

The Place and Relevance of Art in the Modern Christian World - Rémi Brague

1. A historical approach

We should begin by asking what we mean, exactly, when we speak of the “modern” world. There is a continuous flow of time and events as historians endeavor to reconstruct them. Where shall we draw the line? We commonly refer to the period after the Middle Ages as “modern.” Moreover, we commonly distinguish between modern history and contemporary history.

Pinpointing the start of modern times after the Middle Ages is not easy, although it is supposed to begin with the Renaissance. But when did that begin? This depends on the country or city-state in question. The beginning of contemporary history is commonly accepted as the French Revolution and the upheavals that it brought about with the Napoleonic wars.

In Germany, things become even trickier, since Germans distinguish between *die Neuzeit*, which begins in the sixteenth century, and its subset, *die Moderne*, a common moniker for the arrival of new artistic practices, especially in Vienna or Munich, toward the end of the 19th century.

Be that as it may, modern times form a peak in the history of art. The arts flourished in every field and in every language. In literature, the novel appeared with Cervantes. Among the performing arts, theatre, both tragic and comic, which slumbered through the Middle Ages (except for the “mysteries”), enjoyed a rebirth all over Christendom with artists such as Calderón, Shakespeare, and the French trio Corneille, Racine, and Molière. In music, polyphony appeared, along with new musical forms like the sonata, the cantata, and the symphony. Entirely new forms of art appeared, like opera, which blends theatre and music.

By and large, all the arts had Christian underpinnings. This burgeoning of the arts took place in Europe and therefore in a Christian context. This raises the issue of the relationship between art and Christianity. A historical approach is required, because Christianity is more a historical fact than a doctrine, given Jesus Christ’s life, death on the cross, and resurrection. Furthermore, this fact is perhaps the only real event in history, the only thing that really “happened” and was not merely the kaleidoscopic reorganization of already existing elements of the world, the only fact that gave the lie

to Schopenhauer's applying the motto *eadem sed aliter*¹ to history. Christian doctrine attempts to do justice to this fact and to translate it into an adequate conceptual vocabulary.

2. Before Christianity: Beauty without art

What was the state of art when Christianity became the leading factor in Western culture? Let us first consider the so-called pagan world. There is great evidence that in the pre-Christian world decorative forms and art were present and commonly practiced across different societies. Ancient music was rarely noted on paper, and most ancient paintings were not preserved. But Greek architecture survived. So did Greek sculpture, mainly through Roman copies, barring some exceptions like the statues retrieved from the shipwrecked carriers that brought them from Greece to Italy. Greek and Latin literature produced masterpieces, some of which survived and remained models for later writers.

In our present-day common representation of the ancient world, especially the Greek one, this world was beautiful: not happening to be so, but essentially determined by beauty. The world was beautiful because it was good, and it was good because whatever exists, in so far as it exists, is good. This simple equation is to be found in each philosopher of the classical tradition, Platonic cum Aristotelian.² We identify the Greek world with a world of beauty because we see in it a world of art. For instance, in a late fragment, Hölderlin explains that the Greeks wanted to institute a reign of art, but failed to do so, so that what was supremely beautiful, Greece, disappeared:

Nemlich sie wollten stiften / *Ein Reich der Kunst*. Dabei ward aber / Das Vaterländische von ihnen / Versäümet und erbärmlich gieng / Das Griechenland, *das schönste*, zu Grunde.³

Nevertheless, a surprise awaits us that evidences a momentous shift in the understanding of art. We modern people speak of the “fine arts” in all European languages: *beaux arts*, *schöne Künste*, *belle arti*, *bellas artes*, *изобразительное искусство*, and of course *sztuki piękne*, demonstrating that art appeals immediately to the senses and that there is a strong perceived association between arts and beauty. For us, at least until a certain time that I will mention later, it was taken for granted that the goal of art should be the production of “things of beauty,” to borrow John Keats' famous phrase, although the British romantic poet was referring to the sun, the moon, trees, and other natural phenomena and forms of life.⁴ Yet beauty and art do not simply belong together as the goal and the

1 A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, III, 38, in: *Werke*, ed. W. von Löhneysen (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), t. 2, 570.

2 See the texts quoted in my *Anchors in Heavens*, § 10.

3 F. Hölderlin, ...Meinest Du es solle gehn... in: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. F. Beissner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1951), t. 2, 228. My emphasis.

4 John Keats, *Endymion* [1818], I.

means. They might even be in conflict. When Greek thinkers discussed the beautiful, which they often did, they seldom mentioned art as a means to create beauty.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato saw beauty as being, among all the ideas, the most splendidly visible and worthy of being loved (εκφανεστατον και ερασιμωτατον); it sweeps us out of ourselves and brings us to another, higher dimension.⁵ But Plato's opinion on art is anything but favorable. In his *Republic*, he hardly pampers poetry and painting. His Socrates expels poets from the ideal city he is sketching. He reduces poetry to a merely instrumental role and, if he supposed it could foster beauty, it would be the moral beauty of the virtuous warrior-citizen. As for painting, it is demoted to a mere way to ape things that are themselves images of true realities.⁶

Six centuries later, Plotinus, the father of what is known as Neoplatonism, wrote two treatises on beauty, I, 6 [1] and V, 8 [31]. A passage from the second treatise qualifies Plato's demotion of imitative arts by explaining that the sculptor does not copy visible reality, but rather the idea of it in his soul. Plotinus' idea of inner beauty and assumption that finding the way to true beauty requires first "an inner sight," already present in Cicero, and taken up by later authors, had a tremendous influence on Italian Renaissance artists and thinkers.⁷

The following passage is particularly revealing.

The soul must be trained, first of all to look at beautiful ways of life (επιτηδευματα); then at beautiful works (εργα), *not those which the arts produce* (ουχ οσα αι τεχναι εργαζονται), but the works of men who have a name for goodness.⁸

Plotinus is obviously alluding to the ladder of ascension that leads to the "beautiful" as it is presented in Plato's *Symposium*.⁹ When he reaches a second rung, he is eager to remind the reader that the

5 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d8.

6 Plato, *Republic*, III & X.

7 Cicero, *Orator*, 2, 9; Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 8 [31], 1, 34-40, ed. P. Henry & H.-R. Schwyzer (Paris: DDB, t. 2, 1959) 376; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, V, 13, 23, ed. J. Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1963) 296; Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, II, ed. E. Diehl (Leipzig, Teubner, 1903), 265.

8 Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 6 [1], 9, 3-5; tr. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1966), 259.

9 Plato, *Symposium*, 210c (επιτηδευματα).

ergon he must contemplate is not the work produced by art. Later in the same treatise, Plotinus mentions sculpture, but only as a metaphor of the work we must do on ourselves to become adequate copies of the gods.

For Greek philosophers, if the beautiful was produced, this happened rather by action (*praxis*) than by production (*poiēsis*), if the distinction proposed by Aristotle can be applied in such a case. It could be argued that this view reflects the social conditions of the ancient Greek world, in which action—which by and large meant political action—was an activity of free citizens, while slaves performed the heavy physical work.

In any case, a moral meaning was associated with the “aesthetic” dimension, and even eclipsed it to the extent that *kalon* denoted “the noble” rather than “the beautiful.” As a consequence, no full-fledged theory of the arts could possibly arise in this context. Several centuries later in Renaissance Italy, painters and sculptors had to salvage the dignity of their profession from the stain left on them by their alleged belonging to the “mechanical” or “servile” arts.¹⁰

In the Middle Ages, the “beautiful” is one of the transcendental properties of “being,” at least if we are to trust Saint Bonaventure, who single-handedly added the beautiful to the classical list of four: being, one, true, and good.¹¹ For Aquinas, Bonaventure’s contemporary, the beautiful is nothing more than a certain aspect of the good.¹² In brief, once again, the focus was not on art as such.

3. Ancient Israel

This “pagan” and medieval worldview was very much in keeping with the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. Mentioning it, let me remind you, is not a side issue to the task that was entrusted to me of speaking about Christianity. For Christianity has its roots firmly embedded in the experience the people of Israel had with God. Now, there are few references to art in the Old Testament. To be sure, the Torah mentions and praises the artists who crafted the special ceremonial vessels of the tabernacle. It even singles out two craftsmen whom the Bible calls by name,

¹⁰ See, for instance, A. Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), ch. 4.

¹¹ See H. Pouillon, La beauté, propriété transcendante chez les Scolastiques (1220-1270), in: *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Age*, XV (1946), p. 263-329.

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1m. et al.

Bezaleel and Aholiab. It even says that they were “filled with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Exodus, 31, 2-11, 35, 1-2).

This passage is the first occurrence of the idea of inspiration given by some divine power and leading the recipient to artistic craftsmanship rather than to “prophecy.” Interestingly, this biblical idea of divinely inspired art finds a parallel in the Greek idea of the divine inspiration, not of the prophet, but of the poet. Hesiod’s narrative about the mission he claimed to have received from the Muses strikingly resembles the way the prophet Amos legitimized his own mission as assigned by the God of Israel. Both had to justify their activity as “amateurs” because they were not card-carrying members of an acknowledged professional guild of singers or prophets.¹³ Needless to say, this biblical passage, and the idea of “inspiration” in general, was heavily drawn upon by Christian artists who wanted to provide their trade with a theological foundation.

Nevertheless, the crucial utterance in the Hebrew Bible may be God’s own satisfaction when constructing the world, according to the first narrative of creation in Genesis. On the end of each day, God looks at what He has just made and finds it “good” (טוב). On the sixth day, after the whole show has been completed, God adds that this is “very good” (טוב מאד) (Genesis: 1, 31).

It is interesting to observe that this judgement on the quality of the work completed refers precisely to a work (מלאכה) (Genesis: 2, 1-2, 3x), that is to say, something that has been wrought, brought into being, and not a fact that simply existed. I hesitated to use the word “quality,” because the Hebrew adjective, for which I have kept the traditional rendering of “good,” means “pleasant,” “agreeable,” and in many cases “beautiful”. We can thus notice some closeness between the two ideas of “work” and “beauty.”

In conclusion, in the ancient pre-Christian culture, the deep agreement on the fundamental goodness of whatever exists somehow places the Greek and Jewish worlds, “Athens” and “Jerusalem,” side by side. This basic assumption was not challenged by the Christian revelation. Nevertheless, the Biblical tradition adds a rider: beauty can be fashioned not only by action but also by production.

4. The Christian revolution

There was great art in Christendom. This is a fact so obvious that nobody could possibly gainsay it. Yet a question should be asked: can we refer to this art as a Christian form of art? Was this a *Christian*

¹³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 22-35 and Amos, 6: 14-5.

art, properly speaking? To be sure, the bulk of the pictorial legacy of former generations is religious in nature, and specifically Christian. Scenes from the Old as well as New Testaments furnished a repertory of themes for classical painting and sculpture. But the same relationship between sacred scriptures and arts holds true for the Indian religions. Furthermore, classical China, Japan, South-East Asia, etc., produced masterpieces of art, but this art was certainly not Christian, and usually not even religious in nature.

The representative character of Christian painting mirrors the way in which God chose to address mankind, i.e., by taking a visible form. According to Paul, who incidentally never saw Jesus in the flesh, Christ is the one who makes visible the invisible Father, His image (εικων του θεου του αορατου) (Colossians: 1, 15) and, according to the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the effulgence (απαυγασμα) of God's glory (Hebrews: 1, 3). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus said, "who saw me saw the Father" (John: 14, 9). The theologians who legitimized the use of icons drew heavily upon this argument.

Nevertheless, for Christianity, the "beautiful" is paradoxical in nature. It reaches its peak in Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross, hardly a beautiful spectacle. The crucified Christ suffered the punishment reserved for slaves, was whipped, ridiculed, and tortured. He was ugly, with not even a whiff of sublimity, and he was ridiculous, the summit of horror and scandal.

Furthermore, the model on which the narrative of the Passion was told, and perhaps even on which Jesus consciously molded himself, the Suffering Servant of the Deutero-Isaiah, is explicitly said to lack beauty and glamour (לא תאר לו ולא הדר) (53, 2). The LXX rendered the second part of the same verse as "no beauty, that we should desire him" based on an reading (לא מראה), by the Greek concepts of εἶδος and κάλλος, which are heavily loaded terms for philosophers.

The German literary scholar Erich Auerbach (1892 - 1957), a Jew who taught comparative literature of the Romance languages at Yale, had a fascinating thesis on the origin of European literature. He argued that literary realism, a tradition pervading the whole history of this literature, was not possible in ancient times. What he meant by "realism" is the sober description of the human condition and real world in all its dimensions. In the ancient world, a strict division of labor obtained. Two styles, two stylistic levels, divided the realm of narration. The stories of gods and heroes were told in the sublime

style of epic and tragedy, whereas stories related to the lower class and the slaves were told in the vulgar style of comedy.

Christianity, specifically the central event narrated in the Gospels, pierced the border between the noble and the base. The Passion of Christ, a particularly base event, was related in a lofty, sublime style.

Doch nicht nur die Intensität des Persönlichen, sondern auch seine Mannigfaltigkeit und den Reichtum seiner Erscheinungswesen erschließt die Geschichte Christi, indem sie die Grenzen der antiken mimetischen Ästhetik überschreitet. Hier hat der Mensch keine irdische Würde mehr; es darf ihm alles geschehen, und die antikische Spaltung der Gattungen, die Scheidung zwischen dem erhabenen und dem niederen Stil existiert nicht mehr.¹⁴

Before Auerbach, another German, the philosopher and disciple of Hegel Karl Rosenkranz, published a work in 1853 whose paradoxical title adequately captured the author's intention: *Aesthetic of Ugliness*. In it, he wrote:

Mit der christlichen Religion aber als der, welche das Böse in seiner Wurzel erkennen und von Grund aus überwinden lehrt, ist das Häßliche nun vollends in die Welt der Kunst eingeführt.¹⁵

5. Islam as counterproof

According to Islamic dogma, in principle, making images of any living being whatsoever is forbidden. This practice follows, to some extent, the prohibition in the Hebrew Bible, which forbade what it called "idolatry," the cult of images and consequently their production (Exod. 20, 4 and Deut. 4, 15-18). The Islamic objection to figurative representations is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, but in some utterances ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad (see the corpus of *hadith*, reports about what Muhammad said and did).¹⁶ The Islamic resistance to the representation of living beings stems from the prohibition of idolatry and from the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to God,

14 E. Auerbach, *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1929), 22. See also *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1946), 43-52, 73-4.

15 K. Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* [1853] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 39.

16 Hadith, for instance in *Sunan Ibn Majah*, XII, 5, no. 2151.

which is why images and image makers have been controversial. The strongest statements on representational depiction were made in the *hadith*, where painters were challenged to “breathe life” into their creations and threatened with punishment on the Day of Judgment.

Islamic aniconism meant that, unlike in other parts of the world, no painting could develop, except the early Omeyyad period when the prohibition was not yet fully implemented or, more likely, when the *hadith* that forbade it had not yet been forged. On the other hand, miniature paintings became a significant genre that achieved exquisite refinement, mainly in Persia. But this consisted for the most part in illustrating literary narratives, such as Firdawsi’s *Shah Nameh*. In compensation, Islam developed the art of calligraphy. To be precise, the art of beautiful writing had been known in China for centuries but used Chinese ideograms. Islamic calligraphy exploited the Arabic alphabet’s inherent potential for writing as ornament.

Moreover, decoration with floral motives was quite common, as were geometric figures that didn’t represent any definite object.

The philosopher Kant chose non-figurative art as the best example of what he called *pulchritudo vaga*, “free or floating beauty,” in contradistinction to the *pulchritudo adhaerens* of figurative art.¹⁷

Interestingly, the typical form of Islamic art, whose name betrays its origin, the arabesque has become a favorite metaphor in Christendom for the modern work of art that no longer must represent a concrete object. As for the word “arabesque,” it may have been first used as a book title by the painter Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, a so-called Mannerist, who penned a collection of pieces in the Milanese vernacular and had it printed in 1589 under the title of *Rabisch*.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the word “arabesque” became a favorite title in Romantic literature all over the Western world, in Russia with Nikolaï Gogol (1835), and in the United States

17 I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §16.

with Edgar Allan Poe (1840). Similarly, this word was borrowed by classical musicians, again all over Europe, such as Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and later Claude Debussy.

The theoretical use of the word had to await Friedrich Schlegel, who wrote:

die Arabeske ist die älteste und ursprüngliche Form der menschlichen Phantasie. [...] Ich halte die Arabeske für eine ganz bestimmte und wesentliche Form oder Äußerungsart der Poesie.¹⁸

Both sentences are found in his *Dialogue on Poetry*, which to some extent mirrors discussions held by male and female persons active in intellectual walks of life: the philosopher Schelling, the theologian Schleiermacher, the two brothers Schlegel. The first sentence is put into the mouth of Ludoviko (most likely denoting Schelling) in a “Speech on Mythology;” the second belongs to a “Speech on the Novel” given by Antonio. (More on Schlegel below.) Two generations later, Baudelaire, probably the most important and influential French poet of all time, followed suit, calling arabesque “the most spiritualist kind of drawing.”¹⁹

6. Late modern times: art without beauty

Until the late modern period, beauty was assumed to be the supreme purpose of art and even synonymous with artistic excellence. With the early German Romanticism of the Jena period, what had been considered obvious for centuries, hence requiring no explicit mention, was challenged. A significant shift, and the reverse of what had happened earlier, took place in the understanding and evaluation of aesthetic values. The Greek philosophical inquiry into art and beauty, specifically Plato’s approach, treated these two categories as independent, and spoke of beauty without associating it with art. Art, mostly denoting poetry, is closer to a greatest danger than any other phenomenon Plato mentioned, while beauty is closer to a greatest good. A new separation occurred, the same as in ancient

18 F. Schlegel, Gespräch über die Poesie, in: *Schriften zur Literatur*, ed. W. Rasch (München: dtv, 1972), 305 and 313.

19 See my *L’image vagabonde. Essai sur l’imaginaire baudelairien* (Chatou: La Transparence, 2008), 112-3. See too “Arabeske”, in K. Barck, M. Fontius, W. Thierse (ed.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe. Studien zu einem historischen Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1990), t. I, p. 272-286 [non vidi].

thought, but in the opposite direction. Whereas Greek philosophy in the Platonic tradition had beauty without art, modernity has art without beauty.

Friedrich Schlegel took a momentous step at the end of the 18th century: he maintained that the proper object of art is no longer the “beautiful” but the “interesting.”

Das Schöne ist [...] nicht das Ideal der modernen Poesie und von dem Interessanten wesentlich verschieden.²⁰

Here Schlegel was following Kant's proclamation of the autonomy of the “beautiful,” the object of art no longer seen as a means: it pleases us as an end in itself, thus the aesthetic state is pleasure “without interest.” The interesting can become the basic object of art precisely because Kant has freed the sentiment of the beautiful from its link with interest by defining it as “satisfaction without any interest” (*interesselose Wohlgefallen*).²¹ He thereby made possible what I could call a “disinterested interest.”

To be sure, what ignites our interest can be beautiful, but this is not a *conditio sine qua non*. The grotesque, the shocking, the monstrous, etc., can be as interesting as the beautiful, and perhaps even more so. Schlegel mentioned “the new, the piquant (*Pikant*), the striking (*Frappant*).”²² The French poet Victor Hugo, in the preface to his verse play *Cromwell* (1827), explained this in a bombastic style, although he preferred to speak of the grotesque as the main aesthetic category he represented.²³

What decides whether a production is a work of art is the reaction (not necessarily an active decision) of the viewer, reader, listener, etc. It is the impact on the audience, the audience's response that determines a work's aesthetic value. Art is yoked to subjectivity.

This leads to a bevy of consequences. First, the work produced must be able to arouse the subject's interest, thus being shocking in some way.

The artist's personality becomes more decisive than the works that he produces. The artist is swept into a whirlwind of concurring attempts to attract the subject's attention. This may be the case even when the “artist” must play the fool in order to be considered an artist, more precisely to lead the life

20 F. Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, Vorrede [1797] in: *Schriften zur Literatur*, loc.cit., 89.

21 I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §2.

22 F. Schlegel, *Über das Studium...*, 100.

23 V. Hugo, Préface de *Cromwell* [1827], in V. Hugo, *Théâtre* (Paris: Hetzel, 1858).

of an artist. An artist without any work is no longer a contradiction. What really matters is that the would-be artist leads a bohemian lifestyle.

Beauty may even be banned from the realm of art and with it what was commonly held, during the classical era, to be the highest example of beauty, i.e., the human body. Accordingly, whatever is human will be expelled, unless it is presented as a caricature, stylized, or even distorted. In an essay, originally published in 1925, the Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset referred most literally to the absence of human forms in nonrepresentational art using the expression “the dehumanization of art.”²⁴

Beauty as such can be tolerated in so far as it enters the realm of technology. The name art takes when it accepts the yoke of technology is “design.” A Frenchman who made his whole career in the United States, Raymond Loewy published in 1951 a book titled *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*. The French translation has, in my opinion, a more interesting title: *La laideur se vend mal* (Ugliness sells badly).

7. The end of art and Christianity

A first question to be asked is whether art still has a meaning in the modern period, regardless of the Christian, non-Christian, or post-Christian character of this period. A powerful voice answered in the negative. I mean the German philosopher Hegel with his famous thesis about the past character of art. Hegel reflected on art in a series of lecture-courses that he called Aesthetics. Notably, the term “aesthetics” derives directly from the Greek word for “sensory perception,” αἰσθησις. But at the time its use in German was still recent; it was the German philosopher Baumgarten who coined the term “aesthetics” and established this discipline as a distinct field of philosophical inquiry denoting the general theory of sensory knowledge rather than a theory of art.²⁵ Hegel himself confessed that he would have preferred the word “callistic,” meaning “theory of the beautiful.” But his object was not the beautiful in the whole breadth of its manifestations, in nature for instance, but the beautiful in art.

Anyway, in the following passage, Hegel observed that, in its highest vocation and the highest form of consciousness of the truth, art is and remains for us a thing of the past:

Die Kunst ist nach der Seite ihrer höchsten Bestimmung für uns ein Vergangenes. Damit hat sie für uns auch die echte Wahrheit und Lebendigkeit verloren und ist mehr in unsere *Vorstellung* verlegt, als dass sie

24 J. Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte*, in: *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1950), t. 3, 353-86.

25 A. Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, Halle, 1735.

in der Wirklichkeit ihre frühere Notwendigkeit behauptete und ihren höheren Platz einnahm. Was durch Kunstwerke jetzt in uns erregt wird, ist ausser dem unmittelbaren Genuß zugleich unser Urteil [...].

Hegel clearly understood that this relative demotion of art's significance was the result of Christian faith:

Eine tiefere Fassung der Wahrheit, in welcher sie nicht mehr dem Sinnlichen so verwandt und freundlich ist, um von diesem Material in angemessener Weise aufgenommen und ausgedrückt werden zu können. Von solcher Art ist die christliche Auffassung der Wahrheit, und vor allem erscheint der Geist unserer heutigen Welt, oder näher unserer Religion und unserer Vernunftbildung, als über die Stufe hinaus, auf welcher die Kunst die höchste Weise ausmacht, sich des Absoluten bewußt zu sein.²⁶

Art is not the highest way for modern man to enact truth. Martin Heidegger devoted a lengthy and deep article to the question of the work of art and its origin. The words "beauty" and "beautiful" are not in the center; what has this place is instead truth. In the version published in 1950, we must content ourselves with the short sentence, "*Schönheit ist eine Weise, wie Wahrheit west.*"²⁷ In the 1935 edition, those words are simply absent. But the focus is on art as "*ins-Werk-setzen der Wahrheit,*" putting truth to work.

Although the concept of truth may remain, to some extent, somewhat related to the concept of beauty, it has been separated from what is perceived as good: aesthetic values are independent of moral values; there is no moral dimension to art. A purposeless, aimless art becomes possible, the expression "art for art's sake" (*l'art pour l'art*) becomes possible. It illustrates that art is divorced from any

26 G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. F. Bassenge (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), t. 1, p. 22, then p. 21.

27 M. Heidegger, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*, in: *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950), 44; see also the Postface, 67-8.

utilitarian function, including moral and didactic functions. Art can't possibly be a window opening on transcendence. What is left receives the moniker of "culture."

In Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, a conversation takes place between the central character of the novel, the composer Adrian Leverkühn and ... the Devil in person. The latter says of the separation between Kultur and Kultus, culture and cult:

Seit die Kultur vom Kultus abgefallen ist und aus sich selber einen gemacht hat, ist sie denn auch nicht-anderes mehr als ein Abfall, und alle Welt ist ihrer nach bloßen fünfhundert Jahren so müd und satt, als wenn sie's, *salva venia*, mit eisernen Kochkesseln gefressen hätt [...].²⁸

8. Our present situation: art

We can hardly answer a question about art and the modern world without first defining "modernity" and examining how and the extent to which it affects our society and life. This is a tall order since the whirlwind of modernity draws all of human life into itself. I tried to do that elsewhere and need not repeat what was the topic of several books already.

In the present time, a time in which we can't help living, we must evaluate what in art is positive and negative for Christianity. On the one hand, art has lost its relationship to beauty for roughly two centuries. More generally, it has lost its possible relationship with the metaphysical dimension of reality. We saw that the fundamental object of artistic production was the interesting. Now, the interesting can't possibly be convertible with the other transcendental properties of being any longer. We can say that everything is one, true, good, etc. But we can scarcely say that anything whatsoever is interesting.

For we experience the opposite: the boring. And there are plenty of boring things. Rather, nothing is boring in itself, but we experience boredom, which is the flip side of our reducing the beautiful to subjectivity, to what we find interesting. The boring is the interesting that no longer arouses our

interest, in the same way as the disgusting is what used to tickle our palate when we are no longer hungry.

At the beginning of the 19th century, more precisely between the Congress of Vienna and the revolutions of 1848, i.e., during the era of monarchic Restorations, the German *Vormärz*, for literary historians the Late Romantic period, we find all over Europe thinkers who gave the experience of boredom a literary or philosophical expression. Among writers and poets, let us mention Lord Byron on boredom, Alfred de Musset on *ennui*, Pushkin on *скука*, Leopardi on *noia*.²⁹ Among philosophers, Schopenhauer described human life as alternating between boredom (*Langeweile*) and pain; Kierkegaard meditated on *kedsomhed*.³⁰ This I can only mention *en passant*.

To stave off boredom, artists must change styles and subjects as quickly as possible, resulting in an unquenchable thirst for originality. The received definition of art was even enlarged to introduce into it practices that had, until then, hardly anything to do with art. The trouble is that, as Leopardi saw, the very variety in change produces boredom:

la continuità è così amica della noia che anche la continuità della stessa varietà annoia sommamente.³¹

I certainly can't demonstrate this by the methods of the history of ideas, yet it is my hunch that this overall experience of boredom is, a generation later, the consequence, the price to be paid, or perhaps the punishment for the reduction of the beautiful to the interesting in its various forms.

9. Our present situation: beauty

Beauty as such doesn't fare better in the other realm, i.e., in nature. The two uncrowned kings of late modernity, Arthur Schopenhauer and Charles Darwin, debunked natural beauty. Both contended, each in his own style, that beauty is in the service of reproduction and hence the will to live. This will does consider the happiness of the individual, but its only aim is the survival of the species. This is Schopenhauer's thesis in his "metaphysics of sexual love." In his exposition of the theory of natural selection, Darwin maintained that, for instance, the bright colors of flowers are traps for insects that

29 A. de Musset, *Confessions d'un enfant du siècle* (1836); A. Pushkin, *Evgeny Onegin* (1831); G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, passim.

30 A. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818); S. Kierkegaard, *La Culture alternée*, in: *L'Alternative* [1843], French translation by P.-H. Tisseau and E.-M. Tisseau (Paris: L'Orante, 1970), t. 1, 267.

31 G. Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 51, ed. L. Felici (Rome: Newton Compton, 2007), 35b.

will be drawn to them, carry pollen from flower to flower, and ensure the reproduction of the species. Psychologists have shown through experimental research that we consider beautiful the faces of persons whose features suggest their ability to ensure the healthy reproduction of our genes or the protection of our offspring.³²

Now, our current social and cultural context could be a chance for Christianity and thus may, if not foster, at least enable a renewal of Christian art. The temptation to idolize beauty has vanished. A sort of “religion of art” was dreamt of all over Europe in the late 19th century among some circles of refined aesthetes. Today, some people keep attributing to Dostoevsky the sentence “Beauty will save the world” (мир спасет красота). Those obscure words, which neither the author nor his character ever pronounces, are in fact ascribed to Prince Myshkin, the highly ambiguous central character of *The Idiot*, by the young nihilist Ippolít Teréntyev, who will end up committing suicide.³³ In any case, we should not take the Russian novelist for a prophet, let alone for a Church father, and handle this hackneyed quote with the utmost care.

These days, a religion of art is hardly thinkable. This doesn’t mean that the temptation of idolatry has definitely been rebuffed. The famous sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer Jean Calvin put his finger on the sore point when he said that the human mind has always been a factory (*boutique*) of idols.³⁴ In fact, other idols have replaced what was once valued in art. And I’m afraid they may prove far more cruel and dangerous.

On the other hand, for Christians at least, art can develop itself as instrumental to revelation. Art must accept some humility, an ancillary function. This is exactly what it did during past centuries, by the way. There was no such thing as an “artist,” a character invented in the Renaissance. There were craftsmen who did their job as well as possible and did not consider themselves entrusted with any sacred mission. They aimed to help the prayer of the faithful, which was the heart of the matter.

The leading metaphor could be an *objet d’art*, the monstrance. In this object, the rich splendor of the material and the delicacy of the ornaments wrought in valuable metal and precious stones don’t have

32 Synthesis and critique in A. Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 63-71.

33 F. Dostoevsky, *Идиот* [1868], III, v, in: *Complete Works in 15 volumes* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1989), t. 6, 382-383.

34 J. Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, ed. F. Baumgartner (Genève: Beroud, 1888), vol. 1, ix, 8, 50a.

any other function than concentrating the onlooker's gaze on the small colorless host, thereby enabling Eucharistic contemplation.

10. In conclusion: back to the problem of the transcendental

In this essay, I mentioned the concept of the "transcendental" twice. First, I briefly recalled a classical doctrine: the medieval system of the main properties that run across the categories that divide Being. The "beautiful" was either one of the transcendental properties of "being," on the same footing as the other four, or a derived aspect of the "good" or the "true." I then observed that the "interesting," the central concept of modern aesthetics, doesn't belong among those transcendental properties. The trouble is that the older, more basic assumption, common to Greek and Biblical thought, on the fundamental goodness of being, is now facing a challenge. I have argued that renewing Christian art, retrieving both the sacred in art and art *tout court* would only be possible by rediscovering the transcendental aspect of art. Re-evaluating the "beautiful" and re-establishing the close relationship between beauty and art as conceived in the past would certainly be a fascinating and perhaps enjoyable task, yet not the best starting point. I contend that we should first reclaim the concepts of "true" and "good" as essential properties of "being."

My brief analysis has aimed to demonstrate that the problem of the relevance of art in Christianity today, if there is such a problem, is not to be solved at the level of art itself. No doubt art will continue to exist and, for better or worse, artists will continue to produce works of art. Would-be artists will certainly keep trying too hard to seduce the public and sell their works to the public, whatever they may be. Accomplished artists will continue to express their great abilities in their work and modestly ply their trade. But they will (whether or not they realize it) need the support of the metaphysical dimension of art, which can be achieved by reasserting the transcendental characteristics of "being," "true," and "good." To accomplish this theoretical and practical task, we need philosophers and saints rather than artists. We have been blessed to witness these two categories combined in extraordinary ways in one person, Pope John Paul II. Therefore, I feel honored indeed to have had the opportunity to contribute to this volume, based on the JP2 Lectures held in Rome, and dedicated to his memory and work.