Tradition and Modernity in Scruton's Aesthetics

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Abstract
During the last century, most Western artists abandoned the traditional forms of Western art. Two closely related questions arise at once: why did artists do this, and were they right to? Scruton is famous for arguing that the answer to the latter question is *no*. His response to the former question is, by contrast, little known. In this paper, I investigate Scruton's discussions of it, arguing that a more complex and equivocal picture of the relationship between tradition and modernity quickly emerges. Scruton actually gives two mutually inconsistent genealogies of the flight from tradition. The first, surprisingly, is inconsistent with Scruton's defence of traditional forms, as well as with a number of his other commitments. The second coheres better with his other commitments, and on one version is consistent with his traditionalism. To vindicate his traditionalism this way, however, Scruton would be constrained to make an interesting and significant commitment.

In the course of the twentieth century, most Western artists abandoned the traditional forms of Western art, like tonality in music, classicism in architecture, and linear perspective in painting. Among them were many who profoundly admired the old tradition, and many who believed that abandoning these forms was somehow the only way to perpetuate and renew it. Again and again in the writings of twentieth-century artists and critics, we find the idea that though so much of what we admire and cherish was made in the old forms, art must now take another path. Most of us have at least some sympathy with this idea, a vague sense that, while we admire the art of former centuries, there is something false or otherwise problematic in continuing to employ its forms in our own time. Many of us, however, find it difficult to say why exactly this should be so.

Two questions are readily distinguished here. One is genealogical: why have so many artists come to think that they should abandon traditional forms? The other is normative: are they right in doing so? Let us say that 'traditionalism' is the view that modern artists should normally use traditional forms and that 'anti-traditionalism' is the view that they normally should not do so, 'modern artist' being understood here simply to mean an artist in a modern society, not one who works in a putatively modern style. Roger Scruton is well known

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for statements that seem to place him firmly in the traditionalist camp. Modern architecture is 'the greatest crime against beauty that the world has yet seen'; postmodernist orchestras are 'bleak noise-factories' which will 'soon be a thing of the past, as quaint as futurism and as empty as Dada'; our public galleries no longer offer us 'imagined ideals in gilded frames' but rather 'real junk in quotation marks'.[1] His work on the question of genealogy, however, is much less known. This is a pity, not only because of its great intrinsic interest, but because, as we shall see, the two questions are intimately related.

As I shall show here, Scruton actually gives not one but two genealogies of the flight from tradition in modern art. The first originates in his Peter Fuller Memorial Lecture in 1995, which was subsequently published in this journal under the title 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', and then republished in successively modified versions in following years, most recently in 2006.[2] The other is found in the final chapter of Scruton's 1997 book *The Aesthetics of Music*.[3] As these dates suggest, Scruton seems to have developed these genealogies concurrently, and there is no suggestion in his work that he distinguishes them. But distinct they are: to the extent that one is the correct genealogy, the other is not. I argue that, surprisingly enough, the 'Aesthetic Endeavour' genealogy is actually inconsistent with Scruton's defence of traditional forms, as well as with some other, highly plausible, commitments. The *Aesthetics of Music* genealogy, on the other hand, accords better with his other commitments, and on one version it coheres with his traditionalism. As we shall see, however, vindicating his traditionalism in this way has an interesting and important implication for Scruton's view of the modern world.

[1] 'Why Beauty Matters', Roger Scruton, BBC, 28 November 2009; Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007); Roger Scruton, 'The Great Swindle', *Aeon*, 17 December 2012 at https://aeon.co/essays [accessed on 25 November 2018].

[2] Roger Scruton, 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', *Philosophy* 71:277 (1996): 331–350; republished in, *inter alia*, his *The Aesthetic Understanding*, 2nd edn (South Bend IN: St Augustine's Press, 1998 [1983]) and then in a shorter form in his *Modern Culture*, 3rd edn (London: Continuum, 2005), chs. 7 and 8. Hereafter I quote from *The Aesthetic Understanding*.

[3] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 15.

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1. The 'Aesthetic Endeavour Today' Genealogy

One of the characteristic features of anti-traditionalist writing is relentless hostility to the arts of the nineteenth century, or at least to those strands that did not clearly anticipate modernism. 'It is the things of the spirit in which the Victorian age lacked vigour and courage', says Pevsner.[4] Given his supposed traditionalism, Scruton might be expected to contest this picture. It is thus among the surprises of 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today' that it begins with a critique of Victorian art very much in the modernist tradition:

> By the middle of the nineteenth century the subject-matter, symbolism and language of English poetry were through-and-through medieval, or at any rate mock-medieval. Wagner was writing medieval operas in alliterative verse, while the fauns and nymphs frolicked and bucolicked in the Salon paintings as though the steam trains had never discovered their glades. The pre-Raphaelite movement in painting, the Gothic revival (which Pugin saw as 'a revival of Christian architecture') and the stained-glass language of William Morris's romances (written by a dogmatic atheist), carried on the habit of an art which was modern, only so as to repudiate its modernity. It was against this kind of modern art that the modernists reacted. For most of it was entirely phoney: an attempt to avoid the reality of modern life, by invoking other and impossible worlds.[5]

Against this Scruton counterposes the modernists, or at least of the better sort of modernist, among whom he numbers Baudelaire, Manet, Cézanne, Eliot, Joyce, Stravinsky, Yeats, Messiaen and even, on the whole, Picasso and Schoenberg.

> You can paint modern life only if you produce your image of it as *painters* do - which means using brush and pigments with the same broad intention as they were used by Titian, Rembrandt and Gainsborough. That is why modern art is so difficult, and why it has proved necessary to be not merely modern, but also modernist. For the modernist is the one who self-consciously re-shapes the medium, precisely in order that the *old* intentions can be entertained.[6]

[4] Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, 7th edn (London: Penguin, 1963 [1943]), 375. This is not though the whole truth about Pevsner, who was also a founding member of the Victorian Society.

[5] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 220.

[6] Ibid., 221–222.

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What are the 'old intentions'? The core of the answer is the expression of a certain vision of human life:

> To put the matter briefly, Western art - perhaps all art that rises to a permanent place in our affections - has been motivated by a religious end. I do not mean that our art has always been in the *service* of religion, or animated by some doctrinaire or sacerdotal purpose - far from it. I mean that our art has drawn upon and amplified the experiences which form the bedrock of religion, and in so doing provided a secular vindication of a sacred view of human life. Behind a work such as *Las Meninas* or *The Death of Sardanapalus*, lies the very same vision that bursts forth in the *St Matthew Passion* or the *Divine Comedy* - the vision of human life as mattering, and mattering more than can easily be said.[7]

Astonishingly enough, then, Scruton appears to be expounding a genealogy of modern art that presupposes a kind of anti-traditionalism: modern artists abandoned traditional forms because something about modernity meant that, to express the sacramental vision of human life that great art must in some sense implicitly express, they had to use different forms. The formally traditional artists of the nineteenth century failed to recognise this and correspondingly failed to express this vision; the modernists corrected this error and thereby produced great art once again.

What was it about modernity that put the modern artists in such a different normative position to their predecessors? Scruton's answer lies in the kind of emotion whose expression he thinks is most valuable in art.[8] Scruton believes that the principal value of art lies in the fact that, in appreciating it, we sympathise with the emotions which it expresses. What makes some artworks more valuable than others lies ultimately in the kind of emotion expressed in them. Scruton is a cognitivist about emotion, holding that it consists in a kind of evaluative judgement of an object. The evaluative judgements with which it is most valuable for us to sympathise must be true, and they must be about important rather than trivial subjects. But what distinguishes the judgements that are really valuable to sympathise

[7] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 224.

[8] The view sketched is present throughout Scruton's aesthetics. See esp. his *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen & Co, 1974), chs. 14, 15 and 16, *Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), chs. 8 and 10, and *Aesthetics of Music*, chs. 6, 11 and 12. It is adumbrated in 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today' at pp. 220–221.

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with from the ordinary run of true evaluative judgements about weighty subjects is that they engage with the *detail* of the object.[9] We all disapprove of oppression, but when we read Euripides' *Trojan Women*, we sympathise with a repugnance of oppression that involves an understanding of its nature, and what is really repugnant about it, far deeper than any that most of us have ourselves. Scruton's claim about traditional and modernist artists in modern societies is ultimately that, although they shared the same sacramental ideals, only the modernists really brought those ideals to bear on modern life, issuing in an experience of judgement of far greater richness and complexity than what he portrays as the traditionalists' pious application of ideals to a world of make-believe. And what distinguishes both the traditionalists and the modernists from their predecessors is the profane character of modern culture, a culture governed by the belief that life is 'transitory, futile and empty of meaning'.[10] The view is nicely encapsulated in some of Scruton's remarks about English literature:

> [It is] not that art has no licence to summon the ideal and the impossible. But when Chaucer invokes an ideal chivalric world in *The Knight's Tale*, it is partly to illustrate the very real idealism of the Knight himself, and partly in order to show the apertures where the ordinary world of medieval England opened onto a sublime and redemptive version of itself. The world of chivalry makes contact with the medieval reality, but it is impassably remote from the reality of Victorian England.[11]

Taking up the thread a few pages later, he continues:

> Eliot placed himself in conscious reaction to English poetry in its Arthurian twilight. He believed that the stilted poetical diction and lilting rhythms of the Georgians betrayed a moral weakness: a failure to observe life as it really is, a failure to feel what must be felt towards the experience that is inescapably ours.[12]

Let us summarise. Scruton implies that traditional forms are inherently suited to express what we may loosely call an experience of affirmation, of something like finding the world to conform to the

[9] Scruton is here influenced by F.R. Leavis, especially 'Thought and Emotional Quality', *Scrutiny* 13 (1945): 53–71 and 'Reality and Sincerity', *Scrutiny* 19 (1952–1953): 90–98.

[10] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 234.

[11] Ibid., 220.

[12] Ibid., 225.

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highest sacramental ideals. Chaucer had a version of those ideals, and a world that in some measure lived up to it, so he had a rich and detailed experience of affirmation that he could then use traditional forms to express. The Victorians had the ideals but lacked the world, so they had to imagine a world worth affirming, and ended up with a rather vague and ill-focussed experience of affirmation that led to a correspondingly unconvincing use of the traditional forms. Eliot was in the same position as the Victorians, but he chose to express an experience of reproaching the real world rather than affirming an imaginary one in his poetry. Since the real world is more complex than made-up ones, this experience was richer and more interesting; and since ideal standards are presupposed as much in reproach as they are in affirmation, a poetry that expressed it would be no less an expression of the sacramental view of life than had been the literature of the Middle Ages. But in order to write that poetry, he needed to devise new forms, forms suited to the expression of reproach rather than affirmation. The ultimate result was Eliot's modernism.

Modernism was only viable as long as artists did not share the view of the world as 'futile and empty of meaning', and were thus in a position to judge a culture oriented around that belief from a higher standpoint. But artists are part of society, so in the end artists too came to accept this view, and the modernist project faded. The art that ensued - the dominant strand in what is sometimes called 'postmodernism', represented by figures like Jeff Koons, Richard Rogers and Damien Hirst - was therefore in an important respect unlike all the arts before it: where the Old Masters, the Victorians and the modernists all shared the sacramental vision and differed only in how they applied that vision to the world, the postmodernists lack it, and thus can neither affirm nor reproach in any serious way.[13] As is well known, Scruton is not impressed by the results. What is less clear is whether there is any way forward for the arts from this. Scruton tentatively suggests a sort of semi-ironical art, that tries to express something serious while acknowledging that 'our highest artistic endeavours will always seem a little like quotations, even if quotations from ourselves'.[14] He also suggests that we should build bridges to what is better in the popular culture. But 'one corner of the heart will always be held in reserve against the likelihood of failure'.[15]

[13] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 228–234. I omit some details of Scruton's discussion of postmodernism that are not important for the present argument.

[14] Ibid., 235

[15] Ibid., *loc. cit.*

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There is a strong sense that the real solution, if solution there be, lies not in art but in life: without our having again the religious experience that was expressed by premodern art and by the modernists, we will not be able to produce great art again: 'we cannot overcome kitsch through art alone: the reorganisation of tradition is also a reorganisation of our lives'.[16]

The Scruton of 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', then, gives us a genealogy that seems to imply a form of anti-traditionalism as far as artists of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are concerned: the genealogy of the flight from tradition is that the normative situation really did change, and that (some) artists responded appropriately to this. It is a little less clear that Scruton's account is anti-traditionalist about art today. As we have seen, Scruton thinks that the dominant strand of contemporary art is of very little value ('rubbish in inverted commas'),[17] so traditional forms need only yield a very modest success to be preferable. Given the support he has expressed for traditional art in other contexts, perhaps the most consistent interpretation of his view here is that he thinks traditional forms can indeed yield this, and that he has such forms in mind in making the tentative suggestions with which he ends the essay. But if indeed Scruton is a traditionalist here, he is an extremely unusual one. Remember that he claims that the sacramental view of life had already declined enough in the nineteenth century to make most traditional Victorian art 'entirely phoney'. It has now been declining for another century, presumably at an accelerating rate. So if indeed we return to the forms that the modernists rightly abandoned, we must expect the results of doing so to have become very phoney indeed in the meantime. Even if Scruton counts formally as a traditionalist here, then, his is not a traditionalism that any traditional artist should be pleased about: the spirit of his view has much more in common with an end-of-art theory than with traditionalism as it is normally encountered.[18]

What should we make of this genealogy? Like any high-level account of this kind, it makes plenty of contentious presuppositions: clearly it is not going to convince those who differ fundamentally with Scruton's critical judgements, his view of modernity, or his

16 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 233.

17 Ibid., 234.

18 These conclusions would be mitigated somewhat in the case of architecture, on account of its status as a vernacular art. See esp. Roger Scruton, 'Vernacular Architecture' in his *The Classical Vernacular* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994).

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account of artistic value. Even those who are broadly sympathetic to these may be uncertain about the claim that there is in some sense a single sacramental vision of life that runs through almost the whole of Western art, or the claim that forms as vastly flexible as classicism or tonality are inherently better suited to expressing one kind of emotion than another. Interesting as it would be to pursue these points, however, I am going to focus on something different. I shall argue that this genealogy has at least one implication that is not merely questionable, but inconsistent with commitments that lie at the heart of Scruton's own worldview.

The difficulty arises most clearly in the cases of the traditionalist Victorians and the modernists, so let us focus on them and set the postmodernists aside for the moment. According to the genealogy, as we have seen, what distinguishes the predicament of these artists from that of their predecessors is that the modern world comprehensively fails to live up to sacramental ideals, meaning that they have no experience of affirmation to impart to their art. But it is time that we placed this idea of the modern world's failure to live up to sacramental ideals under a little more scrutiny. Let us suppose that urbanisation, capitalism and secularisation (or whatever) have indeed led to Europe's becoming in many respects a worse place than it was in 1800, a disenchanted place in which love, loyalty and sacrifice are increasingly rare. It may still be asked: why cannot artists select among their experiences and affirm those cases of love, loyalty and sacrifice that they still encounter? Consider the harpsichordist Froberger, who was born in 1616 in the Duchy of Württemburg. By the time he was thirty-two, the Thirty Years' War had laid waste to Central Europe, the population of Württemburg had fallen by more than half, and much of his family had perished in the plague.[19] As we read in *Simplicissimus*, moral standards under these conditions were not always of the best. We may suppose that Froberger experienced much that was horrible, more, we might even suspect, than the average modern artist. Yet we find nothing of horror in his harpsichord suites, and much of graciousness, wit, and courteous regret. This is, in part, because Froberger did not have one experience-of-the-seventeenth-century-world, but rather many experiences of the seventeenth-century world, and because he retained the power to select among them those of which he wished his music to be an expression, however atypical and unrepresentative they might be.

[19] For the population of Württemberg, see John Theibault, 'The Demography of the Thirty Years' War Revisited: Günther Franz and his Critics', *German History* 15:1 (1997): 1–21 at 21.

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We might then ask why, even if disenchantment is a typical phenomenon in modern societies, artists need to focus on it, rather than to do as Froberger did and focus on the (let us suppose) diminished but still existent pool of more admirable things, to which they can respond like Chaucer.

One option, clearly, would be that it is in some sense the purpose of art to express a response to the typical features of our communal life.[20] Someone who thought this could then say that Froberger had condemned himself to insignificance by ignoring the great social facts of his time, and that the traditionalist Victorians had, *mutatis mutandis*, done likewise. Scruton occasionally sounds as though he might think this: 'The effort of the modern artist is to present the *modern* world, to express realities which have not been encountered before, and which are especially hard to compass'.[21] But it is entirely clear from Scruton's larger *œuvre* that this is not his view: he has consistently rejected teleological accounts of art throughout his career. In *The Aesthetics of Architecture* he argues specifically and cogently against the kind of teleological account that I am alluding to:

> Nothing now stands in the way of the suggestion that a work might succeed, just occasionally, in expressing something other than its historical reality, and derive its success from that. For example, it might succeed, like Westminster Cathedral, in expressing the spirit of a world to which it does not belong, or in expressing some outlook that has no historical determinacy whatsoever, like the rugged simplicity of the Italian hilltop town.[22]

Scruton does not, then privilege experiences of the typical or the representative over other experiences as candidates for expression in art just in virtue of their being experiences of the typical or representative. So it is still unclear why modern artists need to focus on putatively typical reproachable things rather than on putatively atypical affirmable ones. One possibility is that they actually have *no* experiences of justified affirmation to express. The modern world, on this view, is so awful that modern artists actually do not know what it is like to justifiedly affirm something: there is simply no love, no sacrifice, no heroism and no nobility left for them to admire. So although

[20] Many philosophers have defended variants of this. For a recent example, see David A. Kaufman, 'Normative Criticism and the Objective Value of Artworks', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60:2 (2002): 151–166.

[21] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 219. Cf. ibid., 225.

[22] *Aesthetics of Architecture*, 54.

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there would be no reason why they *should* not create art that expresses such an experience, they cannot, because they do not know what such experiences are like. The happy Froberger, by contrast, still had some experiences of faith and community, alongside those of carnage and ruin. This is one way of interpreting statements like 'The Parnassian language of a Musset or a Leconte de Lisle rose high above the seedy truths of bourgeois Paris - too high, indeed, so that all that could be seen below was a decorative tapestry, with the contours of human life rubbed into vagueness' or '[in Georgian poetry we find] a failure to observe life as it really is, a failure to feel what must be felt towards the experience that is inescapably ours'.[23]

This degree of pessimism would not be without precedent. We find it in the more doom-laden passages of many modernists, as when Hemann Broch describes ours as 'an epoch which is completely under the the dominion of death and hell', or when Adorno claims things like 'absolute reification […] is now on the point of absorbing the spirit entirely.'[24] But it is not a picture that Scruton really accepts. This is the man who has described post-war Britain as an 'an experiment in redemption',[25] who deplores false equivalences between Soviet communism and 'bourgeois democracy',[26] for whom the Enlightenment was 'an enormous gain in moral, political and spiritual freedom',[27] and who is an admirer, albeit a somewhat ambivalent one, of the great modern society, the United States.[28] There is much of love and nobility in the characters of his novels and short stories.[29] It is in fact wholly clear from Scruton's work as a whole that he does not think there is nothing left to affirm in the modern world, and that, correspondingly, he cannot claim that that modern artists must express experiences of reproach because they have no alternative.[30]

[23] 'The Aesthetic Endeavour Today', 220–221 and 225.

[24] Hermann Broch, *Die Schlafwandler* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994 [1931/1932]), 445; Theodor Adorno, *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976 [1951]), p. 26, translations mine.

[25] Roger Scruton, 'On Defending Beauty', *Spectator*, 17 May 2010.

[26] e.g. in his *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015 [1985]), esp. in chs. 5 and 7.

[27] *Understanding Music* (London: Continuum, 2009), 208.

[28] e.g. *Culture Counts*, viii-ix.

[29] For love and nobility in Scruton's novels, see e.g. Zoë in *A Dove Descending and Other Stories* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991) or Laura in *The Disappeared* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[30] We might likewise suspect that it is at best an overgeneralisation that all artists since the decline of modernism lack sacramental ideals, but I shall not pursue this here.

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Scruton accepts, then, that both reproach and affirmation can be the proper content of art, and that there are in the modern world things worth reproaching and worth affirming. He may well think that the balance has shifted in the direction of the reproachable, but that does not entail, given his wider aesthetics, that artists should focus on it. It would be more consistent, given those wider commitments, to conclude that artists have always been justified in reproaching what is bad, and in affirming what is good, and that this situation is not fundamentally altered today; given the premiss that traditional forms are more suited to affirmation and non-traditional forms to reproach, this would entail a sort of pluralism, on which traditional and non-traditional forms are normally both legitimate. But if that normative view is correct, then the genealogy discussed in this section, which explained artists' flight from tradition as a response to genuine reasons they had to abandon traditional forms, is false. For a consistent Scrutonian genealogy of the flight from tradition, then, we must look elsewhere.

2. The *Aesthetics of Music* Genealogy

Scruton's second genealogy lies in the *Aesthetics of Music*, although, as noted above, he does not explicitly distinguish it. His discussion begins with an account of how the expressive possibilities of a form can be shaped.[31] Many forms, he thinks, have become associated with contexts in which they have previously been used, such that what they can express is affected by the community's memory of those contexts. The expressive possibilities of the phrase 'I have a dream' have been permanently changed by Martin Luther King Jr's use of it, in terms of which listeners will always hear its subsequent use. In using the phrase 'I have a dream' today, one sets oneself in comparison to King: to use the phrase in earnest without looking preposterous would take an excellent speaker and a profoundly important topic. The same is true of the words that tradition ascribes to King's namesake, 'Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders': one who uses this phrase evokes the scene of Luther before the Emperor, and claims for his or her own predicament the great idea that, in identifying oneself with one's duty, one is revealed in the pride of one's freedom.

In general, the development of this kind of culture profoundly enriches our expressive possibilities. But sometimes someone's use of a

[31] *Aesthetics of Music*, 462–467.

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form can curtail its expressive potential for others. The German language is littered with once-powerful words, phrases and rhetorical devices that can never again be used, of which *Kraft durch Freude* and *Volksgemeinschaft* are but the least chilling. In Britain the phrase 'strong and stable' is currently associated with the unsuccessful campaign of the Conservative Party in the 2017 General Election, and would be difficult to use with expressive force except in pastiche. In other cases, words and phrases lose their expressive usefulness not through one spectacular misuse but through countless occasions on which they have been employed as lazy substitutes for real thinking, a phenomenon Scruton calls 'banalisation'.[32] Fowler offers us 'tender mercies', 'leave no stone unturned', 'wind of change', 'acid test', 'strain every nerve', 'tower of strength', 'explore every avenue' and 'blessing in disguise'.[33] In all such cases, it becomes impossible to speak about objects in a certain way not because the objects themselves have changed, but because our linguistic culture has: there are not fewer strong and stable things today than there were in 2016, but it is less often apt describe them as such.

In modern societies there emerges a particularly invidious and contagious form of banalisation, namely kitsch. Kitsch, Scruton thinks, is art that expresses sentimental emotion; sentimental emotion, in turn, is fake emotion, whose subject does not really care about the object in the relevant way, but who pretends to do so as a pretext for the pleasant or flattering emotion in question.[34] Scruton thinks that kitsch has proliferated in modern societies as never before. He tentatively suggests several explanations, including the development of modern advertising, the decline of the emotional education that he believes to have taken place in organised religion, and the decline of the idea that others have the right to judge one's emotional life against some objective standard of excellence.[35] Crucially, he takes seriously the possibility that the proliferation of kitsch has now spread far beyond trite phrases and garden gnomes to banalise the traditional forms of European art in general, such that those forms have now lost their expressive power. He cites Mann's Faustus, the composer Adrian Leverkühn, as an archetype of one who sees

[32] *Aesthetics of Music,* 480

[33] H.W. Fowler and Sir Ernest Gowers, *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965 [1926]), 90–91, 234–235.

[34] I condense here the discussion at *Aesthetics of Music.*, 479–488.

[35] For advertising, see *Modern Culture*, 83–4; for secularisation, see *Aesthetics of Music,* 505–506; for 'democratic culture', see ibid., 496–498 and 504–505.

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modern art thus.[36] It is worth quoting Leverkühn's canonical description of what it is to experience traditional forms as banalised:

> Beauty goes like this: the cellos sound alone, a melancholy and meditative theme, contemplating the senselessness of things, the meaning of all the longing and driving and hounding and wrongdoing, all in the most deeply philosophical and expressive way. The cellos dwell on this puzzle, wisely and regretfully, and then at a certain point in their deliberations - a very judicious one - , in comes the wind section with a chorale, movingly solemn, splendidly harmonised, with all the muted dignity and subtly restrained power of brass. The sonorous melody sweeps up towards the climax, before which, however, it swerves - for the time being, in the interests of economy, the climax is to be sidestepped, avoided and saved up - and so the melody falls back, lingers very beautifully, then falls back again and gives place […] [finally the brass returns with the chorale] and ascends solemnly towards the climax - the climax which it had so wisely avoided the first time, so that the Ah!-effect, the swelling of feeling, might be so much the greater - and now, magnificently supported by passing tones on the tuba, it rises unrestrainedly and gloriously bestrides the summit, there to honourably sing itself to an end, while looking back with dignified satisfaction on all that has gone before. […] Why must it seem to me as though almost all, no, all means and conventions of art *are suitable today only for parody*?[37]

Leverkühn hears the late Romantic symphony as cliché on a grand scale: its forms still pretend to be expressive, but they no longer are. As he stresses in the last line quoted, he does not merely think that its forms have been misused by others, but that he himself, in using them, could use them only in a banal or parodic way. If we must all experience the modern use of traditional forms this way, it is surely true that artists should not continue to use them as they did previously.

The more radical modernists, Scruton suggests, believed that this was indeed the case, and concluded that the only way to continue to create great art was to abandon these forms and create alternatives. The difficulty the modernists faced was that the kitschmongers could follow in hot pursuit, adopting, misusing and banalising the

[36] *Aesthetics of Music*, 491.

[37] Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008 [1947]), 179–181, translation mine.

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new forms as they had the old. So the modernists sought to make the new forms formidably sophisticated and inaccessible, so as to preserve them as the private language of spiritually pure. Hence the well-known difficulty of much modernist art.

Although, as we have seen, Scruton clearly thinks that the motives for this strategy were intelligible, he is sceptical that it ultimately proved artistically fruitful. One reason for this is that the style that the early modernists developed - a genuinely valuable style, but an austere, refined and elitist one - proved fatally attractive to the pretentious and the fraudulent. 'There grew around the modernists a class of critics and impresarios, who offered initiation into the modernist cult. This impresario class began to promote the incomprehensible and the outrageous as a matter of course, lest the public should regard its services as redundant.'[38] These troublesome characters gradually changed the character of modernism, making difficulty into the end rather than the means: Boulez is an extreme example of the result. A second reason is that in adopting forms that were difficult for the kitschmongers to banalise, the modernists in some cases adopted forms that were simply harder to make good art with. This seems to be Scruton's view of atonal music, of concrete architecture without mouldings, and of some kinds of non-figurative visual art.[39] A third reason is that, despite the modernists' best efforts, many of the new forms were ultimately banalised after all: 'just as the revolt against figurative painting soon produced abstract, cubist and fauvist cliché - indeed, abstract kitsch of the kind that decorates a thousand bars on the Mediterranean sea-front - so has the revolt against tonality produced a wealth of atonal clichés - cluster chords, explosions of cross-rhythms on the brass [and] exaggerated tessitura'.[40] So the avant-garde was not ultimately successful in renewing the tradition. If Scruton really does think that artists were indeed forced to this option by the utter banalisation of traditional forms, then, he arrives once again at something like an end-of-art thesis.

We shall consider in a moment whether Scruton is indeed committed to this. But it is worth noting first that, even if he is, the pessimism that this genealogy presupposes is in one important respect far more moderate than that presupposed in 'The Aesthetic Endeavour

[38] *Modern Culture*, 80–81.

[39] On tonality, see e.g. *Aesthetics of Music*, esp. ch. 9; on architecture, *Aesthetics of Architecture,* 252–254 and *The Classical Vernacular*, 77–84; on what Scruton calls 'constructionism', see *Modern Culture,* 81–82.

[40] *Understanding Music,* 223. Further possible reasons are discussed at *Aesthetics of Music*, 469–474.

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Today'. The reason for this is that, as we have seen, for artistic forms to be banalised it is not required of everyone who uses them to have a correspondingly banal inner life: 'strong and stable' could pass forever from our vocabulary without our becoming even slightly weaker and less stable. Likewise, our artistic forms could in principle become wholly banalised, and all possibility of expressive art could vanish, while the emotions of the overwhelming majority of artists and audience members remained completely sincere and high-minded. So Scruton could hold this genealogy without accepting the caricature of modern experience that its counterpart entailed. I think this would constitute a decisive reason for Scruton, and for us, to prefer it over that alternative.

The question remains, however, of whether Scruton really holds that traditional forms have been irretrievably banalised. Here he seems uncertain. At times he writes as if this is a grave possibility:

> [T]he return to tonality has had a peculiar character. What we find in Del Tredici, John Adams, Robin Holloway and Alfred Schnittke is not tonality, but 'tonality' in inverted commas: somehow the composer does not treat the tonal idiom as his predecessors had treated it. […] If it is true […] that all attempts to recuperate tonality end in inverted commas, tonality, as the forthright and self-believing thing it has to be if it is to exist at all, is irrecoverable. It is at this point that the argument must run into the sand, however. […] For who can know that some new composer might not emerge tomorrow, who causes tonality to live again?[41]

To be sure, Scruton denies here that we know that tonality is dead. But he also seems to deny that we know it is alive, and to imply that it is at best comatose.

Elsewhere, however, Scruton seems more optimistic, suggesting at several points that the claim of universal banalisation is exaggerated.[42] One reason for this is that he thinks there is a plausible explanation of why artists believe in universal banalisation that is independent of its actually being the case. Intellectuals, he suggests, tend to be disaffected with modern society, the society of the common man, which does not take them and their transcendent longings seriously. They dimly recall the vast status their clerical forebears enjoyed, and seek

[41] *Aesthetics of Music*, 490–491. Scruton sounds the same note in the book's closing lines; see ibid., 508.

[42] His most confident expression of this view is at *Culture Counts*, 90; cf. more cautious optimism at *Aesthetics of Music*, 482–485, 488 and 493–494.

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once to define themselves again as a spiritual elite. This shapes their attitude to art even as it shapes their attitude to politics:

> Avant-gardism should be understood, I believe, as the last gasp of a romantic illusion: the illusion of the artist as separated from society, possessed of new and astonishing truths which raise him above the lives of ordinary mortals and endow him with the attributes of judgement […] The avant-garde defines itself against the bourgeois, and therefore creates the bourgeois as the fictional object of a renewable contempt. This negative self-identity explains what is perhaps the most curious feature of the musical avant-garde in our century: its use of technicalities, both theoretical and practical, in the justification of its novel sounds.[43]

To the extent that this picture is right, the flight from tradition was not a response to any actual exhaustion of tradition, but the result of intellectuals' attempts to define themselves as a spiritual aristocracy by creating an art that remorselessly excluded ordinary people, while conveying secret truths to those who had been initiated into its precepts. A serious, but not insuperable, problem of banalisation was then exaggerated to stigmatise all art that did not take this path. Here, then, we find a genealogy of the flight from tradition that is not also a justification of it, and hence, at last, a genealogy that Scruton could hold alongside his traditionalism.

Another source of Scruton's occasional optimism is worth mentioning. This is that he is not convinced that abandoning a form is the only way of responding to its banalisation. There might be an alternative remedy, which is that of developing or recontextualising the form in a way that brings it back to life. He cites Geoffrey Hill's description of a search for bodies washed up from a shipwreck: 'Quietly they wade the disturbed shore; / Gather their dead as the first dead scrape home'.[44] The dead metaphor 'to scrape home' is here eerily revived, as we are reminded abruptly of the literal sense of 'scrape'. Scruton finds such revivification of traditional form in many artists he admires, from Beckett to Joyce, from Janáček to Lutyens. At his most optimistic, he wonders if this might be the solution to the whole problem. 'Martin Amis tells us at all costs to avoid clichés: I

[43] *Aesthetics of Music*, 471. His views here seem to be influenced by Irving Kristol, 'The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals', *Encounter* (October 1979): 5–14.

[44] *Aesthetics of Music*, 479. Cf. his 'Beckett and the Cartesian Soul' in *The Aesthetic Understanding*.

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think rather that we should rescue them. Maybe the redemption of the cliché is the great task for modern literature.'[45]

3. Concluding Remarks

It is alas beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether either version of Scruton's second genealogy is true. But some more preliminary conclusions are possible. As so often, Scruton's view has transpired to be more complex and equivocal than it first appeared. There is unmistakably an end-of-art theory present in his work, the view that art cannot survive in modernity's poisoned air. It is doubtful, on this view, that we are still capable of using traditional forms successfully, and hence it must also be doubtful that we ought to do so. But there is another Scruton, who thinks that though the traditional forms of our art have been rather battered and abused, they are still alive, and they are not beyond recovery. With care and creativity, this Scruton thinks, we can nurse them back to health, and this work of recuperation is the true task of the modern artist. Scruton's direct statements on the subject are, I think, inconclusive between these views. But given that he has written six novels, two collections of short stories, a volume of lyric poetry, several song settings and two operas, and given that he has spent a lifetime in costly public championship of classical architecture and tonal music, we surely have some reason to think that the latter is more nearly his considered opinion.

As we have seen, Scruton does tentatively offer a genealogy of the flight from tradition that is consistent with this. But something significant has emerged about what that genealogy presupposes. It is natural to think that Scruton's traditionalism is tied to his pessimism about modernity: his rejection of modern forms is apiece with a larger rejection of the modern world from whence they came. What we have seen, however, is that matters are more complex. In fact, extreme pessimism is actually inconsistent with Scruton's traditionalism: if modernity has left us with no experiences of anything worth affirming, or with no forms that are not irredeemably banalised, then traditional art today stands condemned, alongside art of every other kind. Perhaps this is illustrative of a larger tension in Scruton's conservatism, namely: if post-Enlightenment Europe is so very bad, why conserve it? What we have seen is that Scruton can only be a traditionalist

[45] Roger Scruton, *News from Somewhere: On Settling* (London: Continuum, 2004), 4.

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in the sense specified here, as perhaps he can only be a conservative more generally, if he holds that our predicament in the modern world, the world shaped by liberalism, democracy and the Enlightenment, is not so hopeless after all. For what it is worth, I think he should hold this. And although the textual evidence is not absolutely clear, I think he probably does.[46]

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