptych, whether in liquid form (as in the centre and right panels), or frozen (as indicated in the bottom of the left panel by the character on skates).⁵⁶ Dixon therefore takes this otherwise inexplicable mandrake-fishtail figure effectively to suggest an amalgam of two commonly employed remedies against St Anthony's Fire.⁵⁷

For a most representative illustration of the apparent '*modus operandi*' in Bosch's image, Rembert draws attention to the triptych's "riding demons", especially the 'thistle-headed, winged knight-falconer' sitting astride the 'jug-bellied horse' just next to the tree-person figure.⁵⁸ Rembert explains that this character, with his 'hunting horn and hooded bird on wrist', is evocative of the falconer, but that this signification is con-fused, by means of the addition of his armour, with the image of the (Tarot) knight.⁵⁹ As to the anatomically-confounding attachment of wings where this character's arms ought to be, Rembert suggests, in an apparent concession to the evident (and characteristically Boschian) equivocation between symbolic signification and imaginative indulgence, that what could be but a 'burst of fancy,' could also, if a more indicative explanation is sought, be taken to signify, in this case, the sanguine temperament of which 'the falconer was sometimes emblematic'.⁶⁰ Traditionally associated, in humoralism, with the element of air, the sanguine temperament was often signified by a falconer, sometimes depicted literally "in his element", that is, 'amidst clouds and stars'.⁶¹ In the unorthodox and far more subtle mode of signification typical of Bosch's work, however, the Lisbon falconer figure, rather than being depicted literally in the air, instead bears the *suggestion* of such a signification by his having a pair of wings outstretched as if in flight.⁶² Like just about everything in Bosch's image, this peculiar character cannot, Rembert submits,

⁵² Laurinda Dixon, *Bosch* (Phaidon, 2003), p. 185.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 188.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 185.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 188.

⁵⁸ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 215 and p. 217.

⁵⁹ See *ibid*, p. 217.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

‘be considered as an autonomous symbol of a detachable idea’, but rather appears to be a concoction ‘of many associated ideas’.⁶³ Speaking elsewhere of the various component images that populate the artist’s works, Rembert remarks that ‘[t]here is not one... that could be said to come entirely from any single source’; instead, Bosch’s pictures appear to be a collection of incorporations ‘from numerous sources’, and often a ‘hybridisation’ and/or ‘flamboyant elaboration’ thereof.⁶⁴ It is in this generous accommodation, thorough assimilation, and imaginative (even if sometimes seemingly arbitrary) (re-)utilisation of a rich repertoire of *potential* significations and significances, that the artist’s works may be said to be at once of especial value *to*, and exemplary *of* the ascetic endeavour.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the confounding (or, to the ascetic, congenial) diversity in interpretations of Bosch’s works may be symptomatic, at least in part, of the seemingly deliberate inscrutability or opacity that appears to be invested in so much of the artist’s output. Once again this is what makes the images so amenable to the ascetic’s endeavour. They are, to re-deploy that useful expression of Koestler’s, quite “ripe” for (the possibilities of) aesthetic communicativity and significance. To repeat the pertinent point, the more that something (potentially) “says” to us, the more it may (potentially) “speak” to us; and few artistic oeuvres have been taken to have (or have been given) quite so many “voices” as Bosch’s. That this (potential) “multivocality” may be endemic in the imagery itself is suggested by their manifesting just those features that Koestler identified as conducive to the facilitation of the (aesthetically) important “bisociative click”. There is evidence aplenty in Bosch’s works of similarities and affinities ‘detached from meaning’ and (familiar) function; of the ‘unearthing of hidden analogies’, the making of ‘links’ that in other contexts would not be made, and the ‘condensation’ in one link-idea or -image ‘of several associative contexts’; of ‘the use of concrete images’ to stand for the ‘nascent’ and unverbalisable, and the ‘double identity’ of something being both one thing and yet ‘something else at the same time’ (even to the extent of animal-vegetable-mineral cross-fertilisation).⁶⁵ Bosch’s images, in other words, afford an equivocally rich variety of potential significations. As already described, the various elements within each work can appear confusing, confounding and ambiguous, even where (or perhaps even more so where) the ostensible subject is (otherwise) straightforwardly traditional. Bax observes, for example, that many of the suggestions (as they have frequently been interpreted) of (serious) censoriousness (against the Church or against mankind) in Bosch’s images appear

⁶³ Ibid, p. 220.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 121 and p. 117.

⁶⁵ Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 179. The Lisbon triptych affords some particularly potent examples of the latter. Indeed, alongside its being a particularly notable portrayal of that most (in)famous exemplar of (Christian) asceticism (Saint Anthony), it is also a rather representative example of the kind of depiction that, with its evocation of the characteristics of the Grotesque *and* its ambivalent (that is, cognitively-dissonant) register, might serve as a particularly effective embodiment of what was argued for in Chapter Two with regard to the grotesque.

just as convincingly to have ‘a touch of the comic’ about them.⁶⁶ The troublesome equivocality in the artist’s works is particularly acute as regards their depictions of the clergy, the many ‘shocking allusions’ to which could be read (with equal conviction (or lack thereof)) either as condemnations or else as cautions ‘that the Devil can masquerade in clerical clothing.’⁶⁷

All these images that might, by virtue of their confounding divergence from traditional or conventional standards of depiction, be a source of consternation for some individuals (those seeking contextual-semantic comprehension), are for the ascetic’s aesthetic endeavour a wonderfully obliging challenge. That an artwork should make (even if only nominal or suggestive) reference to a subject is, so to speak, grist to the mill of the ascetic’s gathering of potential references, resonances, significations and significances. Such images and objects as those described above, like the ascesis that they both serve and exemplify, do not just demand but even seem to solicit a (much-)more-than-one-sided approach. Everything must, at least at the outset, be taken into consideration. Of course, one ought not in any case to ignore what may be ascertained about or affiliated with a particular artwork or artefact, nor can one afford to disrespect the disciplined constraints that these inevitably impose upon what would otherwise be a too ignorant or inattentive interpretation. There will always be some constraints upon our interpretative freedom; perhaps more so in some cases, as with the relatively institutionally circumscribed arts of the pre-modern era (with regard to which, for example, it would be difficult (if not daft) to do without any acquaintance with Judaeo-Christian traditions). Such constraints, however, far from being a limitation upon an individual’s artistic and aesthetic appreciation, are, as was argued earlier here, fundamental to them; they bear the potential to *increase* and *enrich* the possibilities for aesthetic communicativity and significance. They are part and parcel of the mutually informative and mutually corrective dynamic that constitutes the aesthetic endeavour; that is, the dynamic *between* the “empirical” demands of the artistic or aesthetic object, and the necessary discovery by the individual of that object’s aesthetic significance (to him). At the same time, therefore, that the “empirical” aspects of a particular artwork or artefact must be taken into consideration, these ought not (to be allowed) to exercise *too* proscriptive an influence upon the individual’s “freedom” (potentially) to find for himself some (possible) communicativity in the object of his attention. One ought, that is, to allow for a degree of separability between the suspected “empirically”-justified (e.g. moral, spiritual, cultural or intellectual) significations in or of a (potential) aesthetic object, and the (idiosyncratic) significance that the same object might have for an individual. As maintained early in Chapter Three, despite the vital importance to artistic and aesthetic engagement and experience of (an effort towards) contextual-semantic understanding, such (attempted) understanding is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition, as highlighted by the fact that one may, in the absence thereof, still have what might be called a “legitimate” (if perhaps of

⁶⁶ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 372.

⁶⁷ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 241.

lesser quality) aesthetic encounter. That one happens to know little about the history or iconography of an object will not necessarily prevent it from affording the communicativity requisite to aesthetic engagement, nor will the historical-contextual or iconographical object-knowledge to which one does lay claim necessarily have a definitive bearing on one's aesthetic encounters and experiences. The obtaining of aesthetic significance may be *nondependent* on any construal of meaning; hence the appellation given here to those "meaning-less significances" of the aesthetic dimension. As Rembert discusses, in implied objection to some overly meaning-subservient studies of Bosch, to speak of meaning is to imply 'an idea or association' against which an artwork or some such object is to be 'judged', to which it is expected to conform.⁶⁸ That an individual should remain thus concerned, however, (i.e., more with external meaning than or at the expense of the (aesthetic) object or encounter itself, and its significance to the individual in question) is anathema to aesthetic appreciation. Though instrumental *to* (the maximising of the potential for) aesthetic communicativity, (the pursuit of) intelligible meaning ultimately has no necessary sway *within* the aesthetic dimension.

Like Bosch's pictures, with which they share many traits, the artworks of Aubrey Beardsley are another particularly acute example of the challenge posed and the onus obliged by the (inevitable) decontextualisation of art and artefactual objects in the modern (museological) milieu. The dynamic discerned in the older artist's images, that of following with a significant degree of freedom the textual and visual traditions of their nominal subjects, is also a characteristic of Beardsley's prints and drawings, many of which take the form of book illustration. Unlike those (more commonly encountered) kinds of illustration that are either faithful to their nominated text or that 'diverge from the text but are faithful to its general spirit', Beardsley's images, as Milly Heyd observes, are 'never faithful to the text'; they rather 'compete with' it, 'creating two realms of reference', one the writer's and the other the illustrator's.⁶⁹ More subversive than those other, more obliging types of illustration, and perhaps even more divergent from tradition and convention than Bosch's pictures, Beardsley's artworks challenge (sometimes even to the point of suggestive competition with) the texts to which they are nevertheless inextricably bound by title and type.⁷⁰ That Beardsley's images, like Bosch's, go beyond a mere representation of their ostensible subjects or stories to assume a significant autonomy is of course part of both their challenge to, but also (perhaps because of that challenge) their especial value to the ascetic.

While the clues to a contextual-semantic comprehension of Beardsley's works might, by virtue of chronological and cultural proximity, be (considered to be) more substantial than in

⁶⁸ Rembert (quoting Fränger), *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Heyd cites here as an instructive example the artist's 'Siegfried' (Pen, ink and wash, 1892-3 (Victoria and Albert Museum)), which seems to bear little more than a titular relation to the legendary character. *Aubrey Beardsley: Symbol, Mask and Self-Irony* (Peter Lang, 1986), p. 13 and pp. 6-7.

⁷⁰ See Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 13.

the case of an artist like Bosch, any presumed “advantage” in this regard is counterweighted by the seemingly more determined inscrutability about his images. The words that Bax employs to describe Bosch’s pictures are, therefore, perhaps even more fitting to Beardsley’s: the entertaining of ‘artifice’; the piling of ‘motif upon motif’; the figuring of frequently ‘unusual’ and ‘bizarre’ forms, full of suggestive symbolism; and the combination, conflation, or confounding ‘of the comic, the symbolic, the sensual and the diabolic’,⁷¹ or, in Beardsley’s case specifically, of the (suggestively) unrefined with the extravagantly (over)refined. All such features work together to render everything about the artists’ imagery habitually ‘equivocal’.⁷² It seems to be possible (if not most appropriate) to regard Beardsley’s pictures, like Bosch’s, as entertaining different, indeed often perplexingly contradictory interpretative possibilities. The pluralistic potential in the artist’s oeuvre is exemplified perhaps most instructively by the two completely divergent moralistic interpretations to which his work has (stereo)typically been subject. Despite the manifest, indeed frequently overwhelming ornamentalism of the artist’s imagery, the most marked interpretative tendency of observers has been to approach it ‘in moral terms’.⁷³ Most commonly this has taken the form of a denunciation of the ‘evil’ that is deemed to be depicted in Beardsley’s art; hence the call made by a particularly damning reviewer in the *Westminster Gazette* in 1894 ‘for a constitutional ban on’ the artist’s works.⁷⁴ Even if such a call ‘need not be taken literally’, as Heyd comments, highlighting the now ‘attractively archaic sound’ of the reviewer’s remarks, the latter’s words nevertheless convey a sense of the ‘disgust and revulsion’ that Beardsley’s images sometimes provoke, and the degree of ‘intensity of opposition’ to which they have at times been subject.⁷⁵ On the other hand, and apparently in attempts directly to offset the aforementioned view of the artist’s works as moral monstrosities (and thus to ‘rehabilitate’ their ‘reputation’), other observers have commended Beardsley’s images for their perceived ‘satirical... condemnation of society’.⁷⁶ In other words, such appraisers appear to have endeavoured ‘to clear’ the artworks of accusation by turning that accusation ‘upside down’.⁷⁷ One group’s moral monstrosities, it seems, are another’s satire of ‘social vice’.⁷⁸

Insofar as the argument here is concerned, what is most important to note about Beardsley’s oeuvre, and the dichotomous interpretations thereof, is the facility with which the

⁷¹ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 374.

⁷² See Ian Fletcher, ‘A Grammar of Monsters: Beardsley’s Obsessive Images and their Sources’, *English Literature in Transition 1180-1920* vol. 30, no. 1 (1987), p. 143.

⁷³ Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Heyd notes that this reviewer was so appalled by the artist’s works that he did not even deign to apply to them any terms like ‘work of art’ or even ‘drawing’, but rather refers to them by means of the blatantly ‘derogatory appellation “thing”’. Ibid, p. 3 and p. 1.

⁷⁵ Heyd also notes in the critical literature the frequently ‘fastidious refusal to ascribe’ (even accidentally) any ‘complimentary terms’ to the artist’s work. *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 4 and p. 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

⁷⁸ See *ibid*, p. 4.

artist's works, again like Bosch's, appear readily to accommodate or support (even to invite or solicit) both moralistic views, as well as many other (possible) readings. Both artists' images deftly defy the seemingly impossible entertainment of two (or more) contrary interpretations; though in the case of Beardsley's more so than Bosch's, the works seem much more to provoke or demand rather than merely prompt or invite such (contextual-semantic) perplexities (or what would, to the ascetic, be rather great (aesthetic) potentialities). Once again, the characteristics that Koestler cites as being of such 'great value' to the 'forging' of (aesthetically lucrative) 'new combinations', as being especially favourable to the facilitating of that (aesthetically essential) 'bisociative click', may be found in the works of these artists.⁷⁹ They include an (apparent) 'indifference... to convention and common sense', and the (apparent) 'illogicality and... naïveté of visual associations'.⁸⁰ Echoing Bax's comments about Bosch, Ian Fletcher observes of Beardsley's images that in them one often finds, both in 'theme and iconography', a suggestion that 'serious matters' are being 'treated flippantly' and the 'trivial seriously'.⁸¹ 'Familiar objects', Fletcher elaborates on the challenges posed by such equivocation, are 'defamiliarised' and no sooner 'responded to, than defamiliarised again'.⁸² The ensuing 'dialectical' dynamic, he describes, seems to issue not in any 'sort of synthesis, but rather in a hanging paradox'.⁸³ Heyd, too, notes in Beardsley's works what she describes, incorporating the words of Thomas Carlyle, as an irony-infused interplay between 'concealment and... revelation', the latter never being 'explicit and unambiguous'.⁸⁴ It is just this kind of ambiguity, said here to be epitomised in the work of artists like Beardsley and Bosch, that is particularly lucrative in terms of (aesthetically) communicative potential. All the qualities attributed here to these artworks are what make them both of especial (aesthetic) value *to*, and an exemplification *of* the ascetic endeavour; that is, their superlative capacity for the entertaining of *possibilities*, and, hence, their amenability to the obtaining of aesthetic communicativity and significance.

One explanation as to how Beardsley's work is able so effectively to entertain such divergent readings is that the images' ambivalence or equivocation is only *deceptively* moralistic and/or satirical. Irony, as Heyd clarifies, functions satirically only 'where there are two rival groups or attitudes: the just and the condemned' and one side is suggested to emerge victorious.⁸⁵ There do not appear, however, to be any such triumphal confrontations between alternative value systems discernibly staged in Beardsley's works.⁸⁶ What the latter display, Heyd proposes, is rather 'the irony of the puppet-master'.⁸⁷ The images themselves do not

⁷⁹ See Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 181.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Fletcher, 'A Grammar of Monsters', p. 143.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 13.

overtly articulate anything ironical, but their characters and compositions are arranged in a way that renders them open to multiple possibilities for interpretation (and, in likely turn, the subsequent (self-perpetuating) frustration thereof).⁸⁸ Thus Arthur Symons writes of Beardsley that he was ‘a satirist of an age without convictions’; he depicted ‘hell’ as did Baudelaire: ‘without pointing for contrast to any... paradise.’⁸⁹

Given the ambivalence about the artist’s works, it is not surprising to find that some observers approach them not by presuming one or other moral or meaning-full position, but rather by doing (or attempting so to do) without one altogether.⁹⁰ It is important to note once again that the artworks seem just as accommodating of this option as they do of any other. One such meaning-less or morally neutral position is the ‘formalistic’ approach of those who focus more or less exclusively on the artworks’ distinctively inventive designs.⁹¹ Such an approach is readily sustained by the artworks, with their apparent disregard for any (intelligible) ‘meaning’ in or of their nominally represented scenes, and their devotedness instead to a ‘display of intricate draughtsmanship’ and sophisticatedly ornate artistry.⁹² Heyd maintains, however, that a (too exclusively) formalistic approach is just as reproachable as a meaning-subservient one; both are irresponsibly circumscribed.⁹³ Her argument is amenable to the one advanced earlier here for the importance to both artistic and aesthetic appreciation of (an effort towards) contextual-semantic comprehension. ‘Detailed iconographical study’, Heyd recommends with regard to Beardsley’s images, suggests that the latter’s themes and content cannot be so readily disregarded; a ‘purely formalistic approach’, she insists, ‘cannot be sustained.’⁹⁴ Though there is a manifest ‘superficiality’ and ‘exteriority’ about much of Beardsley’s art, the latter is far from being a matter of mere ornamentation.⁹⁵ Though it is easy to imagine an absence of any direct relation between a particular work’s subject matter and its manner of depiction, this ought not to signal that the nominal subject is ‘not significant’, and that the observer is absolved of the onus of informed attentiveness thereto and (attempted) acquaintance therewith.⁹⁶ The artist’s designs, Heyd urges, taking issue with what she calls ‘the fallacy of the formalistic view’, ‘should not mislead us’ in our engagement with them, for both in and beyond their two-dimensional display of figures, objects and environments ‘lies a rich world of’ potential references, resonances, and significations (and, hence, potential (aesthetic) communicativity and significance).⁹⁷ Indeed, too

⁸⁸ See *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Arthur Symons, *Aubrey Beardsley*, as quoted in Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 4.

⁹⁰ See Heyd (citing the work of George Twose), *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 6.

⁹¹ See Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 3 and p. 6.

⁹² Heyd cites as a notably instructive example of such ‘formalistic’ approaches Nikolaus Pevsner’s interpretation of the artist’s earlier-mentioned ‘Siegfried’ illustration. See her discussion of Pevsner’s *Pioneers of Modern Design* in *Aubrey Beardsley*, pp. 6-7.

⁹³ See Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 7 and p. 8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 9.

severe a swing in either direction (towards meaning and moralism or towards formalism) seems to make for too limited an approach. The corrective is, of course, the all-encompassing accommodativeness said here to be exemplified by the ascetic. With their challenging openness to potential significations and significances, their cultivation, indeed solicitation of that crucial dynamic between responsible learnedness and interpretative creativity, the works of artists like Bosch and Beardsley are particularly, exemplarily obliging to the ascetic's aesthetic disposition.

It is perhaps worth reiterating at this point the important if subtle terminological distinction drawn in Chapter One between the prioritising of the aesthetic by the ascetic, and the 'aestheticising view' of the aesthete. The latter, with its subordination of substance to style, its inclination towards artifice, decorativeness, 'theatricality' and 'extravagance',⁹⁸ is to be distinguished from the ascetic's aesthetic view, which, as here accounted for, encompasses both (indeed everything) in the service of maximal communicativity and significance. To repeat the analogy given in Chapter One, the difference is that between the attempt to force everything into the (artificial) frame of art, and to see things as though they always already occupied such a frame. That Beardsley's work is (more) exemplary of the ascetic type (not, as is typically claimed, the aesthete's) is suggested by Heyd's observation that much of the experience conveyed in the artist's images seems to have come already at "second hand", via the 'secondary sources' of literature, theatre, opera, and the visual arts.⁹⁹ The ascetic endeavour, it may be recalled, was explained (in Chapter One) in almost analogous terms; that is, as an aspiration always only to experience things at "second hand", to entertain but never to identify with, to see but not to be. Once again, it ought to be apparent how it is that Beardsley's works may be both amenable to, and serve as an exemplification of the ascetic's endeavour. What is offered by, and what the ascetic especially values in the aesthetic dimension is that it should (continue ever to) *present* to him experiences that *speak to* his (sense of) self, but that do not (necessarily) become a(n indelible) part thereof, that do not (necessarily) become identified or identifiable therewith. The ascetic endeavours not to exclude or escape from existence or experience (he is both unable thus to escape, given his hypersensitivity, as well as uninclined thereto, given their vital potential for nourishing his excessive aesthetic demand). He cannot afford to dispense with the aesthetically communicative capacity of (exposure to) a variety of experience(s). At the same time, however, he cannot countenance becoming identified therewith. The point of distinction in the nature of his engagement is that he endeavours always (only) to entertain (all) things aesthetically. Experience for the ascetic must remain ever only a prospect or possibility, as anything else would constitute a (to him uncountenanceable) regression of or from the aesthetic dimension. There can never be (felt to be) any enactment of, and consequent measure of indelible identification with (a particular) experience, and this is precisely what is offered to him so effectively by, and (hence) is so valued in the aesthetic

⁹⁸ See Heyd's discussion of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*, in *ibid*, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Heyd, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 14.

dimension. (Ever-present) possibility, not (indelible) identity, as exemplified in the (in)famously ambiguous work of artists like Bosch and Beardsley, is the guiding criterion.

This peculiarity of ascetic being is indeed evoked in an observation made of Beardsley's images, which Chris Snodgrass describes as doing whatever (it is) they (may be said to) do 'mysteriously, creating an odd... "eternal suggestiveness" that... expresses intensity while "denying all final formulation"'.¹⁰⁰ Just about the same could be said of Bosch's art, and also of the ascetic. It is, to repeat the relevant point, the 'final and definitive', 'the dead end of possibility' (that which is so suggestively skirted in both Bosch's and Beardsley's images) that the ascetic 'regards with suspicion' and ever seeks to elude.¹⁰¹ There is also a suggestive passage in Harpham's study of the *Ascetic Imperative* where the author, upon discussing Bosch's Lisbon *Temptation*, draws a link between what he describes as the 'interplay of form and formlessness in the ascetic's longing' with (what he thereby seems to imply becomes embodied in) the artist's composition.¹⁰² The latter, Harpham captures the image's eloquent incongruities, is 'filled with containers that do not contain, bodies that do not cohere, forms that do not exclude', its 'metamorphosing' features invoking 'a principle of limitlessness and freedom'.¹⁰³ Just as Bosch's composition is described by Harpham to be filled with forms that refuse (with seemingly limitless freedom) to contain, cohere, or exclude, so Beardsley's graphic work is described by Snodgrass as rendering a world that is not cohesive, authoritative or 'logocentric', but rather 'paradoxical'.¹⁰⁴ With regard to both artists' works, the viewer is, as it were, 'thrust into a world without closure'.¹⁰⁵

Such descriptions of the aesthetic dynamic both at play in, and encouraged by an engagement with the works of these artists also resonate with Harpham's (attempted) encapsulation of the ascetic dynamic, which is suggested always to encompass both (indeed all) sides of everything to which it gives its attention 'without any sense of a disabling contradiction.'¹⁰⁶ 'Characteristically,' Harpham writes, 'asceticism engages an issue... and articulates an opposition within which dialogue and dialectic can occur; but it leaves the issue unsettled by privileging both sides.'¹⁰⁷ Just about the same could be said of Bosch's and Beardsley's works. What was described earlier here as the keenly observant comprehensiveness of the ascetic in his significance-seeking endeavour is suggested by Harpham to be such an individual's particular adeptness (whether by nature or disciplined nurture) at entertaining an

¹⁰⁰ Chris Snodgrass (quoting Derek Stanford), *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 200.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter One, footnote 178.

¹⁰² Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 57.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 59 and p. 57.

¹⁰⁴ Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

all-encompassing ‘perspective’.¹⁰⁸ To paraphrase Harpham, all coexists in the spacious potential of the aesthetic dimension, which ‘does not settle oppositions’ so much as it accumulates, accommodates and assimilates them.¹⁰⁹ Once again, something similar could be said of Bosch’s and Beardsley’s images. There are also in the works of these artists evocations of that apparently incongruous mix of “rejoicings in” with (severe) “restrictions of” described in Part One to be characteristic of the ascetic. Thus Bax finds in Bosch’s works an intimated simultaneity of circumspection about certain subjects ‘coupled with strong interest in’ those subjects; it is difficult, he notes, to sort the artist’s apparent savouring of the latter’s ‘picturesqueness’ in ‘appearance and behaviour’ from the sometimes equally strongly suggested condemnation thereof.¹¹⁰ Bax also identifies in Bosch’s art another characteristic that accords with that ascribed here to the ascetic individual; namely, the especial acuity particular to him (whether as cause or consequence of his compulsive discipline), and his exemplary capacity to attend to the concomitant responsibilities of informed attentiveness and imaginative effort requisite to the aesthetic challenge. Thus Bax describes of the artist’s images that they evince both a keen-eyed observation and a capacity to charge with significance the results thereof.¹¹¹ The artist’s works, in other words, are once again both of especial value *to*, and exemplary *of* the (ascetic’s) aesthetic endeavour. Something of the essence of the endeavour ascribed here to the ascetic is captured also in the words that Snodgrass employs with reference to Beardsley’s art, the ‘implicit strategy’ of which is said to be ‘to redefine life inclusively as a rich banquet of plentifully meaningful, if ambiguous, possibilities’.¹¹²

As already suggested in Chapter Three, the ascetic has an unusual ability to do without man’s proverbial need for meaning. To borrow an expression from Richard Lanham, who in his case is writing about the practice of literary rhetoric, the ascetic’s imperative and discipline habituates him ‘to a world of... plural orchestration’, of what the non-ascetic individual might take to be ‘a world of... perpetual cognitive dissonance’.¹¹³ The ascetic, like Lanham’s rhetorical individual (but unlike the non-ascetic individual), does not ‘repine... because his world [thus] possesses no centre’;¹¹⁴ quite the opposite. What may be for the non-ascetic individual a lamentable deficit is for the ascetic a circumstance of boundless potential. In his all-encompassing aesthetic-existential accommodations (extending even to what others take to be the most cognitively-dissonant of phenomena (embodied by the grotesque)), the ascetic (unlike the anti-museum critic) has no cause for consternation about such things as decontextualisation,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 200.

¹¹⁰ Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, p. 371.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

¹¹² Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 5.

¹¹³ Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (Yale University Press, 1976), p. 6 and p. 7.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

for he who has recourse to the aesthetic dimension is never ‘without resource’,¹¹⁵ and this (ideally) is the ascetic’s perpetual condition. The prospect of an ever-unresolved (and unresolvable) dialectic between alternative possibilities, which may in many cases (as in that of the scholar or curator) be cause for frustration and unease, is for the ascetic, given its lucrative potential for the affording of aesthetic communicativity, rather most enticing. In every aspect of his existence, as may also be said of Bosch’s and Beardsley’s art, plurality of orchestration appears to be the abiding value. It is, in other words, the ‘equivocal interpretation’ to which both artists’ oeuvres so exemplarily lend themselves that grants them their especial value to the ascetic-aesthetic endeavour.¹¹⁶ The more that something (potentially) “says” to an individual, the more it may “speak” to him; that is, the greater the scope for *potential* communicativity and significance in a particular aesthetic object or encounter, the greater its aesthetic value. The generously accommodating hyper-attentiveness of the ascetic is, therefore, especially well served by the works of artists like Bosch and Beardsley. The latter are ‘rich fields’ for the ‘stimulating’ of (alternative) significations and associations, potentially ‘without closure’.¹¹⁷ As such, they are exemplary aesthetic objects. Their superlative potential for both accommodating and encouraging aesthetic communicativity and significance renders them, and objects, experiences, or encounters like them, of unique value to the ascetic, whose very being and existence depends so crucially upon such communicativity.

What, for the non-ascetic individual, is at issue in such “unresolvable” artworks is the kind of cognitive dissonance discussed in Chapter Two as being characteristic of the grotesque (and (potentially) unbearable to all but the ascetic). One is, by such images, both fascinated and unsettled. While they may not necessarily be agreeable, neither are they entirely disagreeable. Their features are not so ‘regular’ or familiar that they slot ‘easily into our categories’ (both artists’ works depict otherwise traditional subject matter in a highly unconventional manner), but neither are they ‘so unprecedented that we do not recognise them at all’ (despite their unconventionality their nominal subjects remain identifiable).¹¹⁸ To paraphrase Kayser’s comment regarding the grotesque, it may just be that we struggle ‘to orient ourselves’ in the face thereof.¹¹⁹ As befits the (thesis advanced in Chapter Two about the) grotesque, such images are (potentially) a challenging, destabilising, subverting confrontation to all but the ascetic’s sense of being-in-the-world. Indeed, given the claims made in Chapter Two regarding the affiliation between the ascetic and the grotesque, it is accordingly suggested here that, alongside the *literal* depiction of asceticism, the ascetic might also find a sense of his being-in-the-world in works that display more exclusively the grotesque or cognitively-dissonant character thereof.

¹¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ The quoted words are from Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Rembert, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation*, p. 118, and Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, p. 40.

¹¹⁸ The quoted words are Harpham’s. *On the Grotesque*, p. 3. See Chapter Two, footnote 72.

¹¹⁹ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 185. See Chapter Two, footnote 73.

There *is*, (partly) to concede the point to critics of asceticism, an apparent (indeed uniquely intimate) alignment between the ascetic and the grotesque. As the reappraisal of both phenomena here has hopefully helped to clarify, however, this alignment is *not* of the unjustifiably pejorative implication by which such an assessment has heretofore been (stereo)typically, indiscriminately made.

There is, however, a little more to be said about just how and why the ascetic's (aesthetic) encounter with the image or embodiment of his own being is an experience of unique value to him. To repeat the crucial points, the ascetic wishes to see but not to be, to entertain but not to enact, and he attains to such experience (exclusively) via the aesthetic dimension. Every facet of existence and experience the ascetic endeavours to entertain always (only) in the aesthetic dimension. Such is the essence of his idiosyncratic imperative and the discipline to which it gives rise. The ascetic aspires always (only) to be spoken to, never to be identified with that which he experiences or encounters. This point is crucial to explaining the especial status and value *of* the (prospect of the) ascetic *for* the ascetic.¹²⁰ While the aesthetic is (in all but this one case) that which speaks *to* the ascetic's sense of (his) being-in-the-world, the latter speaks (*to* him) *of* his sense of his being-in-the-world; that is, it speaks to him of what he (already) is. The especial peculiarity of this *particular* aesthetic experience, in other words, is that it is the only one in which the ascetic, if one can forgive the rather awkward-sounding explanation, effectively experiences his being *being* back at him. To hark back again to the account given in Chapter One, the asceticism discussed in this dissertation is non-instrumental, self-justifying; it is a forgoing of (an) experience for the sake of (that) experience. What, then, is unique about this especial instance of its engagement, of the ascetic's so-to-speak second-order experience (of his own being), is that it is that experience's doubling back on itself. This exceptional encounter, one might encapsulate the distinction, is aesthetic experience speaking *of* aesthetic experience, as opposed to (in all other cases) aesthetic experience speaking of some other experience *aesthetically*.

The prospect presented (to the ascetic) by any *other* aesthetic object, experience, or encounter is that of potentially endless revelations of significance. Everything in the ascetic's ambit, as he is acutely (and sometimes agonisingly) aware, is a potential carrier and conduit of the endless possibilities for aesthetic communicativity. Whereas, generally speaking, every aesthetic prospect is an endlessly open-ended one, to be filled in so many ways, this *particular* one entails an open-endedness that cannot be so filled, or, rather, an open-endedness that is already occupied, by the (pursuit of open-endedness exemplified by the) ascetic's being itself; hence the description of the experience as a "doubling back on itself". To draw on the platitude about communicative abundance, while in both cases the "picture" in question may be said to

¹²⁰ 'The (prospect of the) ascetic' may be taken to refer to anything either (literally) representing or resembling the ascetic dynamic and discipline (e.g., (literal) portraits of ascetic individuals), or that which is (merely) reminiscent thereof, which is felt to bear some relevant, related characteristics or qualities (e.g., the grotesque).

“speak a thousand words”, in the former case (that of endlessly open-ended aesthetic potential) the picture (in affording the opportunity for it to be filled in so many ways) may be said to do so literally. In the latter case (that which speaks of ascetic being), the picture may be said to do so only metaphorically; that is, only insofar as ascetic being-in-the-world exemplifies the endlessly open-ended pursuit of aesthetic communicativity and significance. In the former case the “picture” has (for the ascetic) a thousand potential pertinences and provocations, presents (to him) a thousand potential existences and experiences to be experienced aesthetically. In the latter case no such interminably creative pursuit is possible, and there may be no substitution of a merely aesthetic experience for any other (kind of) experience, because what is pictured or presented is always already more than that. The ascetic cannot merely “see” what he already is, cannot only entertain what he (in the very moment of attempting so to do) already *enacts*.

The ascetic’s encounter with his own (sense of (his)) self is the one exception to the otherwise open-ended dynamic of his discipline, the one special case where something of a stop is put to the piling up of endless possibilities. For such an individual, every encounter with a (potential) aesthetic image or object is, as it were, an invitation for a (potentially) interminable finding of and filling with significance(s); every encounter, that is, except that with (the image of) his own (ascetic) being, for one cannot fill what speaks of the endless filling itself. The open-ended accommodatingness with which the ascetic is compelled to confront everything that he encounters (in order to facilitate a constant and copious supply of (potential) aesthetic communicativity) ends with his own image. What the latter (uniquely) presents to, or represents for the ascetic is not a prospect of endless (aesthetic) possibilities, but rather the unique experience of his being *being* back at him. This is the especial aesthetic value of the ascetic’s confrontation with the image of his (sense of (his)) being-in-the-world.

Given that, as earlier explained, we are more or less reliant on the literary and visual arts for representations of ascetic being-in-the-world, it may be said to be most likely (but not exclusively) the case that the ascetic will attain to these superlative aesthetic experiences via encounters with such visual representations. Given that the grotesque is also most expediently exemplified by means of the visual arts, and given the alignment between the ascetic, his representation, and the grotesque, it is not surprising that, once again, the visual arts may serve as a major conduit of this consummate ascetic-aesthetic experience. It is, therefore, rather paradoxically the case that those very arts that, along with asceticism itself, appear to have suffered the greatest disregard by philosophers of aesthetics, may be said to be, for the ascetic(ally-inclined) (and hence aesthetically preoccupied) individual, of greatest value.

It ought to be clarified here that those grotesque or cognitively dissonant (aesthetic) phenomena said here to speak (potentially) *to* the ascetic *of* his sense of (his) being-in-the-world are of course so described only insofar as they register as such with the *non*-ascetic individual, for whom they (potentially) present a dissonant affront to his sense of (his) being-in-the-world. As explained in Chapter Two, properly speaking nothing intra-aesthetic can for the ascetic be

dissonant. It may therefore be that an alternative term is required to denote the unique experience of the ascetic's confrontation with a phenomenon that, though it might to a *non-ascetic* individual be cognitively dissonant, and may be recognised as such *by* the ascetic, cannot, insofar as it is aesthetic, have such an effect *for* him. The peculiarly confronting quality of the ascetic's singularly unique aesthetic experience (as described above) is not antagonistic. It might, therefore, by way of (contra)distinction from the aforementioned dissonance, and perhaps most fittingly given its (second-order self-)reflective character, be dubbed "assonant". Hence one might sum up the discrepancy as follows. Aesthetic-cognitive dissonance (the preserve of the grotesque) entails a confrontation to, or subverting of one's sense of (one's) being-in-the-world, and, given that it remains an intra-aesthetic phenomenon, the ascetic cannot be subject to it. That which *does* confront the ascetic (non-antagonistically) with his sense of (his) being-in-the-world is therefore (describable as) assonant. This is the uniquely confronting quality of those especially valuable aesthetic encounters in which the ascetic is presented with the prospect of, and hence experiences his being *being* back at him.

Because the ascetic's being is so exclusively circumscribed by the aesthetic dimension, everything (else) is, in accord with the aims of his endeavour, to be experienced by him always only aesthetically. Thanks to the generously accommodating comprehensiveness of his imperative, all varieties or possibilities of existence and experience bear the potential to be, within the aesthetic dimension, *presented* to (and thus experienced (only) aesthetically by) the ascetic; with the exception, that is, of his own. The unique instance of the ascetic experiencing his own being *being* back at him is the one aesthetic encounter that *cannot* be experienced by him (only) aesthetically. It is, in other words, the sole exception to the ascetic's otherwise all-encompassing and uncompromising endeavour.

Bibliography

- Adams, E. M., *The Metaphysics of Self and World: Toward a Humanistic Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
- Adams, James Luther and Wilson Yates (eds), *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*. Michigan; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997.
- Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1978.
- Bagger, Matthew, *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Barasch, Frances K., *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.
- Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954.
- Bax, Dirk, *Hieronymus Bosch: His Picture-Writing Deciphered*, translated by M. A. Bax-Botha. Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1979.
- Berleant, Arnold, 'Aesthetic Sensibility'. Available at <<http://www.autograff.com/berleant/pages/Aesthetic%20Sensibility.draft%208.htm>> Accessed 22 November 2013.
- 'Transformations in Art and Aesthetics'. Available at <<http://www.autograff.com/berleant/pages/Transformations%20in%20Art%20and%20Aesthetics.11.htm>> Accessed 22 November 2013.
- Boyers, Robert and Robert Orrill (eds.), *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Brooke, Christopher, *The Rise and Fall of the Medieval Monastery*. London: The Folio Society, 2006.
- Brown, James F., *Affectivity: Its Language and Meaning*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982.
- Burrus, Virginia, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Burton-Christie, Douglas, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Chadwick, Henry, 'The Ascetic Ideal in the History of the Church', in *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, papers read at the 1984 Summer meeting and the 1985 Winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society, edited by W. J. Shiels, pp. 1-23. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- Clayborough, Arthur, *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- De Vos, George A., 'Affective Dissonance and Primary Socialisation: Implications for a Theory of Incest Avoidance', *Ethos* vol. 3, no. 2 (1975), pp. 165-118.
- Dewey, John, *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 2005.
- *The Child and the Curriculum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1902.

- Dixon, Laurinda, *Bosch*. London: Phaidon, 2003.
- Dixon, Robert, *The Baumgarten Corruption: From Sense to Nonsense in Art and Philosophy*. London; New Haven: Pluto Press, 1995.
- Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Eco, Umberto, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Elgin, Catherine Z., 'Art and Education', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, edited by Harvey Siegel, pp. 319-332. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Elkins, James (ed.) *Art History Versus Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Ellis, Havelock, *Selected Essays*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936.
- *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1927. Available via Project Gutenberg: e-books #13610-#13615 (2004).
- Farber, Leslie H., *The Ways of the Will: Essays Toward a Psychology and Psychopathology of Will*. London: Constable, 1966.
- Fingesten, Peter, 'Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 42, no. 4 (1984), pp. 419-426.
- Fletcher, Ian, 'A Grammar of Monsters: Beardsley's Obsessive Images and their Sources', *English Literature in Transition 1180-1920* vol. 30, no. 1 (1987), pp. 141-163.
- Guyer, Paul, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Aurora: The Davies Group, 2006.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- Heidegger, Martin, *Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 2000.
- Heller, Erich, 'Burckhardt and Nietzsche', in *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays*, pp. 39-54. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Heller-Roazen, Daniel, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation*. New York: Zone Books, 2007.
- "Ships of Theseus": Review of Udo Thiel's *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume*, *Times Literary Supplement* August 2 (2013), p. 24.
- Heyd, Milly, *Aubrey Beardsley: Symbol, Mask and Self-Irony*. New York: Peter Lang, 1986.
- Hinde, John Roderick, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*. Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.

- Hufgard, M. Kilian, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: A Theory of Art Formulated from His Writings and Illustrated in Twelfth-Century Works of Art*. Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1989.
- Hugo, Victor, 'Preface to Cromwell', in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, Harvard Classics vol. 39, edited by Charles W. Eliot. New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909-14.
- Hume, David, *Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Irvin, Sherri, 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 48, no. 1 (2008), pp. 29-44.
- Jacquette, Dale, 'Schopenhauer on the Antipathy of Aesthetic Genius and the Charming', *History of European Ideas* vol. 18, no. 3 (1994), pp. 373-385.
- Jacquette, Dale (ed.), *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- James, William, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912.
- *A Pluralistic Universe*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909.
- *Selected Writings*, edited by G. H. Bird. London: J. M. Dent, 1995.
- *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911.
- *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York; London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914.
- Johnson, Mark, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Joughin, John J. and Simon Malpas (eds), *The New Aestheticism*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Jung, C. G., *Psychological Types, or The Psychology of Individuation*, translated by H. Godwin Baynes. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1924.
- Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, translated by Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963.
- Kleinberg, Aviad, *Flesh Made Word: Saints' Stories and the Western Imagination*, translated by Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Knight, Margaret (ed.), *William James: A Selection from his Writings on Psychology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950.
- Knox, Israel, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1958.
- Koestler, Arthur, *The Act of Creation*. London: Penguin/Arkana, 1989.
- Krondorfer, Björn, 'Review of *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* by Virginia Burrus', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* vol. 74, no. 1 (2006), pp. 259-262.
- Laing, R. D., *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.

- *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Langer, Susanne K. (ed.), *Reflections on Art: A Source Book of Writings by Artists, Critics, and Philosophers*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958.
- Lanham, Richard A., *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- MacKendrick, Karmen, *Counterpleasures*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Maleuvre, Didier, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Mali, Joseph, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's 'New Science'*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Milchman, Alan, and Alan Rosenberg, 'The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethics of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault', *Parrhesia* no. 2 (2007), pp. 44-65.
- Miller, Patricia Cox, 'Review of *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* by Virginia Burrus', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (2005), pp. 264-266.
- Miller, William Ian, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Nehamas, Alexander, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Chapter One available at <<http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s8357.html>> Accessed 22 August 2013.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil (Jenseits von Gut und Böse)*. German text available via Project Gutenberg: e-book #7204 (2005).
- *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. London; New York: Penguin, 1993.
- *On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Douglas Smith. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Nolan, Maura B., 'Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* vol. 34, no. 3 (2004), pp. 549-575.
- Paglia, Camille, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- 'Sexual Personae: The Cancelled Preface', in *Sex, Art and American Culture: Essays*, pp. 101-124. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993.
- Panofsky, Erwin (ed.), *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- Parsons, Howard L., *Man East and West: Essays in East-West Philosophy*. Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1975.
- Podro, Michael, 'Kant and the Aesthetic Imagination', in *Art and Thought*, edited by Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen, pp. 51-70. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Putnam, Ruth Anna, *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- Rashdall, H. 'Review of *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* by William James', *Mind* vol. 12, no. 46 (1903), pp. 245-250.
- Read, Herbert, *Education Through Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1943.
- *Icon and Idea: The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness*. London: Faber and Faber, 1955.
- *The Meaning of Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1931.
- Rembert, Virginia Pitts, *Hieronymus Bosch and the Lisbon Temptation: A View from the Third Millennium*. New York: Parkstone Press, 2012.
- Roberts, Tyler T., *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Saito, Yuriko, 'Everyday Aesthetics', *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 25, no. 1 (2001), pp. 87-95.
- Santayana, George, *The Sense of Beauty, Being The Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*. New York; Chicago; Boston: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896.
- Sass, Louis A., *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- 'Self and World in Schizophrenia: Three Classic Approaches', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* vol. 8, no. 4 (2001), pp. 251-270.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Essays and Aphorisms*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 2004.
- *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1958.
- Scruton, Roger, 'In Search of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 47, issue 3 (2007), pp. 232-250.
- Sewell, Brian, 'Every picture tells a history', *Times Higher Education* no. 2, 102, May 23-29 (2013), pp. 34-39.
- Shrimpton, Nicholas, 'Ruskin and the Aesthetes', in *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, edited by Dinah Birch, pp. 131-151. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Shusterman, Richard, 'Dewey's *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* vol. 44, no.1 (2010), pp. 26-43.
- 'Review of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* by Terry Eagleton', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 49, no. 3 (1991), pp. 259-261.
- Shusterman, Richard and Adele Tomlin (eds), *Aesthetic Experience*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008.
- Snodgrass, Chris, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Stanghellini, Giovanni, 'Psychopathology of Common Sense', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* vol. 8, no. 2/3 (2001), pp. 201-218.
- Tagliacozzo, Giorgio, Michael Mooney, and Donald Phillip Verene (eds), *Vico and Contemporary Thought*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1980.

Taylor, Eugene I. Taylor and Robert H. Wozniak (eds), *Pure Experience: The Response to William James*. Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996.

Thomson, Philip, *The Grottesque*. London: Methuen and Co., 1972.

Trodd, Colin, Paul Barlow and David Amigoni (eds), *Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grottesque*. Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999.

Vico, Giambattista, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)*, translated by Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture (De architectura)*, translated by Morris Hicky Morgan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914. Available via Project Gutenberg: e-book #20239 (2006). Latin text at <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/vitruvius.html>> (source uncredited). Accessed 17 October 2013.

Wimbush, Vincent L. and Richard Valantasis (eds), *Asceticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Workman, Herbert B., *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal, from the Earliest Times down to the Coming of the Friars*. London: The Epworth Press, 1927.

