ART CRITICISM AND SEMANTIC DISCIPLINE

Lewis W. Beck *

When ideals are rejected or "debunked" and when illusions are destroyed by semantic analyses which uncover the "real reasons" behind the "good reasons" for human actions and institutions, a work of art often seems to lie in a region safe from attack. If we seek limits to this exorcism or "enlightenment," art appears to be a form of communication which withstands by its very nature any translation into an impersonal language about matters of fact. This autonomy of art, its freedom from the requirements of scientific accuracy, is always one of its most striking characteristics, regardless of the special theories which have been held as to the essence of the beauty which seems its own excuse for being. "Art for art's sake" and the Ivory Tower tradition are at most only exaggerations of a freedom which seems to be the life of art. To ask for a program for a piece of music or for a narrative explanation of any work of art is to ask that "divinely superfluous beauty" be put to work augmenting our stores of information. "Tragedy is more philosophical than history," said Aristotle, but to seek in it a report of actual events is to judge it by standards which often seem alien to that which is essential in it.

Nevertheless, Aristotle also says that poetry is an imitation, and when art is regarded as a representation of something else, there is the danger that it will be felt as of insignificant worth in comparison with the thing which it merely pictures, and that the artist will be accused of a kind of counterfeiting. On the other hand, in spite of the vaunted independence of the artist, one of the most common objections to "modern" art is that it does not imitate reality and is therefore "meaningless."

Can we reconcile these two deep-seated attitudes towards art? Can an artist describe or imitate reality, and at the same time claim immunity from matter-of-fact criticism? To answer these questions we must first determine the locus and status of artistic meaning.

* Department of Philosophy.
I. Objectivity and its Consequences

Kant's writings occupy a unique place in European thought because of the way in which he sought to do justice to the intellectual and moral attitudes which were in obvious conflict at the end of the Enlightenment. The rights of each he defended in his "two-world" theory. But he did not preserve an untenable dualism in his picture of nature and human nature; he sought rather to bridge the gap between the scientific and moral attitudes in a metaphysical theory based in part upon aesthetical experience. This required a new deciphering of that experience itself.

His analysis of the experience of the beautiful is directed primarily at distinguishing it from the merely pleasing or interesting. The former experience is dependent upon a universal characteristic of any possible human experience, the abstract relation of content to mere form in perception. The latter experience is dependent upon actual human interests which may well be widespread among men, but which are not necessarily present in all cases. Only by involving the necessary characteristics of all human experience can beauty be absolutely recognizable by all men; it is that which should please all men regardless of particular personal characters, whereas the interesting thing attracts only those who happen to have certain desires and interests. A thing is not beautiful because it aids us in satisfying some desire, for there is no human interest which could be served in all men by a single object, and all men should admire the beautiful. Aristotle had naively listed among the sources of art the joy we get when we recognize something familiar, but even this reference to a thing as a norm or a model is an adulteration of the purity of aesthetic pleasure, for the work of art must please without any principle or idea or remembrance with which an agreement would be pleasant, since obviously not all men have this knowledge of what is represented.

Naturally then Kant was forced to prefer a highly abstract art with little or no content. Tones and colors are only reluctantly called beautiful by him, and that only after he has convinced himself that there may be some truth in the new theory that they are dependent upon "pulsations" and thus ultimately upon formal mathematical relations. A flower is to him the paradigm of natural beauty, for neither our purpose nor our interest is served by it, and we do not use whatever knowledge we have of it when we judge it to be beautiful. And in deciding whether a work of art is beautiful, there is no object
or standard such as "nature" which we can appeal to, because a beautiful work of art cannot owe its beauty to its being an imitation of something else.

The sharp distinction between aesthetic taste and interest, which leaves the former only mathematical or geometrical form for its object, is not made for the purpose of defending some extreme artistic preference of his. Rather, he wanted to show that man is not merely a part of nature, but that he has something supersensuous in him. Such a conception could be supported only if it could be shown in some way that man is in part independent of natural forces. Sufficient evidence of this Kant found in three facts: that in knowledge there is some element which does not come from the senses, in morality some feeling of obligation which is not due to hidden motives, and in art a taste which is free from particular interests and desires.

This moral or religious motivation of all his thinking led him to interpret the aesthetic experience as indicative of something "higher" in man and nature. But it did not produce the criteria of art which Kant accepted. That is to say, though art is a revelation of something "eternal" in man, a single work of art does not have to indicate in itself anything about man's moral nature. Though Kant was a moralist, and to him the possibility of an autonomous art was evidence of man's moral being, he did not allow this interpretation to destroy its own basis, which is that very autonomy itself. Art must be kept free from the dictates even of morality. The moral interest must be excluded from art if it is to remain autonomous and to serve its metaphysical and deeper moral role.¹ Kant was simply interested in preserving the purity of aesthetic pleasure from all irrelevant criticism.

But such a theory had great disadvantages. It is true that it defended art from the encroachment of alien interests and Philistinism, whether originating in the economic, social, moral, or religious sphere. But in so doing, it narrowed the contents of art and excluded the possibility of an aesthetic treatment of these same interests, which give to both life and art their deeper significance. Art was freed, but its free contents were restricted to little else than flowers, arabesques, and the verse of Frederick the Great.

Some modern theoreticians who aim at an equally aristocratic and austere theory of art are in an equally narrow groove. Clive Bell,

¹ In spite of its title, section 59 of the Kritik of Judgment, "Concerning Beauty as Symbolic of Morality," does not contradict what is said here, but rather reinforces it.
for example, is forced by his theory of a *special* esthetic emotion to find for it a special stimulus for artistic appreciation which does not occur in our ordinary evaluation of nature, of a beautiful woman, etc. Art, of course, generally consists of something more than significant form, but to Bell this "more" is in itself neither good nor bad; it is irrelevant to the whole question of aesthetic value. "To appreciate a work of art," he says, "we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions."

But immediately questions crowd in upon this theorist, questions more difficult to answer successfully than Kant's. Why should this emotion differ from all others in having so high a degree of specificity of stimulus, which seems to be its chief recommendation to the aesthete- tician who wishes to escape from subjectivism? And is there, after all, such an emotion? Is it not rather a hypostatization of a feeling we may find as an aspect of many excitations which do not depend upon our understanding of them, or upon our possession of biological needs for their stimulation? Would not this emotion be very "thin" compared to those integral feelings which are aroused by objects which speak to our heightened sense of vicarious pleasure or well-being? One is immediately reminded of Kant's remark that perhaps no one has ever performed a truly moral act: such a taste, which depends upon such an emotion, is admittedly rare. To be sure, there is no danger that significant form can ever be exorcized by asking what it means; it is significant of nothing. But what a price must the artist pay to be free from the charge of speaking about facts and values which he does not, but which the scientist and moralist do, profess to know about theoretically!

Thus looked at, the question of the meaning and content of art is the old query put to Ion by Socrates: How can the poet speak with authority about matters in which he is not expert? Failing to be satisfied with Plato's answer, the modern purist takes the subject matter away from the artist.

**II. Impressions, Expressions, and Symbols**

Kant's defense of objectivity is one of the most fundamental achievements in aesthetics, but aesthetics as a theory of art cannot

---

2 Following William Stern (*Wertphilosophie*, p. 129), I use the word *symbol* in a more restricted sense than usual. The following distinctions are observed: generically, a *sign* is anything which means anything else. Specifically, *sign* is distinguished from *symptom* and *symbol*, which are signs in the generic sense. A
stand against the actual artistic movements of a culture. And the art of his time was one in which form was being subjected to meanings (Hegel’s definition of romantic art), and even the most formal of the arts was being vivified by new contents which gave it a more dramatic human significance.

Other theorists, both before and after Kant, attempted to come to grips with the problem of actual content found in great art. The works of these other writers and artists differ widely, but they all agree that art has a meaning of some sort. They differ in their localization of the meaning. It is possible to group their theories under three main types, which I shall call the impressionistic (or transitive), the expressionistic (or reflexive), and the symbolic (or intrinsic) theories. The first of these might also be called the semantic theory, since it holds that art is imitative and reports on things which it is supposed to mean. The second might be called the symptomatic theory of art, since it says that the meaning of art lies in its being an expression of personality or social conditions, and that a correct understanding of it leads us to an understanding of the conditions under which it arose and of which it is a symptom. The symbolic theory holds that the true locus of meaning in a work of art is in some sense within itself, and this theory, though differing from Kant’s in many details, can yet draw much from his defense of the uniqueness of beauty.

The semantic theory is one that has seldom if ever been defended in a pure form. Nevertheless, it is well to see what would be the effect on art of a theory which developed consistently the notion which is so often implicit in popular opinions about art, the view that the purpose of art is representative. According to this, the meaning of a work of art is “transitive,” like the meaning of a sign; it would be

symptom is a natural object which indicates in a causal and non-conventional way the real existence of something else. A symbol has the conventionality and some of the arbitrariness of a sign, but unlike it, the symbol has a value which is phenomenologically, if not genetically, independent of the value of the thing it indicates in its rudimentary signal function. Thus a flag is a symbol of a country; its name is a sign of it; its imperialism may be a symptom of its exhausted market. The factors which determine the transition from sign to symbol and conversely have been exhaustively studied by psychoanalysts, Ogden and Richards (with a different terminology), etc., and cannot be further pursued here. It must be noted, though, that sign and symbol do not constitute a complete dichotomy. In many symbols there is a rudimentary and ambiguous significance, and in many signs (metaphors) there are vestigial symbols. We may speak of the “sign tonic” and the “symbolic overtone” in many communications. The entire psychoanalytical theory of symbolism is based upon the possibility of a continuous transition from one status to the other, even though the psychoanalytic definition of a symbol is somewhat narrower than the one followed here.
found in the subject matter it indicates or suggests. Were this theory acceptable, two forms of art would meet with approval. If we follow Plato and hold that the real thing is the idea or the idea, then we could be classicists and idealists in art and still say with Aristotle that art is an "imitation of nature." Or if we think of the particular thing as real, or are perfectly consistent and think not of the persisting thing but of a single, unique, and transitory situation as the ultimate reality, then we could be impressionists and hold that the purpose of art is to "save the appearances." Because both of these attempts to define the subject matter of art presupposed that the artist could seize reality directly without the paraphernalia of science, the advancing structures of knowledge could not outmode his descriptions.

Idealists and impressionists both found reality aesthetically valuable. Their only point of difference lay in what they considered to be real, and what they conceived the character of the aesthetic vision to be. What one considered to be real, the other considered an illusion; classicism was realistic, and impressionism was nominalistic or even terministic. Both tell a complete story from a chosen standpoint, and one aspect or perspective is exhausted in their imitations. But our modern conception of nature, thanks to the success of science in its attack on the theory that the ideal is the real, has been so narrowed that a man calling himself both an idealist and a realist would perhaps be overbold. Our modern scientific conception of nature is more nearly that of the impressionist, for our science is but a systematization of our particular observations—or at least we tend to emphasize that aspect of its structure. The sensations in these observations, enjoyed without regard for the classifications and arrangements of the scientist, form the material of realist and impressionist art. Positivism, which not accidentally made itself felt about the time of the impressionist revolt, holds that the entire task of science is to find relationships between the given appearances, so the difference between the scientist, at least as the positivist sees him, and the impressionist is not the commonly accepted one between the aesthetically valuable content of art and the valueless abstract content of science; it lies rather in what each does to the given material. The scientist classifies it, measures it, predicts from it; the impressionist merely "entertains" it without committing himself to it. He attempts to reproduce it in its innocence.

His conception of what his object is—the immediately given impressions of surfaces and media—he owes to positivism, and only
through a supposition of the adequacy of this theory of science can he call his object "nature." But this assumption is not well grounded. Science does not base itself exclusively on the surfaces of things. Because only the surfaces were given, though, the positivist thought and the impressionist painted as if surface were all there was; it never occurred to either that "nature" was not something given to sensation but rather a construction embodying much that was not phenomenally given at all. Their striving for "objectivity" obscured their vision that in this striving there was a preconception which would have been untenable had they really reduced all the contents of science and art to mere sensations. For positivism, the preconception could not be mere sensationism; there was also the tacit assumption that there was a knowing mind, actively striving to organize the sensations and report on them in simple language. Analogously, for impressionism the assumption was not merely that the aesthetical object was all atmospheric surface, but also that the artist had an arbitrary choice of subject matter and perspective. In neither case, whether scientific concept or picture or poem, was content solely a report on something unscientific or unartistic; it was at the same time, and more importantly, an indication of the standpoint and interest and choice of the scientist or artist. That is, it was an expression of the creator as well as an impression of the object.

These facts could never be seen by them—or more accurately, when they were seen by those whose sole interest had been in the sensory phenomena, they immediately became interested in the fact that they themselves were important in the determination of the concept of nature and object. Thereupon they rejected positivism or modified it so as to recognize the hypothetical and operational elements which determine the "what" of scientific experience (here consider Pearson, Mach, and Poincaré). In art, those who recognized it surrendered impressionism. Some, like Cezanne, went in the direction of a more "realistic" notion of the object, while others turned inward. Renoir even said, "A painting is primarily the product of the imagination and ought never to be a copy."

Thus the instability of so passive a theory and the necessary movement beyond it become clear. If impressionism by virtue of its care-

---

8 This is the meaning of much of Stern's and James Ward's earlier work. Stern’s "positivistic paralogism" (Person u. Sache, vol. 1) would of course be treated by modern positivists as "metaphysical," but what they will not have as metaphysics they must use as fictions, whose origin and status constitute "pseudo-problems."
ful rejection of conceptualization and definition of objects finally ended in alienation from what everyone understood by nature and existence, then obviously the essence of its art was not that it was a perfect copy of nature. It was not impression but expression; not copy but creation. In science, the positivist's circumscription of conditions for experience, if carried to an extreme, would end necessarily in solipsism; the same circumscription of conditions for seeing drove the impressionists to private perspectives and thus to subjectivism. Subjectivism, however, is in effect a projection of the individual into the world, and thus the impressionist method necessarily generated expressionistic art.⁴

Expressionism is an example of what I have called the theory that art is a symptom. For it, the meaning of art is reflexive. It reflects an act or condition of creation, rather than representing an object which it may actually suggest or resemble. The task of the critic is to find these reflexive meanings; Kenneth Burke suggests that the student of art may be interested in poetry in the same way the economist is interested in the stock market, finding evidence in it of "the processes of social commerce operating in life as a whole."⁵ Art is a symptom, a "picture" in the medical sense, of its conditions. Rothschild calls it an ego-centric art; "Every picture that the expressionist paints is a 'self-portrait'," he says.⁶ A great deal of art which is not called expressionistic nevertheless falls under the class of works which can be profitably considered as symptomatic; thus "expressionistic theory" is a broader term than "expressionism" as an artistic school. The outstanding example of this is what is called "symbolic art." The use of symbols in art does not mean that the theory underlying the art is symbolical; in fact, it generally means that the art is expressionistic, in this broad sense. Symbols in art "merely serve to tell a story; they are little better than picture writing."⁷ The symbol is only a simple and conventionalized device for showing what is in the mind of the artist; since he cannot paint swiftness, he paints wings on the feet of Hermes, and these wings are clearly expressive, indicative of attitudes to his object rather than impressive, denoting their reality.

⁴I am, of course, again considering an extreme case: "movements" in art are always extremes. These extremes are generally not reflected in the best works of any movement.
⁵Atitudes towards History, vol. 11, pp. 35, 36.
⁶The Meaning of Unintelligibility in Modern Art, p. 51.
⁷Gardner, Principles of Christian Art, p. 146.
But aside from expressionism and other school ideologies which explicitly defended what few wished to challenge, namely that each artist has a legitimate individual and personal creativity, art criticism easily drifts into the position of evaluating all art as a symptom of conditions, regardless of whether the artist was trying to "express himself" or not. The late V. F. Calverton, for example, says,

"Creative and critical composition . . . have (sic!) altered both in style and substance with each of the vicissitudes of social evolution. . . . We . . . discover that all the theories and concepts, the dicta and shibboleths, of creative and critical effort are but the outgrowths of the social system in which they have their being. . . . The criteria of excellence have varied with each advancing epoch."  

This view is very widespread, and though Calverton's development of the thesis is not extravagant, it easily lends itself to enthusiastic exaggeration—as witness the Munich exposition of "entartete Kunst."

Art is a part of culture, and as culture changes, art undergoes like transformations. So much for the fact of expression. What does it mean? Does it mean that the value of art is a function of its symptomatic evidence, and that art is to be judged only by its adequacy as sociology and autobiography? Taste does change from time to time, as Calverton says, and this fact leaves us with the problem of justifying any criterion of whatever artistic excellence we at a particular stage in social development find interesting and worth expressing. Does the fact that taste varies with social conditions mean that it is only a translation into the realm of art of the social and economic interests and preferences of the critic, just as the artist is supposed to have expressed his conflicts and repressions, hunger and discomforts, in a piece of work?

If we answer this question affirmatively, then the vaunted autonomy of aesthetic value must go, debunked and reduced to a material interest imperfectly sublimated. There is no disputing about taste, because the real logic of taste lies below the level of discussion, in causes and not in reasons for preferences. Art is merely propaganda, and criticism is merely opposing propaganda, and both are to be judged by their social effectiveness.

Well, much art is only propaganda, and perhaps most criticism is nothing more. But more importantly, it ought to be called propaganda and not art because of the prima facie differences between the art experience and the propaganda experience. To be sure, the

---

8 The Making of Society, pp. 861–862. (I have changed the order of sentences.)
vehicles of artistic expression will be determined in part at least by the social conditions which underlie the content of propaganda, since only by appropriating words and situations and materials from the attitudes of a time and a group can art have a message at all. Moreover, since what is expressed must be something more than mere artistic form (if we are not to be restricted to Kant’s arabesques) our likes and dislikes obviously do play a part in deciding the form and content of works of art.

But this does not touch their essential nature, their value as art and not as economics, morality, or religion. Beauty may belong to things we like or dislike on these other grounds, but it is not for that reason merely the object of our preferences which have little or nothing to do with the aesthetic success or failure of the creation. It is not possible to say categorically that this may not be the case; there is nothing self-contradictory in saying that beauty is after all “subjective.” But if it is, or even if we merely argue falsely that it is, we lose the possibility of finding any kind of criteria for art and taste. No grounds for art-education (the improvement of taste) and no norms, even of the vaunted normlessness, of art can be found.

The opinion that beauty is private and subjective is widely held, I think, only because the full implications of the view are seldom explicitly recognized by those who profess this easy aesthetical libertinism. The radical inadequacy of this theory is closely related to the error in Mr. Calverton’s opinion. For there are arts in which vision of social conditions is exceedingly obscure, to say the least. Take music for example. Taste in music may be a matter of purely private pleasure to which no general rules apply; its appreciation may depend upon unique and individual desires and pleasures, so that we cannot say that one piece of music is in general better than another. So much may be true in the theory of subjectivity. But what are these desires and pleasures? Their causality is not purely private and unique. They are preferences for or pleasures in characteristics of the thing we call music, and in the very act of expressing our attitudes, no matter how undisciplined and unique the attitude itself is, we are judging it and its characteristics. In disciplined taste, they play the preeminent role in determining pleasures and preferences, but to deny their place in any appreciation whatsoever—a denial which is an implication of this theory when developed consistently—is to assert the nonsense that a deaf man is as good a critic as any other.
It does not matter whether we call these determining factors “aesthetic values” or “pure beauty” or “significant form.” By whatever name we call them, they are not characteristics of our selves but of the work of art; and they determine our preferences rather than being determined by them. If these factors are put into a score because of social and psychological forces at work upon the composer, these social and psychological factors are not yet the sole determinants of the content of the art, because (except in the case of obvious symbols, e.g., bugle calls) their symptomatic fitness to these causes is not itself socially or psychologically caused. The meaning even of a symptom is not exhausted in telling what it is a symptom of; its meaningfulness involves also its specific character by virtue of which we know it to mean other things, but its reality and value include these features it has which do not merely refer beyond themselves.

Therefore the original question about Calverton’s position, “Is art to be judged only by its adequacy to express the conditions in the individual and the society in which its originates?” must be answered in the negative. There is some intrinsic and non-subjective content in art which determines its quality and appeal, and thus our likes and dislikes. It does not matter whether this quality is aesthetically significant only in relation to a subjective attitude, or not; this is a metaphysical question which can go unanswered without seriously affecting our specific judgments of taste. But the recognition that a non-subjective characteristic plays a part in our preferences marks a surrender of the extreme symptomatic approach in criticism, for this feature does not depend upon our attitudes, nor does its significance depend upon the mere attitude of the artist.

This feature or characteristic is the “inherent” meaning of art. So the logical development brings us back to a position close to Kant’s. But is there any way to save the meaningful content of art from his own criticism without falling back into one of the untenable positions we have examined? There is, if we can combine his theory that the artistic experience is unique and irreducible to any other kind of experience with the theory that the content of aesthetic experience is something new and not just a repetition of things we already know through other media. That is, art can be free of moral and other irrelevant encroachments and at the same time significant in its commentary on these values if they are transmuted into artistic material and cease for the moment to be under the sway of the
canons of moral and political and social beliefs. A theory which combines these two beliefs is one which I have called the symbolic.  

To put the message of art outside itself, as is done in highly allegorical works, introduces a dualism and conflict not only into the art but also into the life of men experiencing it. To them it often appears that the artistic value is insignificant and illusory, for what they learn of life in art is only a faded copy of what they have learned by more practical methods in everyday experience. Kant, as we have seen, defended its autonomous value only by isolating it from these themes, and the result was that it ceased to be meaningful at all. The danger from which he and Clive Bell were seeking to escape was that if art had political, religious, or moral themes its meaning would be a political, moral, or religious one, rather than an artistic. The problem for us, however, is not, "Can art have a political, moral, or religious significance?" It is rather, "Can political, moral, and religious themes be given an artistic significance?"

Much modern criticism is dominated by an attempt to return art to "life" and to justify a synthesis of their values, to bridge the gap between them which was made in order to insulate values from semantic shock. This isolation in the realm of fancy or aesthetic illusion or imagination or pure aesthetic emotion occurred in the refuge many artists sought from the concerns of the "practical" world. To understand the principles on which criticism is now trying to return art to life, and yet to save artistic standards from domination by practical affairs, let us examine a book by Stephen Spender. Spender wants to synthesize art and life, yet to preserve or rather return to the belief that literature has an inherent meaningfulness which should not be lost sight of even when art is being used as a political weapon. In his suggestive, though somewhat confused,

---

9 It is essential to keep symbolic art and a symbolic theory of art distinct if we are to understand either of them. Hegel specifically rejects the symbolic form of art (Oriental) when he says, "In symbolic art we have an abstract idea and natural patterns which are not suitable to it." Yet he defends a theory of art which I call symbolic, for he holds that art is not something which primarily means or refers to a thing or an idea. Art for him is the intuitive or sensuous presentation of the Ideal itself, but the symbolical or allegorical form of art is one in which the meaning remains transcendent to the work and must be sought outside it because the material is not sufficiently transparent to the meaning the art-product is supposed to have. Thus an oriental temple merely suggests to him the ideals and values of a certain mode of life; but a Greek temple is the Greek ideal in stone.

10 A cartoon in a recent issue of Esquire gives an inelegant but clear illustration of this attitude: a patron asks an artist the price of a nude he has just painted, and when he is told, he says, "Why, I can get a live one for less than that."
book, *The Destructive Element*, he points out that the motivating force in Henry James's Ivory Tower refuge lay in his desire to save individual artistocratic values from the general ruin of the world, from the Wasteland. Now Spender does not attack the Ivory Tower because it is meaningless or without relation to the wider issues of life; he attacks it only because within its confines the artist fails to achieve the "maximum of effectiveness." The works of this tradition are about realities of social life, though these realities have lost their message for the modern man. Not for this reason, of course, should the artist simply surrender his dream, and James did quite right in trying to keep the world from forgetting them even though they were not to be seen everywhere. But Spender urges that it is not as effective a reality as the ideal of contemporary art held by some of his colleagues (e.g., W. H. Auden), which involves the aesthetic preformation and picturing of living political realities rather than a longing for the past and its values. These living and future political ideals present public goals and dynamic symbols; in them the artist is no longer talking about himself and his remembrance of things past and thus failing to achieve the maximum of objectivity and directness in his message to his contemporaries. In a word, James, in spite of his distance, was not holding art to be meaningless for the larger issues of life; he was, in Spencer's opinion, merely mistaken about what these larger realities were and about the best strategy for dealing with them.

How then does he evaluate his contemporaries? In discussing a poem by Cecil Day Lewis, which pictures the class conflict, he writes that in its details the picture it present of political forces and realities is "grotesque." "But this does not really affect the real claim of the poem to value. The implicit assertion of the poem is that it is about realities. . . ." In judging the poem, "It is not a question of whether the critic thinks the political premises are false, but of whether the premises are about realities, in the sense that there are political and moral realities which are more enduring than the external world of literary criticism." 11

The poem must be about realities, but it does not matter whether it tells the truth about them or not. This is hard doctrine; the simplest reflection shows that a false statement is in part, at least, an assertion of an unreal state of affairs. It cannot be supposed that Spender is unaware of this. And further reading shows him to dis-

11 *The Destructive Element*, p. 277.
tinguish between the sense in which art deals with reality and that in which science deals with it. Both "political science" and "political art" deal with the "common reality" of politics. But political or economic theory about reality must tell the truth about it or else be bad theory, whereas the artistic contemplation does not have to commit itself to a decision on questions of fact. It may merely treat of the facts or supposed facts which are significant for our attitudes, right or wrong, which "lead to a greater and more fundamental understanding of the struggle affecting our whole life today." The poem's meaning lies not outside it in a realm where truth is presented in a rigorous and semantically correct language and tested scientifically. Whether the theory is true or not does not affect, in particular cases, the values of the new perspectives it gives to art from which novel insights can be had.  

It is the presentation from a new and interesting perspective which is artistically important, regardless of whether the view to be gotten can finally be fitted on to the scientific picture of the reality.

I have devoted so much space to Spender because he is often thought to represent with this emphasis on the political and moral theme a defense of art's propaganda function. And I think these quotations show clearly the position he would occupy with reference to our question of the significance of artistic substance. He is a passionate defender of non-artistic subject-matter ("realities which are more enduring than the external world of literary criticism") but he is just as vigorous in denying the applicability to this art of any criteria other than those deducible from the ideal of communication of personal experience. Ordinary communication serves a different function from that of the unique aesthetic communion, and the former alone is under the standards of scientific accuracy. Here, in Spender, is an avowal of the rights of both autonomous and meaningful art. But the meaning by virtue of its freedom from criteria of scientific description and diagnosis has become inward and inherent. Its meaning is not that of illustration; it is a new and unique presentation.

William Hester has defended a similar position with more adequate insight into the final implications for a theory of art of the distinction between a new presentation and a mere representation of something else. This distinction he treats as that between reality and truth. "Other than in an ornamental or accidental fashion," he

12 Shaw says, "And after all, the main thing in determining the artistic quality of a book is not the opinions it propagates, but the fact that the writer has opinions."
says, “poetry is not concerned with truth at all, but with reality.” Truth is a relation between things, such as that between idea and object; but the purpose of poetry is not to represent the world to the mind, to give truth, but “to awaken it in the heart” as an immediate reality of experience. A poem, by virtue of its universality, reaches into a “higher region of meaning, the reality which gives significance to the subject as a symbol of something beyond itself.” But in this symbolism, the “reality which gives significance to the subject” does not remain external and transcendent as in Hegel’s theory of symbolic art. Rather, “The concrete expression is the embodiment of this reality in definite artistic form.”

On the basis of these distinctions, the sense in which art is a symbol is now clear. In so far as the criteria of art are purely aesthetic and dictated by the canons of pure communicativeness of experience and beauty, art is not exhausted in any meanings it may have as a sign of things or as a symptom of the conditions of its origin. What it essentially is is not touched by any “explanations.” No semantic attack touches the intrinsic character of the thing in which men embody their aesthetic ideals.

In its contents, then, art may be symbolical, even though the great artist will generally avoid depending altogether on ready made symbols which may serve a lesser artist as a kind of short-hand explanation of what he has in mind. To be sure, the contents of a work of art may bear resemblances to things which are wholly outside the sphere of ordinary artistic contemplation, and through this resemblance they may suggest these things. Obviously too, art may be said to mean these things it suggests; it would be only a narrow-minded theorist who would say that Titian’s portrait of Charles V does not in some sense mean Charles V. By its relations to these things which men valuate, the work of art takes on some of that value, political or historical or the like; like any sign, a picture or a poetic imitation may, through this borrowing, become a symbol in the deeper sense. If the objects are without significance, we cannot expect the artistic content built on them to be important. It is the symbolic value of art which keeps it, no matter how beautiful, from being a triviality. But as symbolical, it may be subjected to questions concerning its transitive or reflexive functioning, to exorcism and disenchantment, translation into terms of prosaic description, exchange of vivid intuitive reality for abstract truth or error, and judgment according to

the standards of fidelity of reproduction. And in being exorcised, the true symbolic medium and the aesthetic quality of the content and the directness of communication through it are lost. Since art cannot strive for a mere picturing of an alien reality without falling back into the unstable position of impressionism and its consequent dialectic development to symbolism, either we must accept subject matter in symbolism or revert to slavery to mere form.14

III. The Exorcism of Art

Still more devastating an attack can be made on art and its autonomous role and contribution to a social group. The question we have just answered was, "Does the content of art have an irreducible symbolical meaning which is lost if art is looked at only in order to gain knowledge of the world or of the artist?" To this question, we have worked out an affirmative answer. Now, granting this, the exorcist uses it as a base for his new attack. The question becomes, "Since the values a symbol has are always borrowed from something else, and are therefore illusory when they are supposed to be located in the symbol, is not then the value of art itself only illusory?" Answering his own question, he sweeps on to the next, the practical question: "Since art borrows its values from something else, and presents them in an unreal and merely imaginative sphere, why not, by finding out through art what these original values are, make our way from art back to the reality in which they have their proper place, and thus get to the real values which not only lend illusory significance to art, but also real significance to life?"

This question is obviously based on the belief that not only is art a symbol, but that its value is only a symbolic one. Evidence for this is generally drawn, not from the argument I have traced, but from zoological and anthropological observations on the role of beauty in magical, sexual, and religious ritual. In boldest terms, some naturalists believe that art was originally in the service solely of sympathetic magic and sexual play, and that now it is at best merely a sublimation or disguise of these other basic needs and interests. Once again, the explanations of the meaning of art in terms of its being a symptom are called upon, and it is said that the use of imitation shows a desire to

14 Diego Revera says, "Precisely because the subject is admitted as a prime necessity in art, the artist is absolutely free to create a thoroughly plastic form of art. . . . [If he tries to reject it] he becomes nothing but an illustrator of his own frame of mind, and in trying to liberate himself he falls into the worst kind of slavery."
control things, the mechanism of this control being through the sympathetic magic supposed to exist between similar things. This explanation also involves the theory that art is primarily imitative. But this time these views of the meaning of art are applied not merely to specific works of art, but to the artistic endeavor itself. Art as a sphere of human activity, rather than this or that picture, is now taken as serving some function of expression of a substitute satisfaction for some characteristic of human nature. Thus these attacks are far more general than the theories of the impressionist and the expressionist. Instead of now inquiring after the locus of specific aesthetic meanings, the present question is directed to the status of aesthetic value itself.

We may see this difference by comparing Plato's early theory of art with that of a modern naturalist. Plato thought a work of art was beautiful because it presents an Idea, and the Idea is "Beauty absolute and unchanging." The work is not beautiful in itself, but only because it is a transparent deliverance of something else which interpenetrates all beautiful things. Because of this transparence, the archetype of beauty is best suggested by the work of a great artist. But no matter how beautiful a great artist's work may be, its beauty is only a borrowed characteristic; it is primarily a transcendent Idea which "shines by its own light through the clearest window of the soul." Thus for Plato, the aesthetic meaning lies outside the thing which bears it, but it nevertheless remains aesthetic meaning. The naturalist on the other hand agrees with Plato that the work of art is not beautiful in and for itself and that it owes its quality to its relation to something outside it. But here the similarity ends. For while Plato says it owes its quality to ultimate Beauty, the naturalist says that what it is related to is not aesthetical at all, and there is no pure and ideal Beauty and Goodness as Plato thought. To him, beauty is merely a disguise for non-aesthetic values, and Kant's theory is only an attempt to elevate an illusory symbol into an absolute truth. According to the naturalist, to use the words of Mrs. Gilbert, "Beauty happens to art, and is not one with it."  

Art, according to Charles Lalo, one of the most influential representatives of this view, is the "social discipline of erotic play." "Aesthetic value," he says, "is glory and admiration." That is, aesthetic value is a sensuous appearance of social values. The work

---

15 *Studies in Recent Aesthetic*, p. 156.
of art has no intrinsic value in itself; it indicates or produces by suggestion something which is thought to be desirable, and so from this desired thing it borrows value. For example, political cartoons are not evaluated by their artistic excellence, but by the state of mind they occasion or by the state of affairs they suggest; and from these things, which are of no immediate concern to theorists who talked about "pure beauty" and "significant form," a work of art draws our interest and approval. Art then is a symbol. Like all symbols it is subject to being debunked. But this is not a judgment against specific works of art for being mendacious in hiding other interests, as Schopenhauer condemns pornography for arousing men's wills instead of quieting them as art should; it is a judgment against the sincerity of all aesthetic interest. And Mrs. Gilbert truly says that the great inadequacy of naturalistic theories is that "they give specific examples of beauty no intelligible grounding,"17 classing the greatest with the worst art.

But a study of the relationships which exist among the things men find desirable will show us that, granting all the anthropologist's facts about the various uses to which art is put, its value may still not be reducible to the values which are achieved by its uses. Besides the means-end connection, there are several types of relationships between valuable things.18

First, if a certain object or action, such as a talisman or a ritual dance or a painting on a spear, is thought to be the cause of the existence of something else which a person desires, such as success in love and war, we say that the act or the object is a means to this end and therefore it has value for him. If a thing which is desired can be achieved in a certain way, we value those things which make it possible. The value of the means is derivative from the value of the end, and when the value which is ultimate has been realized, the value which the other acts and objects have by virtue of contributing to its attainment is now lost. When the house is built, the tools are no longer needed. To be sure, they may have other values and they may serve other ends, but their specific value in this particular situation has been used up.

But there is a second type of relation which is not so direct. Values may accompany things which are related to each other with-

17 Ibid., p. 143.
18 Nicolai Hartmann's Ethics gives an exhaustive phenomenological analysis of these relations, including the types I shall describe. So far as I know he has not applied the analysis to aesthetics.
out themselves being directly connected. For example, the ocean is pleasant to swim in and rain is good for the crops, so both of them are valuable in some way. Unless there were an ocean, the rain could not fall, but that does not make the value of the rain to us depend upon the value the ocean has as a place for a holiday. The things are related to each other; their specific values are not.

Let us apply this to the theory of art. It is often said that art can flourish only where there is a certain degree of leisure, that is, economic value. But the pleasures of leisure are not the cause of the value of art, nor can we say that we value leisure merely as a means to the enjoyment of art. The thing which has aesthetic value may depend upon a situation which has economic value, but that does not mean that aesthetic value itself is dependent upon economic value per se. A new type of value emerges with the appearance of art, and it might be valuable whether leisure were in itself desirable or not. Here there is no relation of means to end, for when the value which we called aesthetic is realized in beautiful works of art and surroundings is finally enjoyed, the things which make it possible do not become worthless.

But the naturalist not only wished to show what the preceding argument proves to be unlikely, namely that the value of art is merely an appearance of some other value, such as biological superiority or comfort. He wished to show that art itself is a means to these other ends. Is art a means to another end? It may be, and it frequently is. Yet I think we would all be likely to agree that Kant, in his defense of the irreducibility of art to other interests we have, was insisting upon an important truth; namely, that the value art has as a means to some other end is not the value we appreciate and enjoy and consider significant in it when we give ourselves over to it even for a moment. It is almost the universal judgment of artists and critics that sincere contemplation of art puts one out of touch with these other interests and makes them seem less important. Also it is generally agreed that works of art which have the most effective power as propaganda, whether for religion, a political ideology, or a brand of cigarettes, are not those with the greatest significance when we contemplate them sincerely and with self-forgetfulness. In fact, it often seems that attention to these other goals destroys artistic creativity and receptivity. Self-observation and the testimony of artists and critics reveal that the things presented in art do not have their entire meaning out-
side themselves in other things we may be interested in; the value of
the artistic endeavor is not exhausted in the contributions, however
important they may be, that it makes to the enrichment of life and
the attainment of other values of culture. Unlike the value which a
means has, art has a value which outlasts any service it may render to
ends which it may actually further, and we can value it even when it
is in conflict with our desires in other directions.\textsuperscript{19} Thus the reduc-
tion of art to the values of other fields of cultural activity means a loss
of some real and unique value which cannot be recaptured elsewhere.
The exorcism of art is only a procedure of closing one’s eyes to some
real values; what follows after it cannot make up for this intrinsic loss.

\textit{IV. The Social Meaning of Art}

The exorcism of symbols is a demonstration that some ideals are
substitutes for satisfactions which cannot be got in virile reality off
the stage, as it were. Only by freeing men from the illusory interests
in a deceptive satisfaction within a “pseudo-environment” could the
ideals cease to be what Spengler called them—“cowardices.” Only
then could they become significant and effective tools for dealing di-
rectly with a real world. The semanticists must have some social
goal in their attack on symbols and ideals, we may suppose; con-
sistent semanticism would isolate or debunk art or do anything else
necessary to keep us from confusing its imaginative message with
prosaic and practical truth so that the business of living might be
based on hard fact. I. A. Richards has recommended that we call
the contents of art “pseudo-statements” in order to contrast them
with “real statements” about the “real world,” and he does this in
order to circumvent the confusion in the world which is only multi-
pied by the irreconcilable but in some sense true meanings of the
poets. And Stuart Chase says, “A good semantic discipline,” mean-
ing apparently an incomplete one, limited by common sense, “does
not dispense with fiction, fantasy, imagination, ideas, intellectual emo-
tions. It checks us from acting as if fantasies were real events worth
fighting and dying for.”\textsuperscript{20}

But are there no “fantasies” worth fighting and dying for? This
question can be answered in a categorical way only if we know what

\textsuperscript{19} Plato criticizes the poets for page after page, since they would interfere
with his government; but his final dismissal of them is reluctant, since he still
enjoys their “sweet voices.”

\textsuperscript{20} The Tyranny of Words, p. 357. This passage could itself stand some
semantic examination. As it stands, it may mean little more than is included in
the theory of “aesthetic distance.”
they are—their locus and their unreality do not matter. Are the contents of art so pure and unique that they have no significance outside of the situation of disinterested contemplation? That it did not isolate art from life and therefore degrade art to illusion seems to me to be one of the strongest points in the program of expressionistic criticism. I am in perfect agreement with Kenneth Burke, whose theory I have already referred to, when he criticizes Richards’ theory of art as pseudo-statement for not recognizing that all our practical attitudes are as symbolical (i.e. just as much “pseudo-communication” according to semantic standards of denotation) as art. That is to say, I think Burke is quite correct in attempting to obliterate Richards’ distinction by pointing out the connections between thought and action, regardless of the artistic or non-artistic locus of the thought. Of course such a distinction makes Chase’s statement almost a truism. But Burke writes:

“We recognize a symbolism of posture, gesture, and tonality, a purely mimetic symbolism, such as we find not only in formal modes of expression like the dance, but also in our spontaneous mind-body correlations between mood and appearance. ... Insofar as life itself is a creative or expressive process, even the most external manifestations of purpose must be symbolic of such purpose. ... It would be just as truly a pseudo-statement to stroke a person's hair as it would be to write, 'I stroke the head of Cleopatra.' We make a 'pseudo-statement' each time we treat an acquaintance as friend or enemy. ...” 21

If art has been isolated from life, if the so-called “intellectual emotions” are as far removed from life as Bell’s “aesthetic emotion,” then they are perhaps not worth fighting for. In art, however, we see a public and real value in a pseudo-environment (picture frame, stage, etc.) but that does not make it a pseudo-value or its message a pseudo-statement. If one thinks that by exorcism we can take these social values out of a work of art and then realize them practically in their full-bodied actuality, he forgets that every social purpose, including this, must have a living symbolism as a part of its means. Gradgrind is just as much a symbol as Werther. There is a loss of value in one realm without a corresponding gain in the other, for our appreciation of “fact”—supposing it could be changed without a symbolization of our purpose—is not heightened by closing our eyes to art. By itself, exorcism accomplishes only negative results; it is merely critical, not creative.

Art as a place of symbolism, if we grant a social purpose to semantic iconoclasm, seems to be one sanctuary of value which cannot

21 Permanence and Change, p. 325.
be defiled by a narrow devotion to "fact." The symbolism of art does not necessarily make it less than "reality." The imagination under the impact of unfulfilled ideals may create beyond "reality," and the discrepancy between Middletown and Utopia may better be filled in by reforming Middletown than by calling Thomas More a liar. If semanticism destroys art as the most transparent communicative medium and as the most vivid presentation of the symbols which hold society together, it destroys its own civilizing purposes.

Moreover, it would not be correct to suppose, as the romanticist does, that the realm of art is necessarily antithetical to those interests which are said by the semanticist to be sublimated or disfigured in it. We have seen how symbols and signs are mere poles or extremes with many gradations between them, so that we seldom find either in its pure form. The same is true here; art and life are so closely related that, especially for the romanticists themselves, they are almost coterminous. When life increases, through scientific advance, in its technical facilities, art may still stay with it. Art appropriates into its subject matter the advance of science. Lewis Mumford shows how the development of the Faust legend almost paraphrases the history of scientific interests during the same period; in the beginning Faust was an alchemist, and at the end of the development he was an engineer. And conversely, I think one could almost trace the history of decorative art by examining the cannons in the collection at Budapest. The engravings on these guns probably have a latent magical import like the decorations on arrows, but recent developments in art show a deeper unity with science than mere external decoration can give. Magic and science originate from the same magical needs and differ in the way they, in their earliest beginnings, attempted to satisfy these longings. Now, due to the exploded magical significance of symbols, art might appear to be a poor substitute for effective science. And if there is a sharply stated antithesis, the poverty of art becomes immediately apparent. But it is precisely here that a synthesis is striven for; functional art, without the absurdities of decoration, is the result of the presence of the best values of techniques and artistic magic in one and the same thing. When significant works of art are mistaken by simple folk for pieces of plumbing, and when every new locomotive and automobile looks like an exhibit for a world's fair, it is meaningless to talk about any necessary antithesis between the values of symbols and techniques.
There is perhaps some truth in the belief that art is a substitute for reality or a kind of satisfaction of needs on a level of unreality, such as the world of play and imagination provides. This is the case with many of our verbal ideals, our symbols, and "secular prayers" as Kenneth Burke calls them. But exorcism had a meaning there: if men could be enticed away from what Frederick Engels called their "innate casuistry—to change things by changing their names," the world could be made better, social communication could be founded on a firmer basis of fact, our social sciences could deal with social realities and not with just "cowardly" soft substitutes for hard facts, and man and his society could become at home in the world of his sciences of nature. In that way, man could deal with his social problems with the same certainty that he now has in manipulating the already exorcized and disenchanted realities of the physical world.

But in relation to art, even when it remains foreign to the forms and patterns of scientific and industrial techniques, exorcism does not have the same hygienic value. The desire for more objectivity is always connected ultimately with the need for going beyond satisfaction with the delusive spells we cast through incantation of old and unquestioned symbols. The interests which lead beyond these delusions to the formulation of dry facts about the world and society which we may use to improve man's fate do not justify us in forcing the artist out of his studio to work in a "practical world." The reality and the value of art, which are his contributions to the life of a society, cannot be reproduced in the merely technical acts of another part of the social group. "Industry without art is drudgery," said Ruskin, and the rejection of art for mere fact is an impoverishment of the rich language of a culture.