

## FREEDOM AND RECEPTIVITY IN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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No-one can read far into our subject without finding an author linking aesthetic experience and freedom in one sense or another: Kant, notably of course, but also Schopenhauer, Schiller, and many more. In this article I want first [A] to remind you in a sentence or two of those by now classic ways of connecting concepts of freedom and aesthetic experience, and then [B] to outline some thoughts of my own. Section [C] opens up in more detail a less frequented and less well-charted topic: basically, the many-layered nature of much aesthetic experience, and how that can involve freedom in an ‘improvisatory’ contribution by the appreciator. Each layer can be thought of as containing a ‘given’—the product of earlier syntheses, plus a new component, in its turn, to be synthesized, whether historical, scientific, religious, or other. This probably occurs most of all in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, since art offers some controlling, ‘mastering’ of the appreciator’s response. Even so, art works leave room often enough for differences of interpretation, different ways of seeing and grasping the aesthetic object. [D] But aesthetic freedom, I shall argue, is far from unlimitedly accessible, available and untrammelled. As with freedom in other modes and other contexts, we can meet significant limits to aesthetic freedom. [E] Quite demanding problems can arise in the attempt to assimilate, integrate an improvised complement in an aesthetic experience-in-the-making. And we may win and appropriate aesthetic freedom, only to lose it again to new inflexibility of vision, itself sometimes of aesthetic origin.

[A]

For Kant, to experience the aesthetic is essentially to experience freedom, since aesthetic experience is the free play of imagination and understanding—in which we are freed (enjoyably) from the tasks of cognitive grasp and the demands of practical life. Not that the practical, and particularly the moral, are altogether alien to the experience: indeed, aesthetic freedom helps us to be aware—vividly aware—also of the freedom crucial to moral status. At the end of §59 of the *Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, Kant writes that ‘taste as it were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap...and teaching us to find a free satisfaction in the objects of the senses even without any sensible charm’. Without being subject to the universalizable laws of morality, the ‘free’ cooperation of imagination and understanding in aesthetic experience is far from chaotic: lawfulness in the sense of form is vital to the aesthetic. If (or rather when) concepts do enter an aesthetic experience, they are diverted from their normal roles and integrated in an aesthetic whole, contemplated for its own sake.

Freedom features no less centrally, though differently, in Kant’s account of the ‘sublime’. As vulnerable, finite beings, we are overwhelmed (imagination baffled) by the immensity of nature’s distances and by nature’s power. Yet, co-present with that dread, and not at all overwhelmed, there may surge a vivid realization of our conscious rational freedom—so fashioning an experience of the sublime.

Aesthetic experience as promoting a discovering, an awakening, of one’s own powers, especially the distinctive power of freedom—Schiller also famously developed this theme, in the context of the ‘aesthetic education of man’. As Paul Guyer tersely put it, this was to be achieved not through didacticism but only if that education ‘... allowed and encouraged us to freely develop capacities equally necessary for the enjoyment of beauty and the enjoyment of freedom in its moral and political application’.<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer, within his own highly individual and dramatic metaphysical vision, saw the world as, for the most part, dominated by non-rational cosmic ‘Will’ and (for us) as a domain of striving and frustration. Partial and temporary release from the power of Will and the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Guyer (1993), *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, CUP: p.97.

impulsion to action is, however, possible by more than one means; and aesthetic experience is notable among these.

[B]

I have not had to go far to find ingredients for my own view of the place of freedom within the aesthetic. If (as I am strongly tempted to believe) aesthetic experience is heightened consciousness, delighting in its powers and in objects that arouse them to the full, that implies that freedom is quite crucial to it: for a consciousness without self-awareness and the power to move, to steady and to fix its attention, is, in contrast to the human, rudimentary.

Free aesthetic activity has also a *nisus* towards gathering into unity, synthesizing, its objects, a much more creatively demanding venture than being aware of individual items. In this, memory too must play a crucial role, seeking to retain rather than losing from consciousness each new, and newly integrated, item in turn. It is not only items of the same kind or category (spatial shapes, for instance), that are integrated, but also highly dissimilar categories, e.g. sensory particulars, feelings, thoughts, ideas—at any level of abstraction. In aesthetic experience consciousness is free to take into account aspects of a manifold which in other contexts we disregard: for instance, spatial gaps between items, rests between notes in music. There can be no denying that everyday life requires the ignoring of much of the rich presentations of our senses, and has to deny itself, even more, the synthesizing of these with richer intellectual and emotional components. All this, however, is reversed in the aesthetic mode of appreciating, whether of art or of nature.

In trying to express the sense of free, assenting involvement in a momentous aesthetic experience, authors have echoed the words of Longinus on what he called ‘true sublimity’: in which ‘...the soul...is filled with joy and exultation, as though itself had produced what it hears’ (*On the Sublime*, Section VII).<sup>2</sup>

Summing up so far: I want then, to describe the mind’s operation in aesthetic experience as an interactive combination of receptivity and free activity, attention

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<sup>2</sup> On the sense that a work of art is proceeding from one’s own creativity, see also R. K. Elliott, ‘Aesthetic Theory and the Experience of Art’ (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1966-7).

sustained and moved towards maximally complex syntheses by the reward that is offered, obtained and further promised by its objects of appreciation. The offering and promising are crucial, as well as the spontaneous, autonomous directing and holding of attention and contemplative consciousness. On the latter, I shall have much more to say, shortly.<sup>3</sup>

There exists a diversity of other connections between modes of freedom and aesthetic experience, such as the Kantian claims, touched on already, that aesthetic experience makes us aware of our fundamental moral and rational autonomy and the distinctiveness it confers upon us. Perhaps, as more recent writers have argued, literary art in particular shows us endless imagined options for human interrelations, conceptions of self, social structures. Freedom depends not only on the absence of coercion but also on the awareness of options for thought and action—the more options and the more vividly they are imagined—the greater the freedom. Music, in its very different way, makes available an enormously wide range of options for feeling, emotion, mood, the dynamic and the calm, though often of a purity and intensity seldom reached in the responses of everyday life. That life and the choices of life can, nonetheless, be affected by these as ideal poles. To avoid over-simplifying, however, it has to be acknowledged that, in countless other cases, the options expressed cannot even roughly be matched to extra-musical experience but belong uniquely to the sphere of music.

Relevant here too are theories of the arts that present aesthetic freedom in terms of *release*.<sup>4</sup> Therapeutic (cathartic) theory is concerned with ways in which the arts can procure inner freedom as release from oppressive emotion relating to the harshest aspects of the general human condition. It has most plausibility as a theory of tragedy seen as mitigating an obsessive and debilitating dread of death. We confront the very worst, and its grip is loosened. I suspect this matches the experience of some but not all tragedy-goers, and fits some but by no means all tragedies—others being surely adept at enhancing dread and tightening the grip.

We may wonder, moreover, if freedom is the right word to use in relation to the creator of art. Is creation not often a story of the unconscious up-surgings of material—of

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<sup>3</sup> The space of an article will not allow me even to attempt to connect my discussion with the vastly wider question of freewill as such — from which I realize it can only artificially be detached.

<sup>4</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, for instance, includes among his five characteristic features of aesthetic experience ‘a feeling of freedom from concerns about matters outside [the object of attention]’ (*Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 1982 edition, p. lxii).

dark and little understood material, surely belonging far more to the *un-free*? In part, yes; but (interactivity again, of another sort) in order to become art, for the adherents of most styles of art, this material must undergo vital working, shaping, revising, and the bringing of it to a communicable form.<sup>5</sup> ‘Expression’ theorists were right that an expression of feeling or emotion is very different from a mere uncontrolled explosion of feeling—bombastic or hysterical. The one is free in a way the other is not. The artist’s freedom, in addition, extends to autonomy *vis-à-vis* the tradition and genre in which his or her work is naturally set: a freedom to conform to or to depart from these existing modes of creation.

[C]

Issues regarding freedom, and the theme of a duality between data and autonomous complement, arise in the aesthetic appreciation of both art and nature: sometimes in both at once—where an artist or poet prompts the revision or extension of our modes of seeing and responding to aspects of the natural world, and thus broadens the range of our aesthetic freedom. Here is one example.<sup>6</sup>

Wetlands, marshes, bogs, fens...humanity has been slow to explore and realize the great diversity of aesthetic experience they offer. Traditionally, over centuries, they were seen as almost uniformly threatening, fearful, gloomy; many such instances can be culled from poets, mediaeval and onwards. But from the Romantics to the present, appraisals become far more individualized and varied: witness particularly the poems of John Clare (1793-1864), who did most to teach fresh approaches to wetlands: happily appreciative responses to swamp, for instance as the refuge and home of birds such as the snipe, and as a domain of wild flowers, roots and moss. To grasp the multiple possibilities of interpretation and appraisal is (once more) to realize our aesthetic freedom, rescuing our view of the natural world from stereotype, from lazy and society-conditioned perception.

Aldo Leopold wrote in his ‘Marshland Elegy’, ‘A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh... Yearly since the ice-age it has awakened each spring to the clangor of cranes....

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<sup>5</sup> Kant wrote: imagination, for all its ‘richness, ...produces, in its lawless freedom, nothing but nonsense; the power of judgment, however, is the faculty for bringing it in line with the understanding’ (*Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, § 50).

<sup>6</sup> I am restating here some points from a paper I called ‘Imaginative Freedom and the Wetlands’, written for a conference at Ilomantsi, Finland in 1998 (published in Finnish, in *Suo on kaunis*, ed. Kirsi Hakala, Maahenki Oy, Helsinki, 1999).

When we hear [the crane's] call, we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution... [T]hey live and have their being...not in the constricted present, but in the wider reaches of evolutionary time'.<sup>7</sup>

Here again is that duality of data and interpretative complement. Without a major contribution from our own human sensibility this poignant and complex vision could never come to be: for that contribution alone adds to the sights and the sounds a sense of that vast history in a condensed, schematic, momentary, realization, and integrates it with the immediacy of perception at a particular dawn on the marsh! But for that, these elements would never be co-present, would arise and vanish one by one, becoming totally dispersed. Such a synoptic grasp is a remarkable work, a 'triumph', of human imaginative freedom. I am standing on the edge of the great marsh, watching and listening to the cranes, hearing the trumpets in the orchestra of evolution—the whole constituting an episode of intensified consciousness, making a memorable early morning.

We can count it as a substantial advance in our aesthetic sensibility that over relatively few years we have greatly extended the range of our appreciative assimilation of nature—from the microscopic (such as the processes that transformed the ancient forests to present-day peat), to the earth seen from aircraft and space-craft, and to Hubble-telescope images of stellar bodies and galactic events far beyond. We might speak here of aesthetic *reclamation*, and (again) what I have been saying about the appreciation of wetlands certainly falls under that description, a reclamation moreover that does not destroy what it reclaims.

In *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Malcolm Budd argued that the very quest for aesthetic-theoretical models is misguided in the area of nature-appreciation, precisely because there are no constraints limiting our manner of aesthetically appreciating nature, and no one approach can have a special legitimacy. And so, I wrote in a review, Malcolm Budd's book is able to end, satisfyingly, on the theme of the appreciator's freedom.<sup>8</sup> That theme, coupled to the more general theme of 'thought-components' which inform, or integrate with, sense-perception of the original item of nature—seemed to me particularly worth further exploration. Generically, it belongs to the familiar yet still highly elusive

<sup>7</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (OUP 1949), pp. 95-97.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Budd's *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* was published by OUP in 2003. I reviewed it in the *European Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 11, 2003). See p. 438; also pp. 87f of Malcolm Budd's book.

field of ‘seeing as’, ‘understanding as’. As we have noted, these components can be very diverse—for instance, involving awareness of historical or geological contexts (particular surface or deep structures, or a dizzy sense of the unimaginable abyss of past time). To re-apply an acute observation from Budd: not even Kant’s awesome ‘starry heavens’ are aesthetically apprehended in a non-conceptual fashion; for neither the distance nor the size of stars is ‘given’ in purely sense-perceived points of light. One might add that a still more complex conceptual complement is invoked in those Kantian accounts of the sublime, versions that have involved—as a counterweight to the daunting, overwhelming impact of nature’s immensities and energies—the thought of our dramatically contrasting rational freedom, which inserts (so instantiating its own powers) an exhilarating modification into the otherwise fearful, threatened quality of feeling. Some commentators have seen this as an unconvincingly heavy conceptual load for an aesthetic ‘experience’ to accommodate. But, given our undoubted ability to allude to such thoughts in that condensed, ‘stand-in’, surrogate form, this does not seem to me too onerous a demand.

Notably in some accounts of the sublime the emotional qualities involved are so sharply contrasted as to seem very unlikely to admit of unification. Although an ‘alternation’ model is obviously attractive, surely there is also strong phenomenological pressure, ample testimony, to a *single*, memorable, hard-to-describe, perhaps ineffable, emotional quality—overwhelming and exhilarating—not just each of these in turn.

For some of us there might feature, in aesthetic experience of nature, the background thought, ‘All this—all nature—is God’s art!’ And for others, ‘The wonder is—there is *no* divine mind behind any of this beauty!’ I do not want to suggest, however, that, merging with the purest sense data, the improvisatory component will necessarily be a reflective, even metaphysical supplement. Starting from sensuous immediacy, we construct some basic shapes into material objects: we freely decide how to scan this manifold, alternating perhaps between large and small scale objects of attention, from unobstructed sky to driftwood on the beach: and so on. So too with time: we may narrow down our time-consciousness to what strikes our senses at the moment we come upon a landscape. Or, we bring to the experience something of what we know of the history, or the prehistory, of the place where we stand.

I may employ my improvisatory freedom in being self-indulgently selective of only the benign aspects of the animal relationships in a landscape. Then I may sense a measure of ‘bad faith’ in my screening out thoughts that would jeopardize the overall agreeable tone of my aesthetic experience. And the sense of being in bad faith may itself threaten to tip me quite out of aesthetic mode. Or I may be fiercely anti-sentimentalist, refusing to focus on any of the ‘surface’ beauties, say, of animal vitality and movement because they serve in the capture and destruction of prey.

Surely, too, personal memories may be further components in the aesthetic appreciation of a location, memories, it may be, of the same spot at a markedly different time of year, or memories aroused by revisiting the setting of one’s childhood home after long absence. Or one may look out upon a sea, in its visible aspect calm and benign, but with the poignant memory that, the summer before, it drowned a too-intrepid child. Under what conditions could the latter case count as an aesthetic experience and not, simply, as a very sad thought? As with the other cases, it must be because of that gathering and synthesizing of the very diverse data, sensed, thought and felt, into a unified contemplative episode.

To remain aesthetic, what we seek is not to pursue an enquiry or wrestle with a memory, or with an argument (though we may dwell upon *what it is like* to be pursuing one): we are synoptically aware of the mutually modifying components—from sensuous to theory-dependent. We are aware of enough of these to bring the relevant aspects into active (modifying) relation with the aesthetic object as so far constructed. The outcome, once more, is an intensifying, deepening and re-focusing of consciousness.

For yet another instance, we are looking, in aesthetic mode, at a beautiful valley soon to be flooded as a reservoir. Integral to our overall aesthetic experience is an ingredient derived from this thought of its imminent destruction. For that aesthetic experience to be ‘beautiful-valley-threatened-by-technological-destruction’ we cannot relinquish our (fond) appraisal of the beautiful sensory particulars now before us; but these, in their beauty, must remain essential to the synthesized experience, together with the poignant thought of their obliteration. Of course at any time we may emerge from such distinctively aesthetic experience into a related but practically-orientated mind set, in



which we consider what might be done to stop the destruction. Moral and practical freedoms now succeed aesthetic freedom.

Or—even lacking a practical goad—a point may be reached at which (for instance) thought-content swamps sensuous content and aesthetic experience begins to mutate into reverie. The unity and intensity of a sense-centred experience are felt in danger of being lost. More generally, our free, enthusiastic pursuit of one aspect or component of one kind can threaten to overwhelm components of another equally important kind, and therefore choices have to be made—self-correction, to ‘re-tune’ towards a manageable aesthetic experience, or else to leave the aesthetic mode.<sup>9</sup>

At times, however, the appreciator of nature may (freely) decide to banish all thought-components as far as possible, and concentrate exclusively upon, say, the shimmer of sunlight through leaves.

Assimilation of personal memories and their emotional qualities may make a complex aesthetic experience often difficult or impossible fully to *share*. This may matter, for some people, rather less with nature than it does with art. To others it may matter a great deal to share, communicate, aesthetic experience of nature, when it is complex and highly individualized; their sense of personal identity may be closely involved in their aesthetic relation with nature. On occasion, articulating this relation may be approached with the resources of art, that is to say autobiographical art. So appreciation of nature and of art can be intriguingly interrelated.

I hope I have underlined what an extraordinary power of the mind it is, that furnishes the ‘surrogates’, the condensed allusions and intimations of material not currently present to the senses (even where that is possible) nor spelled out discursively. Nothing on the lines of a simple image or symbol could do this job alone, since that would be useless unless it were itself interpreted—in a condensed mode—as playing that role... So the problem would break out again. What is clear to me is that in talking of the aesthetic appropriation of the allusive components, we have been speaking not of dispositional but of actualized, episodic conscious events—experiences. If that account clashes with a philosophy of mind that wants to replace as

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<sup>9</sup> On the ‘tuning’ of aesthetic experiences, see also chapter 9 of my *The Reach of the Aesthetic* (Ashgate, 2001), ‘Data and Theory in Aesthetics’.

far as it can the episodic with the dispositional and the behavioural, then I would claim that an analysis of complex aesthetic experience provides as strong counter-evidence to that as one could wish.

[D]

My account so far, however, has been idealized and oversimplified, suggesting falsely that aesthetic freedom is always unlimitedly accessible and untrammelled.

Thought-components (in the wide sense) can enter an aesthetic experience in more than one way. One of these does indeed involve a free, autonomous decision to bring the thought into consciousness, to hold it there and so modify the aesthetic experience. But in another the thought arises, surges up, independently of any decision to admit it. We may then (freely) endorse and assimilate it, or we may oppose it as undesirably modifying the experience that we seek to 'tune'. Thoughts can resist clarification, be vague, refuse obsessively to be banished, or belong, in part at least, to the unconscious, and not be at our instant beck and call. Any of these may still make a difference to the emotional quality of our aesthetic experience.

Quite different kinds of limits to aesthetic freedom are encountered when we face a complex, difficult work of art and our mental energies do not suffice to gather together, to synthesize, its many sub-unities into a single unity, its emotional qualities into one unique resultant quality or to merge-in relevant thoughts. Concentration-power is not always up to the challenge. Similarly with appreciation of nature: individual items and groups of items we most often manage: a strenuous grasp of the wider context by no means always.

Frustration can occur also because of over-familiarity with a work of art or a landscape in nature. Attention can skim—fail to grip. We move freely enough around its components, but our response is feeble, the experience unmemorable: we cannot do justice to the work. Aesthetic freedom, in the sense of motility, is not in question, but it is insufficient to unlock our emotional responses and obviate what has been called 'aesthetic impotence'.

All such limitations on aesthetic freedom are doubtless part and parcel of our human finitude. But a philosophy of aesthetic appreciation and education can work to understand and mitigate at least some of them.

[E]

I want to take note not only of limits but also, finally, of some related problems and failures in the area of aesthetic freedom.

Most often the thought-component of an aesthetic experience adds to it relevant and compatible content that supplements the initial data of the senses. There occur problem cases, however (already mentioned) where the result is dissonance, not harmony, and others where it is difficult to anticipate what the aesthetic outcome can be. Current examples are the vigorous disputes over the aesthetic appraisal of wind turbines.<sup>10</sup> As highly visible material objects, wind turbines are readily denounced on aesthetic grounds, as destructive of natural features, replacing much-loved upland skylines or untouched seascapes with gross near-identical metal structures. Nonetheless, a defender may say: merge the turbine perceptions with an appropriate thought component (the good to be achieved through the provision of renewable energy), and the resultant overall aesthetic experience of wind turbines will be transformed. The structures will no longer be seen as grim defacement but as agents of wellbeing. But is the benign thought component here powerful (authoritative?) enough to achieve this transformation? It is by no means obvious how we determine this. Alternatively, are we left with two non-merging items of experience, aesthetic appraisal (negative) and welfare appraisal (positive)? And of course an unresolved struggle between them. It will doubtless be argued by some that the turbines are indeed a great defacement (an aesthetic evil), yet the goods of human welfare that they facilitate must be given priority over the aesthetic qualities of nature and the appreciation of these.

It is only, moreover, by ‘thinking in’ a good involving many people, many cities and much technology—as one looks out over a now wind-turbined land- or sea-scape—that one might hope to construct the complex aesthetic experience that would effectively neutralize the offence on the perceptual level. But how ironical that this very thought content and the good that it celebrates conflict so stridently with those very different

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<sup>10</sup> I am thinking, for instance, of the recent exchange in the internet journal, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, initiated by Yuriko Saito. The relevant articles are — Yuriko Saito, ‘Machines in the Ocean: the Aesthetics of Wind Farms’ (Vol. 2, 2004), Jon Boone, ‘The Aesthetic Dissonance of Industrial Wind Machines’ (Vol.3, 2005), and again Yuriko Saito, ‘Response to Jon Boone’s Critique’ (also in Vol. 3, 2005).

goods—tranquil countryside or open sea, freedom from visually pervasive reminders of a near-omnipresent technology—whose loss is being brought about precisely by the pylons and propellers themselves.

I realize that this very substantial and complex problem can scarcely be more than mentioned in a quick run-through of many issues such as the present essay. Yet that may be sufficient to illustrate how the sense-perceptual and the contribution of our freedom-and-reason can be in tension or conflict, as well as mutually enhancing and enriching. In such cases the options for decision can be several, defying simple appeal to rule or principle, and requiring case-by-case appraisal. (Yet, for myself, that does not make them always agonisingly difficult: I wholeheartedly oppose wind generators on Lake District and Scottish Highland sites, and not on these alone.)

A sense of disparity and of dissonance have their parallels also in our dealings with art works: not least in some instances of recent art, where there can seem to be a conflict between an object presented to the senses and its title or manifesto. We may opt for suspension of disbelief, leaving an unbridged gap between object and conceptual complement; or scepticism whether the two sides do in fact constitute a single and effective work of art, whether the conceptual component does in any way cohere with the physical art work. Our verdict may sometimes be ‘difficult art’, but at other times ‘mystification’.

Although art may well help us in fighting for our imaginative freedom, for example, in its repudiation of conventional, ‘picture-postcard’ landscape composition, in some cases new cliché can be the result of projecting readily-assimilated (and perhaps itself repetitious) art upon nature. In such a case, a particular style or individual work of art does not simply add to our options for perception of particular objects, situations and scenes, but, more strongly, takes over perception, comes to monopolize it. Even great works (impressionist or post-impressionist, for instance) can—particularly if over-exposed—have this unfortunate effect.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, art can have the power to initiate and insinuate, to present without the requirement of evidence or argument, one-sided moral or ideological views. Its very vividness, boldness and impact can overwhelm critical appraisal in the area of its subject-matter. Its ‘concrete images’ and symbols can be

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<sup>11</sup> See ‘Nature in the Light of Art’ (*Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*, Vol. 6, 1971-72, chapter 14).

seducing, conditioning agents as well as indispensable parts of our aesthetic equipment. The power of art to charm or bewitch spectators into acquiescence and acceptance of ideology, so to move them by the forceful and seemingly irrefutably logical development of action and ideas in (say) a drama, that the ideas themselves seem, once more, to emanate from the spectators' own will—this power is not always a manifestation of free and rational persuasion.

Another implicit, and needless, denial of freedom may lurk behind the familiar claim that a trend 'must' be taken to its allegedly 'logical conclusion'. For instance, a dogmatic manifesto may argue for out-and-out abstraction in visual art, though it cannot be ruled out in advance that there may be more aesthetic value in some position short of that extreme, allowing a measure of reference to the world beyond the canvas, even if schematic, veiled or indirect, without which a work must lose complexity and intensity. But aesthetic theorizing cannot by itself determine where that maximal position (or positions) between representational and abstract may lie.

It may even come about that the very celebration and expression of our aesthetic freedom can become, paradoxically, an impediment and a denial of that very freedom! Through art we are able to combat or suspend everyday conceptualization and categorization. This doesn't need much arguing for today. Nevertheless that role can be misunderstood and exaggerated. Precisely this happens when it becomes definitional that art is (morally, socially, politically) dissident. 'Art by its nature is dissident...' wrote Rachel Campbell-Johnston.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, some dissident art is great art: but some great art is far from dissident; and some dissident art can be trendily or dogmatically rebellious—earnest and self-important, but thin, repetitive, lacking sharp critical bite.

Finally, one perhaps controversial point can be ventured on the relation between the 'first order' and the 'second order' or 'meta' in the field of aesthetics. The 'meta' level (the level of aesthetic theory) can itself impinge on the phenomena it seeks to describe and explain philosophically. A theory—or rather the schematic posture of consciousness that it engenders—can itself become an important background ingredient or component in a 'first order' overall synthesized aesthetic whole, imparting its tone and atmosphere, whether solemn, mysterious, or everyday, ennobling the aesthetic or reducing it to

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<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

something modest or even trivial. Thus the study of aesthetics is made both complex and absorbing.

Applying this to the account outlined in this essay, I should hope that a sense of wonder may often predominate, both on account of the objects upon which our aesthetic awareness plays (in both nature and art) and on account of the extraordinary feats of our conscious minds in the forging of aesthetic experience—powers of integrating and encapsulating components of such radically different kinds.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I have over-emphasized the self-contained distinctiveness of aesthetic experience in the present essay. Elsewhere, in *Wonder and other Essays*, and in *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, I discuss the important and complex relations between aesthetic and cognitive judgements, aesthetic-religious and aesthetic-moral relationships.

I am indebted at several points to writings of J. N. Findlay. See my chapter, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought and its Metaphysical Setting', in *Studies in the Philosophy of J. N. Findlay*, ed. R. S. Cohen, R. M. Martin and M. Westphal (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1985), pp. 192-211.

I owe the references to Beardsley and Kant, in footnotes 4 and 5 (and other helpful comments) to Emily Brady who kindly read this essay while it was in preparation.