On Reading Scruton: Art, Truth, and Temperament

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Abstract

Art is the one corner of human life in which we may take our ease. To justify our presence there the only thing that is demanded of us is a passion for representation. In other places our passions are conditional and embarrassed; we are allowed to have only so many as are consistent with those of our neighbours; with their convenience and well-being, with their convictions and prejudices, rules and regulations. Art means an escape from all this. Wherever her brilliant standard floats the need for apologies and exonerations is over; there it is enough simply that we please or that we are pleased. There, the tree is judged only by its fruits. If these are sweet, one is welcome to pluck them.[1]

No other English philosopher of his generation has written as intelligently and eloquently as Roger Scruton about the significance of great music and great art (and architecture) in the life of a people. During a time in which moral and political philosophy has been preoccupied with what we owe to each other, it is vital that there are voices concerned with what we owe to ourselves, and immersion in what art and music have to offer us is not the least of those things. But in Scruton's view the arts can also help to shore up values that he feels have been slighted or lost in the contemporary, disenchanted world. The last sentence of his fine book *Art and Imagination* tells us that 'to be certain in matters of taste is, therefore, to be certain in matters of morality: ethics and aesthetics are one'.[2] Here and elsewhere he is sympathetic to the nineteenth-century German idea of a *Kunstreligion*, a reaction to the increasingly secular world whereby the experience of art is not as James said it is, a mere matter of enjoyment. Art is able to do what religious faith had previously done for us. It can take the place of the religious promises of a supernatural world and supernatural life in it, insofar as those promises are fundamentally ways of shoring up our personal, social, and moral lives. When the metaphysics of traditional religions no longer engage people,

[1] Henry James, *Portraits of Places*, Macmillan & Co, 1883, p. 68.
[2] *Art and Imagination*, London: Methuen, 1974, Chapter 16, p. 249.

doi:10.1017/S0031819119000251 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2019
First published online 3 July 2019

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819119000251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there remain enactments in music, dance, art, poetry or drama, that can take their place.

Such, at least, is the promise, and over his career Scruton has adduced many powerful examples, especially from music, where it is plausible to feel that this promise has been redeemed: in Beethoven's late quartets, Schubert's final piano sonatas, Mahler's *Das Lied von die Erde*, and in the operas of Wagner amongst many others. Scruton unashamedly connects the gifts that these works offer us with religious conceptions of redemption, salvation, and of a kind of benediction coming not simply because they make us feel a certain way, but because in feeling that way we are responding appropriately to a quality to something outside ourselves, or even otherworldly. He insists, rightly that insofar as such works do this they succeed by showing us something, not by saying it. This is why they have to be experienced. We have to live through them, not just hear them as a message might be heard.

As Scruton notices, there are philosophical problems here, especially if we wish to connect the value of a work with the notion of the truth expressed in it. Consider what T. S. Eliot said while listening to Beethoven's A-minor quartet Op. 132: 'I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly or at least more than human gaiety about some of his later things which one might imagine might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die'. This is well said, and explicitly picks up one of Beethoven's intentions, given that he called the magical third movement the '*Heilige Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit*'—the holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the deity. It is surely true that the music repeatedly, and with increasing intensity, expresses the sense of a fragile and hard-won emergence from pain to joy, from solemnity to gaiety, from dark to night. It is possible that words should give us something of the same impression, as Eliot hoped, and as he probably tried to achieve in the *Four Quartets*. But in neither case is there such a thing as saying what the message is, except by reducing it to something lesser, or even something utterly trite: that it is unpleasant to be ill, nice to feel that one is recovering, horrible to lapse, but quite euphoric to feel finally well again. This of course entirely misses the point, insofar as we think in terms of a point, which for Beethoven must have been to produce music somehow adequate to expressing these emotions, and for the listener would be to come away feeling themselves to have for a time been privy to such an expression. We might come

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away feeling differently about the troughs and heights of human existence, but we would not come away with a new piece of information.

To take a very different example, Titian's wonderfully moving portrait of Ranuccio Farnese in the National Gallery in Washington shows the mixed emotions of hope, shyness, and perhaps even bewilderment in a young boy burdened with insignia of importance. But nobody would be similarly moved by being told outright that rich young boys might look to the future with both hope and timidity, nor is this easy thought one that anyone is likely to have learned from the picture. It is the experience of seeing those emotions in the particular face and posture of the boy that alone makes it worth going to the gallery, not any message that can be taken away and repeated to others who were not there. If you want to know what Beethoven tells you, then you must listen to Beethoven. I put on one side the otherworldly element in the title of the Beethoven movement, and in Eliot's own claim that there is something 'more than human' about the intensity of feeling in the work, although this is a dimension that Scruton often wants to emphasize in his writings about these things.

How does this affect the notion of truth in art? It is a cliché of aesthetics that you cannot make an aesthetic judgment yourself nor pass an opinion off as your own unless you have been for yourself and felt the corresponding response. To be able to judge, in propria persona, that the play was boring you should have been bored, to judge that the play was exciting, you should have been excited, and so on. Kant insisted on this, and Richard Wollheim christened it 'the Acquaintance Principle': the principle that which insists that 'judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects, and are not except within vey narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another'.[3]

The acquaintance principle is not confined to responses to art. I can be told that it is a nice day in Scotland, but I cannot judge that it is unless I am there, or in an indirect way seeing what it is like there. The principle falls directly out of a connection between judgement, and feeling or response. You cannot voice a response to something unless you have indeed responded to it. You cannot savour the food without tasting it, be moved by the music without hearing it, or be bowled over by the painting without seeing it. The Acquaintance Principle might appear therefore to be perfectly trite, little better

[3] Wollheim's principle is given a good critical discussion in Malcolm Budd, *Aesthetic Essays,* Chapter 3, 'The Acquaintance Principle' Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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than a tautology. Its real importance is just that it throws into relief a contrast between feeling on the one hand, and thought on the other. For as Frege emphasized thoughts, the bearers of truth and falsity, have a public existence. They can be passed from one person to another without loss, communicated in full so as to be shared public property. They can come about by observation or by being retold or inferred. They come in sentence-sized packets in public language. Feelings on the other hand are tied to their occasions and do not come even in cohorts of sentence-sized packets.

In aesthetic discourse we have a vocabulary that crosses the gap, as it were, between feelings and thoughts.[4] We have propositions, that the food is delicious, the music is moving or the painting powerful that themselves become public counters or elements in a public discourse.[5] Thus one can be *told*, for instance, that the Taj Mahal is extraordinarily beautiful, and told moreover something about its particular merits: the dazzling marble, the workmanship of the inlay, the symmetry and soaring yet serene nature of the ensemble of which it is a part. You can predict that you will find a work amusing, enchanting, boring, sad or uplifting on the say-so of an informant whom you trust. Believing this, one might be motivated to go to see for oneself. What one cannot do, however, is to *judge* that it is extraordinarily beautiful without acquaintance with it (or perhaps with good enough reproductions of its appearance, although that would typically be second-best, or worse). We need to see the object as beautiful or sad or uplifting or sentimental, and that implies seeing it. Only then can we experience an 'affect-laden' perception: the kind of acquaintance that makes us say that we have seen or heard the object

[4] See Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, Chapter 5, for a sensitive exploration of the function of propositional form. The gap in question is one that I once christened Frege's abyss, and much of my own work in ethics has been preoccupied with crossing it.

[5] In one of the few papers that have really tied sympathy to a quasi-realist approach to aesthetics, Robert Hopkins, although generously recognizing the attractions of the approach, eventually sees it as failing to do justice to Wollheim's principle. This paper is in part an answer to his doubts. Indeed my own view is just the reverse: the emphasis on an affect-laden perception couples nicely with a 'quasi-realist' account of the role of aesthetic predications. It makes what truth there is in the principle of acquaintance explicable and at the same time frees the predications at which we arrive from being so closely tied to experience as to fail to be publicly transmissible. See Hopkins, R. (2001), 'Kant, Quasi-Realism, and the Autonomy of Aesthetic Judgment' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 9: 166–189.

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as beautiful, or seen the beauty, or sadness or sentimentality *in the object*.[6] Again, by itself this need be no more surprising than that you cannot be moved in any way by a noise, scene, scent or feel unless you listen, look, smell or feel for yourself.[7]

One way to appreciate the force of the acquaintance principle is to contrast what is given in perception, or rather, if we are sensitive about whether anything is strictly given in perception, between what perception does for us, with what can be told. Tellings give us a stock of propositions from which we can make inferences. Perception too can do this: seeing that the man in the painting is dressed as he is I can infer that he is a soldier, for instance. But perception puts us in a state that can be enlarged in quite a different way, by our coming to appreciate quite new facets of what we are looking at. This may be by a change of gestalt, as in a duck-rabbit case, but also simply by an increased awareness of some feature or other that hitherto escaped our notice. Scenes are always richer than our descriptions of them can be, and we can never be sure we have found what is responsible for all of the ways we feel about them, or could be brought to feel about them. A picture or other work of art, we might say, is worth more than a thousand words, because we cannot be sure that any number of words has exhausted what might

[6] A potential complication comes from music. Great conductors have been known to say that they get more pleasure from reading a score and imagining it played in their mind's ear, than they do from actual performance. Perhaps similarly a super-programmer could get the same pleasure from imagining the picture that a gigabyte of code might denote, as he could get from seeing it. But such abilities are far from normal, and for the purpose of this discussion we can confine ourselves to what is normal. In these extraordinary cases the pleasures are still aesthetic, in that the exceptional imagination is conjuring a work to which the subject is responding rather as she would to sensory input.

[7] A further question would be whether Wollheim was entirely right about the contrast with morality. Certainly there are cases in which we can be told what was awful about someone's behaviour, in a way that we cannot be told what is magical about Titian's portrait, or Op. 132. But then there are other cases, as situationists in ethics insist, where it takes acquaintance. You may have to live with a couple for a while to understand just what is so awful about their relationship, just as you have to be acquainted with someone's demeanour and ways of behaving to find him rebarbative. It can take Henry James much of *The Portrait of a Lady* to make us feel just how creepy Osmond is.

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be found in it.[8] Our aesthetic predicates may cross the gap between acquaintance and feeling, on the one hand, and description on the other, but they do not close it. They give us only an abstract idea, a mere indication, of what is on the other side.

The trustworthy informant, then, can pass on truths *about* art, but are there truths *in* art that can only be had by acquaintance? We have already suggested the bluff response would be that truth only comes in sentence-sized packages wrapped in public language, so if Op. 132 or the portrait of Ranuccio Farnese can only be appreciated through acquaintance, then that appreciation cannot consist in the acquisition of truths.[9] To soften this apparently bleak claim, we might turn from truth to knowledge, and point out that there are endless cases where we allow people to *know* something they cannot communicate. The golfer knows, but cannot tell the non-golfer, what it feels like to sink a long approach shot; the solitary sighted person in a community of the blind knows, but cannot tell, what the colour red looks like, at fifty metres range the experienced bird-watcher knows, but cannot tell, the difference in appearance between a little stint and a semi-palmated sandpiper, and so on.[10] Their experience also enables them to re-imagine what it is like, and those without the experience cannot.

We may be satisfied that such examples give us a distinction between a kind of de re knowledge, brought only by acquaintance, and de dicto knowledge that can be told. It may allow us to be sure that someone acquainted with a work of art may know what it is like, in a way that outstrips what can be told. But whilst this gives us a contrast between perception and description, it does not help to identify any truth *in* art, or that the work *expresses*. It only gives us a rich perceptual sense of what the work *is like*. By itself it no

[8] Given that literary criticism is similarly open ended one might need to accept that the words of a poem or a novel can also be worth more than a thousand words.

[9] Although James wrote of himself that he 'incurs the stigma of labouring uncannily for a certain fulness of truth—truth diffused, distributed and, as it were, atmospheric' *The Art of the Novel*, ed. Richard Blackmur, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947, p. 154. I agree with Frege. James indeed gives an atmosphere of there being more to be said, hidden layers of complexity, but he does not thereby locate further truths.

[10] Bird watchers actually have a word for the incommunicable aspect of experience that enables them to make fine discriminations. They say that a candidate has the jizz of one species or another, meaning the something-I-know-not-what in perception that marks the difference. I owe the example to Jeremy Mynott, *Birdscapes*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 55.

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more gives us a sense of a truth the work communicates than the parallel point about the appearance of a mountain or a stormy ocean give us the right to talk of what the mountain expresses, or the truth in a stormy ocean.

As philosophers from Hume to Scruton have often emphasized, the practice of aesthetic judgment implies a 'fit' between an appropriate reaction and some quality of the object. We do not typically confine ourselves to reporting our reaction to a work, but try to locate qualities that justify the reaction, showing that we were not idiosyncratic, or crass, or inattentive in feeling as we did. Hume approached this sense of what is in the work by locating the virtues of the good critics: the ones with "strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice".[11] There is no guarantee that such critics will issue a joint verdict, but when they do this is the best that can be done to justify the claim that a verdict is appropriate to its object.

There is a kind of constructivism implied in this approach, although the term has its dangers. But it is not as if we have an independent metaphysics of gerundively tinged properties—fit to be amused by, calling for sadness, appropriate object of sympathy, and so on—and a correspondence between those and the verdicts of some critics. It is rather that we have the verdicts, and, as we fall in with them, we speak in terms of the works as calling for them, requiring them. Of course there are less metaphysically peculiar aspects of works that are, in Bernard Williams's words, just there anyway: things like sounds and shapes, tones and colours. We react to the work, sure enough, but the predicates we then use are tailored for, and by, the ways we react. The only way of going beyond our judgments and reactions is not by reassuring ourselves that they mirror 'what is really there', but by improving them. Or rather, improving them is the only path to any meaningful version of such reassurance.

The danger in talking of construction is that we may want to say that the work would have been, say, beautiful, boring or sentimental *whether or not* anyone had actually felt it that way. So we do not think that actual reactions 'construct' in the sense of being responsible for the feature in the work. In other words, Moore's "isolation test" applies. Just as a rose may bloom beautifully in an empty desert, so a work might be forever lost, yet soothing, beautiful, exciting, boring and so on. That just means that it has whichever qualities would properly elicit such reactions from properly attuned critics.

[11] Tellingly, just the same qualities need to belong to the creator. The flowers of art only grow in deep soil.

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Moore's test does not install a metaphysically independent gerundive property.[12]

Furthermore, even when the critics do agree we are at liberty to differ. As David Wiggins put it, our response 'will be keyed not to the question whether everyone reacts in such and such a way to item *x* qua possessed of [value] V, but to the question whether one is oneself to concur in this reaction.'[13] If one differs from the consensus of great critics, all they can do is to try to persuade you to change your mind. They cannot claim that they must be right as a matter of definition. And they may fail (and you may, in the end, be chiming in with an even more distinguished band of later critics). Henry James is right that differences of temperament are not to be bludgeoned away by authority.

It is not entirely clear to me what Scruton would have us say about the relation between reactions on the one hand, and qualities 'in' works, on the other hand. When he approaches the issue he uses it to introduce the importance of an 'established practice—of etiquette or art—with its body of generalities and rules'.[14] This might make it looks as though the fitting and the appropriate are wholly creatures of an established practice. But this is apparently not Scruton's intention, for he explains that 'This is not to say that what makes a taste other than arbitrary is its conformity to rule, but rather that once an established practice exists then the concepts of the normal and of the appropriate can gain a foothold'. This, it seems to me, is not finally satisfying, for in the case of etiquette one might have thought that exactly the opposite is true. One's table manners are polite or not exactly insofar as they conform to 'rule', that is, to the regularities and conventions that govern peoples' expectations of the behaviour of each other. They are on the other side of the divide between the aesthetic and the moral that James describes in the epigraph above. The original artist, stretching previous conventions to give new modes of expression certainly risks the same kind of shocked reactions as someone eating peas off their knife, but

[12] A similar constructivism across the board wrongly leads to coherentist notions of truth.

[13] David Wiggins, 'A Neglected Position?' in *Reality, Representation, and Projection*, ed. John Haldane & Crispin Wright, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 331. As Wiggins saw it is completely foreign to Hume's approach, here and elsewhere, to think of him as trying to provide a "truth condition" for a description of the value(s) in a work of art in terms of the responses of any identifiable group of people.

[14] *Art and Imagination*, p. 247

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time may tell that the shock was inappropriate in the one case, but not in the other.

Critics have talked of the role of the critic as 'opening the gateway to appreciation' (Henry James) or in terms of a 'common pursuit' (T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis), engaged in the enterprise of doing justice to a work, establishing just what can be got out of it, or why not much can be got out of it if the work does stand up as it should. When, like these three, they possess Hume's virtues we do well to listen to them, for there is neither enjoyment nor understanding if one remains bewildered by a work, unable to hazard any kind of guess as to what its creator was about, and we are naturally grateful for the increase in enjoyment and understanding that might be granted us by the critic who helps us to see this.

Hume's focus on these affordances and virtues is the right place to start, and anyone with more than a passing interest in the arts can remember occasions of learning and benefiting from a good critic. Many must have learned from F. R. Leavis that Wordsworth's *Westminster Bridge* is a better poem than his *Calais Beach,* and also learned why this is so. The former beautifully juxtaposes the present calm of the great city lying still in the early morning, with its usual daytime state, developing and particularizing the contrast. As for the latter, the 'cloying sameness' is sculpted by repetitive key words: 'beauteous' 'holy' 'quiet' 'Nun' adoration' 'tranquillity', 'gentleness', 'broods', 'mighty Being', 'eternal', 'everlastingly', 'solemn', 'divine', 'worshipp'st', 'Temple', 'shrine', 'God'. These make up 'a simple one-way flow' in which there is 'nothing to qualify the sweet effusion of solemn sentiment'.[15]

We might compare this exercise in education with a wonderfully perceptive remark of André Gide, who said that in his still-lifes Jean-Baptiste Chardin painted 'la vie silencieuse des objets'—the silent life of objects. The still-lifes of Chardin are indeed invested with a profound sense both of time and silence, but whereas Leavis gives us the why and wherefore, in visual aesthetics the sense of being called to feel a certain way comes typically with only an indistinct or inchoate feeling of what it was that issued the call: it is left us as a task to tell what were the sensory features that made the work so moving, or so enjoyable. Thus many viewers, I imagine, will resonate

[15] F. R. Leavis, 'Imagery and Movement' in *A Selection from Scrutiny,* v. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, p. 243. The final sestet, he tells us, 'adds saccharine to syrup and makes the sonnet positively distasteful'. An equally convincing essay, 'Reality and Sincerity' follows immediately in the same anthology.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819119000251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with Gide's remark about Chardin, without at all being able to say what it is in the painting that works the magic, nor at all being able to say why the same might apply to Vermeer, but not in the same way to Cézanne, even if the still-lifes of the latter are equally compelling in a different way.[16] In the case of Chardin both the starting point in the perception of the painting, and the endpoint in a particular feeling of timelessness, stillness and silence are difficult to pin down, and although it took a critic of Gide's ability to give voice to the latter it might take an even more remarkable critic, or perhaps better a painter, to identify the former.

Hume's reminder of the virtues of the good critic is also a defense against a wilder kind of relativism, or a pure 'reader response' view, according to which any reaction to a work or any interpretation of it that strikes a listener, viewer, or reader is as good as any other. Of course, nobody really believes that, because there are obvious disqualifications. If I attend a poetry reading in a language which I cannot understand I may expect to be bored, but if I incautiously advance the judgement that the recital was itself boring my opinion needs to be discounted, and I will be put down as an ass for advancing it. Other cases are less clear cut. Scruton is a knowledgeable and persuasive champion of the works of Wagner. Part of me certainly wants to follow him, for I am aware how much people whose tastes I respect enjoy Wagner, but I am unable entirely to do so. I am haunted by the suspicion of those works voiced by Nietzsche, who, once he had emerged from thrall to Schopenhauer came to loathe what he regarded as the seductive, decadent appeal of Wagner's music.[17] I hope that this is a case where Henry James was right to say that 'differences here are not iniquity and righteousness: they are simply variations in temperament and point of view. We are not under theological governance'.[18] But this does make problematic the idea of the objectivity of the qualities that make a reaction fitting or right. Can Wagner's music

[16] Cézanne is reported as saying of fruits 'they love having their portraits done. They sit there are if demanding pardon for changing colour. They come to you in all their perfume, speaking of the fields they have left, the rain that nourished them, the sunsets they have seen'.

[17] Nietzsche, himself a considerable musician, laments that 'the whole counterfeit coinage of the transcendental and of a Beyond found its most sublime advocate in Wagner's art, not in formulæ (Wagner is too clever to use formulæ), but in the persuasion of the senses which in their turn makes the spirit weary and morbid. Music in the form of Circe…'. *The Case of Wagner,* trs. Anthony Ludovici, Edinbugh, T. N. Foulis 1911, 1st Postscript, p. 39.

[18] Henry James, *Portraits of Places*, p. 69.

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have qualities that make Scruton's rapture fitting and right, but also Nietzsche's impatience or revulsion? Is it not rather that one temperament responds joyfully to the 'coinage of the transcendental' whereas the other finds it—the very same music—counterfeit and decadent?

Where there is variation in temperament (sometimes called 'no-fault disagreement, although the phrase is unfortunate, since in the arts diversity need not lead to disagreement) is there a truth about the work? Is Scruton right that Wagner is a musician of extraordinary spiritual power, or Nietzsche right that he is a decadent northern seducer, a showman who is scarcely a musician at all? Of course we will say that whichever judgment we incline towards is true, but a real doubt remains that in the absence of any convergence of sentiments talk of truth is here less than usually substantial. If we transposed John Mackie's error theory, which I believe to be wholly false in its intended application to morality, to aesthetic judgment, we might fear that it has something going for it. In moral matters diversity is bound to lead to the thought of a fault, flaw, or failure in those with whom we differ, and difference is indeed disagreement, but this is much less clear in matters of taste. Deflationism allows us to say that whichever opinion we agree with is the truth, that whichever response we share is fitting, and that there are qualities in the work that make it so. But we are, as it were, papering over the variations in legitimate, educated, vigilant sensibilities that may still remain. Perhaps, as James said, the grim old bearer of the scales is simply not invited.

Yet Leavis and Eliot talked of the common pursuit of true judgment. But in the case at least of the former there may have been an element of self-deception. One wonders what would have happened if in his class someone had agreed with all the facts about repetition that Leavis pointed out, but then stoutly defended their right to *like* the sweet effusion of solemn sentiment. Hume reminds us that 'We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition' and people have a right to have somewhat sentimental friends.[19] Would it have been part of a common pursuit of truth to argue that it is simply *wrong* to have that preference? We do not tell our friends that it is wrong for them to have whichever other friends belong to them. Whatever we regard as a poor choice would perhaps leave us with a kind of moral

[19] Or, in connection with the examples in his following paper, 'Reality and Sincerity', imagine someone who preferred the noble but theatrical declamations of Emily Bronte to the sincere expression of loss in Thomas Hardy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819119000251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

disappointment, certainly, just as when we think of some tastes as childish, immature, superficial or simply unintelligent. Nevertheless it may be difficult to make such criticisms stick in any particular case. Lovers of Wagner may be, and indeed have been, quick to suggest character flaws in Nietzsche, but although there may well have been such flaws, I do not myself see them as solely responsible for his eventual disappointment in Wagner. Eliot talked of personal prejudices and predilections as 'tares to which we are all subject', meaning weeds or obstacles that get in the way of 'the common pursuit'. But more realistically, James said that 'Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of "liking" a work of art or not liking it: the most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test'.[20]

If truth is only in play in an extremely ghostly form, and if, like James, we are largely tolerant of divergences of opinion amongst those who apparently do not suffer from various disqualifications, are we thrown back on Bentham, holding what Scruton calls the jejune theory that a currency of pleasure gives the only measure of the value or importance of a work?[21] Not necessarily, for we still have know-how to appeal to. We give up sentence-sized messages, but we still have feelings, and may be able to defend the Aristotelian idea that it is good or valuable to experience certain feelings. Significance, in a work of art, remains a matter of the significance of the feelings that can be engendered by encountering it. It is indeed possible to suggest that that de re perceptual knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, is best thought of as a kind of knowing how: the experience may give someone the ability to represent the work in their imagination which cannot be done without the acquaintance.[22] And knowing how to recapture significant feelings is a valuable attribute. Even Hume, writing before the Romantic belief in the superior feelings of the artist, tried to connect the delicate taste of the connoisseur with a superior capacity to deal with life. His very first essay, 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion' argues that the cultivation of taste adjusts us better to the shocks and disappointments of the world, as well as leaving us better able to adjust our

[20] Henry James *Partial Portraits,* London: Macmillan, 2011, pp. 395–6.

[21] *Art and Imagination*, p. 243.

[22] This was Laurence Nemirow's reaction to Frank Jackson's famous thought experiment. See Nemirow, 'Physicalism and the Cognitive role of Acquaintance' in William G. Lycan, ed, *Mind and Cognition*, Blackwell, 1990.

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opinions of those who surround us. But the claim is not made out especially convincingly, and both that and the later essay could be said to leave him open to Rousseau's bitter view that connoisseurship is a past-time of the wealthy, primarily indulged in order to confirm their social superiority to the honest toilers of the world. There is little in Hume or other eighteenth-century writers that connects aesthetic pleasure with understanding, or with a real expansion in our lives. The whole Leavisite defense of the supreme importance of literary studies required the same faith and with the same doubtful support.

But perhaps they were looking in the wrong place, searching for what Scruton calls an external criterion for appreciation, and then the failure to find it was inevitable. Tragedy or sad lyric poetry, or Beethoven or Mahler may fortify our Stoicism or nurture our sympathies or soothe our anxieties, but they may not, and whether or not they do that is scarcely their point, nor where their value lies. With other works of art this may be less clear. Music is equally written to excite and to soothe, to encourage piety, or martial sentiment, or to grace State occasions, and may be performed, as it was during the Second World War in London, to fortify morale. Literature may be written or photographs or pictures created, with the explicit aim of social change. Collingwood's rigid distinctions between art, craft, entertainment and magic quite quickly blur.

We nevertheless have to confront the fact that there is no inevitable connection between a discriminating capacity to enjoy the arts, and any measurable personal improvement. There is the stock example of the Nazi Commandant who listens to Schubert in the evenings and returns to effecting the torture and execution of prisoners in the morning. And there are less lurid examples: I do not know, for example, that beggars expect richer pickings as the Royal Opera House or the National Theatre audiences spill out for the evening. And there are great conductors who bully their orchestras and arts teachers who abuse their students. Beyond this there is great art that is itself corrupting: Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* is a stock example, but long before that Plato had banished the artists. The reason—that they tell lies about the Gods—may sound silly, but if we think of the Gods as embodiments of value, then the charge becomes that artists distort values, elevating some and occluding others as their art demands. Plato's particular worry was the Homeric glorification of the man of *thumos*, the glamorous but dangerous and wildly unreliable Achilles figure, and his problem is still with us.

It is necessary then to return to James, and to stick with the enjoyments and understanding of the arts as ends in themselves. The value

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819119000251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the arts lie in what they are capable of giving us, not in what we may change into as a result of the gift. It lies in our enjoyment of them. The passage from Henry James that I quoted at the beginning of this paper might suggest a laissez-faire, relativistic attitude, but of course James himself struggled prolifically to do critical justice to works, of literature, and exercised the finest discriminations in doing so.[23] It is just that his defense of the practice of criticism— which is just the same as looking, listening, or reading with one's mind alert— is that 'To criticise is to appreciate, to appropriate, to take intellectual possession, to establish in fine a relation with the criticised thing and make it one's own.'[24] And the point is that criticism is 'the only gate of appreciation, just as appreciation is, in regard to a work of art, the only gate of enjoyment.'[25]

But the term enjoyment is itself only a signpost. If it is supposed to be synonymous with pleasure we would be back with the jejune theory, worrying whether Bentham, or even Rousseau, was as far off the mark as we would like to think. We might predict being half irritated with Leavis for spoiling our pleasure in reading *Calais Beach*. But we do not and should not think that way. The enjoyment of feeling that an artist has taken you by the hand and led you on a journey which, perhaps with difficulty, you have been able to follow, is reassuring, warming, and life-enhancing. Finding that the reassurance and warmth were inappropriate would be like finding that a supposed friend was not entirely trustworthy. So we thank Leavis for showing us that our pleasure was misplaced, and resolve to read better.

The jejune theory finds it notoriously difficult to explain why we willing go to see a tragedy or read poems of loss or despair, but the view that we can enjoy the experience is no more surprising than that we can enjoy the rigours of hard mountaineering or ocean sailing, both of which are often very unpleasant at the time. Coming away feeling that for a while something *significant*, something deep in our humanity was asked of us, but that we can rise to it, is, after all, enjoyable, and perhaps especially so when our lives go badly and we need consolation and hope. Without being jejune, one might even say it was one of life's greatest pleasures.

[23] See, for instance, René Wellek, 'Henry James's Literary Theory and Criticism' *American Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Nov., 1958), pp. 293–321

[24] Henry James, *The Art of the Novel,* p. 155.

[25] Henry James, 'The Lesson of Balzac' in *Henry James: Literary Criticism: European Writers and their Prefaces*, ed. Leon Edel (Library of America, 1984), p. 115. I owe the reference to Adrian Poole.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819119000251 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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