THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

ABSTRACTION

A DISCOURSE ON LANGUAGE AND PAINTING

BY

CONOR WALTON

Submitted to the faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies

in

candidacy for the Joint Honours Degree in Fine Art and History of Art.

1993

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Paul O'Brien for his invaluable guidance and assistance in writing this thesis, without which it would not have been possible.

INTRODUCTION

> Man calls the concrete abstract. This is not surprising for he commonly confuses back and front even when using his nose, his mouth, his ears, and that is to say five of his nine openings... In my opinion a picture or a piece of sculpture without any object for a model is just as concrete and as sensual as a leaf or a stone.
>
> Hans Arp. *On My Way*[1]

The use of the term 'abstract' has become accepted practise in the history and criticism of twentieth century painting. From early on, however, it has caused difficulty, and not without reason. Arp's dislike of the term spotlights one difficulty; the verb 'to abstract' means symbolically to separate and withdraw something from something else. Since Arp's art had no subject, he could not abstract from one, and therefore could not consider his work "abstract". They were perfectly *concrete* objects, which, in themselves, bore no relation to anything else. Peter Vergo has written that:

> Strictly speaking, Arp was right, but other terms that have been used for the same purpose, "non-figurative", "non-objective", "pure", suffer from the defect of applying only to art which is not abstracted, just as the term abstract art applies only to that which is abstracted.[2]

Since, he says, the term "abstract" has come to be understood as embracing both non-representational and abstract painting, he continues to use it in this broad sense.

However, since the purpose of this thesis is to define the nature of abstraction, and to establish its true relationship to both the theory and practise of painting, it seems logical that the term "abstract" should apply only to paintings that are, in fact, *abstract*, and I, for one, cannot see why maintaining the distinction between the abstract and the non-abstract constitutes a defect.

How then, is one to distinguish paintings that are abstract from paintings that are not? Can any painting, strictly speaking, be defined as abstract? These are the questions which this thesis sets out to answer. As Vergo himself has said, such questions cannot be properly answered without "a better definition of abstraction than we have so far been afforded" Vergo himself has not attempted this endeavour, beyond saying that:

> Abstraction is not a *style* but what Delaunay called a "change in understanding", and hence no stylistic definition, however broad, can encompass the work of painters as diverse as Kandinsky and Malevich, Mondrian and Kupka, Wyndham Lewis and Itten.[3]

It is indeed the case that most historians have carefully avoided defining abstraction, preferring to deal with what William Feaver called the "'ismatic' order of art historical developments"[4], as if abstraction were a movement that could be dealt with in terms of style and influence. If we are to believe that abstraction in art is not simply a style of painting, but a way of thinking about the world - a philosophy - it is necessary to ask what are essentially philosophical questions, and find answers that are both internally consistent and that entail no unreasonable consequences. This thesis will, therefore, be concerned largely with abstract philosophical issues, that transcend not only issues of style, but the domain of painting itself. The first chapter will provide the broadest possible philosophical definition of abstraction. Subsequent chapters will use the basic logical requirements for abstract symbolism outlined in the first chapter to demonstrate that pictorial abstraction is formally unrelated to the process of abstraction in all other fields of human activity, including language, mathematics, geometry and science. On this basis it will be necessary to ask whether there is any philosophical basis for describing paintings as abstract. It must be said that this thesis is founded on the belief that all theories of pictorial abstraction are logically inconsistent and deeply misleading, that they mistake the abstract for its diametrical opposite, the concrete; and that they have not served painters well over the last century

or more. I cannot, however, deal with all the assertions that have been made about pictorial abstraction within the limits of this thesis. The last two chapters will instead attempt to find reasons why these assertions were made in the first place, and refute the common philosophical and aesthetic postulates on which they are based. This entails establishing a methodology (elaborated in the first and second chapters and restated subsequently) by which theoretical claims made about paintings may be judged. The principles on which this methodology is based are not above dispute, but they have proved fruitful in other fields of endeavour, such as science and philosophy, and although they may be doubted, I have tried to outline the serious risks entailed by their neglect. If this thesis seems unduly negative, my only excuse is that by saying what a painting *is not*, I wish to draw attention to what a painting *is*, and to facilitate a greater understanding and appreciation of all paintings than I believe conventional theories of abstraction/representation have so far afforded us. Arp said that people falsely call the concrete abstract, and in this he was right, but I wish to go further than Arp. The acceptance that no paintings (whether or not they have an object for a model) are abstract, but are as concrete and as sensual as a leaf or stone, is what this thesis seeks to promote.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Quoted by Ades 'Dada and Abstract Art in Zurich, 1915-20 in Vergo Led) *Abstraction: Towards a New Art,*. p.23

2. Vergo, *Abstraction: Towards a New art*, Preface.

3. Ibid., p.1.

4. Ibid., p.11.

CHAPTER I The Nature of Abstraction

Abstraction, in its simplest form, is the conceptual process of generalization. We abstract when, dealing with particular experiences, we perceive order in them, and generalize about them. As such, it is a mental process natural to all human beings with a normally functioning brain. People with certain acute brain disorders, such as aphasia, find many abstractive processes difficult, if not impossible.[1] Animals, as far as is known, also have an extremely limited capacity for abstraction. Higher animals, such as primates, have been shown to be able to abstract colour from size and shape or shape from size and colour. They can, for example, pick out objects with one of these qualities in common from a collection of objects varying extremely in their visual qualities. However, even after intense training, these abstractive processes remain rare, rudimentary and curiously prone to error.[2] In contrast, the human capacity to abstract - to perceive a quality common to different objects, to separate it in mental conception and consider it apart from its concrete manifestations - is taken for granted in most aspects of human life, without which they would not be possible.

Without a sufficiently complex system of symbols, the ability to isolate relations between objects and consider them in an abstract context cannot develop. We cannot, after all, *physically* separate objects from their qualities; this can only be done *symbolically*. Abstraction is, therefore, a symbolic process. Symbolic systems are capable of abstraction because they are not rigidly bound to particular individual figures. Symbols are general and mobile. Human languages are thus symbolic systems, since, while the word "rose" bears a fairly fixed relation to such a flower in English, there is no rigid connection between the physical property of the work, and the properties of the thing that it signifies.[3] "Gul" (Turkish) and "Rhodon" (Greek) are equally satisfactory names for a "rose", for as Juliet says:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose

by any other name would smell as sweet".[4]

The mobility and variability of symbols makes it possible to express the same meaning in various languages and even within the limits of a single language, a certain idea may be expressed in different terms. Thus symbols, in the proper sense of the term, cannot be reduced to mere *signals* (the physical characters which are made to stand for objects or concepts), just as the meaning of the word "rose" cannot be reduced to (or deduced from) the physical properties of that word. Signals, although used to mediate symbolic meaning, have never-the-less a physical and substantial existence. Symbols, as symbols, have no such substantial being; they have only a functional value, a meaning. This meaning can be expressed in any material, for it is not the material of which it consists that counts, but only its function, its logical structure.[5] We can only understand how a sensuous particular, such as a material object or sound, can become a vehicle of purely abstract, general meaning, if what it immediately *is* is thrust into the background by what it accomplishes through its mediation - by what it *means*. When you read this page you see "through" what the page *is* (paper covered with curving and angular ink stains) in order to grasp what it *means*. As Cassirer said; "Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances."[6] The converse is also true; the more the purely concrete, sensuous qualities of this page dominates your awareness, the more the meaning of the words becomes elusive and difficult to grasp. Thus signals and symbols belong to different levels of discourse. The signal is part of the physical world of being; the symbol is part of the conceptual world of abstract meaning.

If we consider this symbolic activity in its most pervasive form - verbal language - some light should be shed on the nature of the abstractive process. All forms of human symbolism stand in need of the instrumentality and priority of language, without which they would not be possible. Although there is remarkable uniformity in terms of the comparative sophistication of

languages in general, human speech does seem to have evolved from a relatively concrete state towards greater abstraction.[7] Older languages contain an abundant vocabulary for describing the smallest nuances of their environment, often at the expense of more abstract class concepts under which they might be subsumed. While in Arabic, for example, there are five to six thousand terms for describing the types and characteristics of camels, none of these gives us the abstract class concept embodied in our understanding of the English word "camel." Similarly, while the Greek and Latin terms for "moon" are equivalent in so far as they refer to the same object, they do not convey the same symbolic meaning. The Greek term (*men*) denotes the function of the moon to measure time, while the Latin term (*luna*) denotes the moon's lucidity on brightness. The English term "moon", on the other hand, having lost such particular connotations, is understood as a more general, abstract concept of its object.[8]

In the general scientific treatment of a subject, attempts are made to eliminate all the peculiarities of concrete content which cling to words, in order to subsume them under more and more general concepts. The whole meaning of the word is made to rest not on its particular, but on its general, abstract significance, as referring either to an object or an action. Words are used, in Hobbes' term, as "counters" of the mind, and we attempt to give unambiguous expression to every operation of thought in terms of these symbols. This purest form of symbolic language, cleansed of all particular content, is the language of geometry and mathematics.

Without an awareness of the abstract nature of symbols - their variability and independence of concrete objects - the true nature of mathematics and geometry, and thus of scientific knowledge, cannot be understood. Even among scientists and philosophers, an appreciation of this has been an elusive and relatively late historical development.

Just as in many religions, the name of a god is conceived as integral to its

nature, so in primitive thought the symbol is regarded as a quality of a thing like other physical properties. The Pythagoreans similarly spoke of number as a quality of objects. The nature of this "quality" was mysterious, inexplicable except as a mystical power. Since the time of the Pythagoreans, however, the concept of number has been recognized as the basis of mathematical thought, and consequently, the search for a comprehensive understanding of this concept was pursued with some urgency. Yet this endeavour was continually frustrated by the need to enlarge the field of enquiry in order to include strange new types of number that kept appearing, all of which seemed at first to be of a highly paradoxical nature, and which aroused the deepest suspicions of mathematicians and logicians. They were thought to be absurd or impossible. We can trace this development in the history of negative, irrational and imaginary numbers, whose very names illustrate the hostility with which their appearance was greeted. Negative numbers first appeared in Michael Stifel's *Arithmetica Integra*, where he called them *numeri ficti* (fictitious numbers). In all the great systems of rationalism, mathematics took pride of place; it alone was the province of clear and distinct ideas, of absolute certainty. Yet as this province became populated with imaginary and fictitious entities, so rationalist tenets were thrown open to doubt. Far from being clear and distinct, such fundamental concepts as number seemed fraught with pitfalls and obscurities. It was only when the general character of mathematical concepts was given a satisfactory explanation by Gauss (1777-1855) that these doubts and obscurities were removed, and it was acknowledged that all numbers are fictitious and imaginary. Number is not a physical property of objects, nor does it have any counterpart in physical or psychological reality. Mathematics is not a system of things, but of abstract symbols.

Similarly, the points and lines of geometry are neither physical nor psychological objects; they are nothing but symbols for abstract relations.[9] Even in elementary geometry we are not bound to the apprehension of concrete individual figures. We are not dependent upon physical things, upon

visual or tactile kinaesthetic data, for we are studying universal relations, for which we have an adequate abstract symbolism. The distinction between actual space - the space of sense experience - and its abstract, theoretical counterpart, was first developed by Greek philosophers. Yet while both idealists and materialists emphasized the distinction, they were hard-put to elucidate its logical character. Zeno propounded paradoxes about motion in order to prove that our perception of both space and time were illusory. Plato, too, described abstract space as a hybrid concept, with no true reality: spatial predicates applied only to appearances: true reality transcended space and time. Democritus, in contrast, declared abstract space to be non-being which, nevertheless, had true reality. Not until Descartes' discovery of analytical geometry was a clearer conception of geometrical symbolism facilitated. This allowed all our conceptual knowledge of spatial relations to be translated into numbers, providing a clearer logical distinction between actual and ideal space. Yet for Descartes, the ideal mathematical space was the more authentic and real of the two.[10] Newton also warned us not to confuse this "true mathematical space" with the space of our sense experience. Common people, he said, think of space, time and motion according to no other principle than the relations these concepts bear to actual objects. But we must abandon this habit, and abstract from our intuitive experience if we are to gain any scientific or philosophical understanding.[11] Conceptually, it is indispensable to distinguish between things and their symbols,for upon this distinction rests, not only the difference between being and meaning, but also the difference between the actual and ideal; between real and possible things. When this distinction is obscured, the difference between actuality and possibility also becomes uncertain. As Kant observed, creatures without an abstract symbolism can have no idea of "possible" things, since they lack the means to transcend the real world of sense experience. On the other hand, a hypothetical divine intellect can know of no distinction between reality and possibility, since everything it conceives is real.[12] It cannot think of a thing without, by that very thought, creating it. The word of God is, so to speak, made flesh. However, human words and symbols are not like that; they hold

dominion in the human world of meaning, but they are impotent with regard to the real world of things.[13] We are thus obliged to distinguish between the world of being and the world of meaning, between the real and the possible, between the actual and the ideal, and between the concrete and the abstract. Unless this distinction is maintained, we risk suffering the grossest delusions, about both the nature of our world, and the capacity of the human intellect, for as Epictetus said, what disturbs and alarms man are not things themselves, but his opinions and fancies about them.[14] Just as in mathematics with imaginary numbers, the same doubts occurred in the divine science of geometry, when it came to be accepted that all proofs of Euclid's fifth axiom were unsound.[15] It was not until the appearance of the first non-Euclidean systems, with their blatant affronts to intuition, that geometry was acknowledged to be, not a theory of real things, but of possibilities; of abstract ideas.

It is only because there is no correspondence between our mathematical symbols and the objects of sense experience that the conceptual world of science is self-contained and autonomous. We make "inner fictions or symbols" of outward objects, and these symbols are articulated like the words of a language, meaningful in itself and ordered according to fixed rules.[16] These rules are so constituted that, as far as is possible, the necessary logical consequences of the rules correspond with the observed natural consequences of the symbolized object.[17] As Bronowsky says, "We are looking for a language in science which mimics or mirrors the structure of reality."[18] This structure is not self-evident:

> We have to tease out the structure from observational sentences when we make them into abstract sentences. How do we do that? Well, we do it essentially by treating nature as, in Leibniz' phrase, a gigantic cryptogram, a gigantic series of encoded messages. And we seek to decode it in such a way that entities emerge which are conserved under various changes and transformations.[19]

Human beings, like other animals, have an intuitive organic understanding of space, time and motion as concrete and physical, as they bear relation to the

actual objects that we see, hear or feel within the arena of corporeal action and reaction. It is only because mathematical symbols are abstract - not bound by our limited visual, auditory and tactile kinaesthetic experience - that science is capable of transcending our anthropocentric instincts and making counter-intuitive assertions. We find just such an assertion accompanying the birth of modern physics, when Galileo proclaims that the Book of Nature "cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the alphabet in which it is composed.

> It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.[20]

Science has made rapid progress only as it has banished all anthropocentric instincts, all subjective experience, all "common sense" from its reckoning. Only in that state can it reduce the sensuous physicallity of our world to the vacuous immateriality of uniform abstractions.

NOTES ON CHAPTER I

1. "The mentally sick man is incapable of [approaching things that are only imagined, possible things, things which are not given in the concrete situation] because of his inability to grasp what is abstract. Our patients are unable to imitate or copy anything that is not part of their immediate concrete experience."

   Kurt Goldstein, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology* pp. 44, 210 quoted in Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.58.

2. Robert M. Yerkes, *Chimpanzees* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1943) p.103.

3. "...Human languages use neutral symbols. There is no connection between the word dog and the four-legged animal it symbolizes. It can equally be called *Un Chien* (french), *Ein Hund* (German), or *Canis* (Latin)... onomatopoeic words, such as Cuckoo, Pop, Bang, Slurp and Squish are exceptions to this. But there are relatively few of these in any language." Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal* p.26.

4. Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*

5. "Language can arguably be transferred without loss to visual symbols (as in sign language or writing) and to tactile symbols (as in Braille)." Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal* p.26.

6. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.25.

7. "A distinct name for every particular thing would not be of any great particular use for the improvement of knowledge, *which, though founded in particular things, enlarges itself by general views*; to which things reduced into general names are properly subservient.. Words

become general by separating them from the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence. By this way of abstraction they are made capable of representing more individuals than one; each of which, having in it conformity to that abstract idea, is (as we call it) of that sort."

Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Bk. 3, Ch.3, sec.4-6.

8. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.134, 135.

9. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.44

10. "When in first infancy we see a triangular figure depicted on paper, this figure cannot show us how a real triangle ought to be conceived, in the way in which geometricians consider it, because the true triangle is contained in this figure, just as the statue of mercury is contained within a rough block of wood. But because we already posses within us the idea of a true triangle, and it can be more easily conceived by our mind than the more complex figure drawn on paper we therefore when we see the composite figure, apprehend not it itself, but rather the authentic triangle." Descartes, *Reply to objections*. V.

11. Newton, *Principia* Book I definition 8.

12. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* secs. 76, 77.

13. "If [philosophers] opinions and their voices have the power to call into existence the things they name, then I beg them to do me the favour of naming a lot of old hardware I have about my house 'gold'." - Galileo, quoted in Stillman Drake, *Galileo* p.71.

14. Quoted in Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.25.

15. The fifth axiom concerns the concept of parallelism, and states that if two straight lines which extend indefinitely in a plane are parallel, they will be equidistant. Euclid himself saw no way of proving this, and by 1763, thirty alleged proofs were listed by Klugel, all of which he rightly concluded were false. Fifty years later, the Hungarian mathematician Farkas Bolyai wrote to his son Janos, also a mathematician: "I entreat you, leave the science of parallels alone... I have travelled past all reefs of this infernal Dead Sea and have always come back with a broken mast and torn sail." Janos Bolyai persevered, however, and eventually was drawn to the conclusion that there could be two equally valid geometries, one where the fifth axiom is asserted, and one which denies it. In other words, because we cannot actually measure parallels to infinity, it is possible that we live in a non-Euclidean universe. In such a world railroad tracks can still be equidistant, but then they will not be perfectly straight. Gauss had arrived at similar conclusions much earlier, but never published his findings, fearing them too subversive. Indeed, the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry must count as one of the most revolutionary in the history of thought. Since Bolyai, such systems have been proliferating. Einstein's relativity theory is based on elliptic geometry, which contradicts Euclid's second axiom, such that according to Einstein, space can be unbounded without being infinite.

16. Heinrich Hertz, *Principles of Mechanics* p.1.

17. "If we treat knowledge of the external world in this way, we are then constructing a language of science which has three features. There are, first of all, symbols which stand for concepts or inferred entities which have the character of words in these sentences. Then there is the grammar which tells us how these things are put together, so that for instance

$$G=K\frac{mm^1}{r^2}$$

is a grammatical sentence. If you did not put r^2 down but r^3, that would be ungrammatical and the sentence would not be allowed in the language. And finally there is a dictionary of translation which relates a sentence like this to specific problems like determining the period of the moon."

Bronowski *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* p.56.

18. *Ibid.*, p.47.

19. *Ibid.*, p.48.

20. Quoted in Stillman, Drake *Galileo* p.70.

CHAPTER 2

SOME LOGICAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ABSTRACT SYMBOLISM

The analysis of abstraction in the previous chapter followed from just two assumptions; that abstraction is a conceptual process of generalization, and that this process is symbolic.

What light does this shed on abstraction in painting? Not much, one may say, but this is not quite the case. The previous chapter has provided us with a principle and methodology whereby we may distinguish between being and meaning, between the actual and the ideal, and consequently between the concrete and the abstract. If we adhere to this method, we may begin to define the relation between painting and abstract concepts, and provide a clear distinction between painting on the one hand, and language and science on the other.

Let us deal with the relation between paintings and abstract concepts first. It has already been pointed out that abstract concepts or symbols can have no physical or substantial existence, but only a function or meaning. We can, therefore, only understand how a sensuous particular, such as a painting, can become the vehicle of abstract general meaning, if what it immediately *is* is ignored for the sake of what it accomplishes through its mediation. It is not the material of which it consists that counts in this act of mediation, but only its function. Thus, for a painting to mediate abstract meaning, we would be obliged (as with a word or sentence) to see "through" what it *is*, in order to perceive what it *means*. This requires a semantic "transparency" of the picture plane far more radical than the Renaissance dictum that a painting be like a window, for it makes the phenomenal existence of the painting, its sensuous particularity, contingent to its meaning. If a painting is, for example, intended to mediate the *concept* of a triangle, it cannot be enough for a triangular figure to be drawn or painted onto it, since the *meaning* of the conceptual triangle -

its abstract universality and theoretical perfection - cannot physically be incorporated into the drawn figure. The figure is not, therefore a conceptual entity an abstract, universal idea - but a perceptual one; a concrete particular object, a crude physical analogy for its metaphysical counterpart. No matter how carefully drawn, the two differ not in degree, but absolutely; it is the distinction between a concrete object and an abstract ideal. Paintings, one must point out, remain concrete, despite the strongest urge to be as abstract and disembodied as an idea. If such a painting is intended to convey an idea, such as the concept of a triangle, it can only succeed if, as Descartes said, we disregard the particular sensuous qualities of the picture, and apprehend, not the drawn figure itself, but the conceptual triangle that it is supposed to represent.[8] As such, the painting itself would not be abstract, but would only be functioning as an expendable physical stimulus to abstract metaphysical thought.

This conclusion is not original. Croce, in his *Aesthetics* similarly claimed that (as with language) the physical properties of a painting are irrelevant to its essential meaning; the physical object is only a token of the artists' spiritual intuition, of no value except in so for as it stimulates viewers into recreating the original intuition in their own minds.[2] Whether or not such notions are felicitous in practise will be dealt with further on. So far, we have established that paintings, although not abstract themselves, may theoretically mediate abstract meaning. This is because meaning can be expressed in any material, for it is not the material itself that counts, but its function; its logical structure. Therefore, to establish that paintings *do, in fact,* mediate abstract meaning, we need only furnish an account of the logical structure and function of painting, showing that painting, like language and mathematics, exhibits structural features that enables it to mediate abstract meaning. Yet if one concedes that the ability of language and mathematics to mediate abstract ides is dependent upon certain structural features, paintings cannot be demonstrated to exhibit *any* of these features.

Let us take an example. We can understand how a concrete sensual object can become a vehicle of purely abstract meaning only if the physical properties of the object are understood as a token physical presence signifying something which has no physical existence, but only a meaning. Thus, with words, the particular physical properties of the sign are distinguished from the abstract properties of meaning which the sign signifies. The meaning of the word "rose" is independent of the physical shape, sound, texture, colour or any other property of the sign that signifies it. Yet, a painting of a rose is only intelligible as such in so far as it can be deduced from the physical properties of the painting itself. How then, can a painting, solely through its physical properties, signify something that is abstract - that has no physical properties at all? Is it possible to have a purely concrete, sensual language that is capable of articulating abstract ideas? Is this not a contradiction in terms?

Philosophically, debate on this issue revolved around the dispute between empiricists and idealists. It is a fundamental tenet of empiricist philosophy that all our abstract concepts must be derived from concrete sense perception. For Locke, the very structure of language contains evidence of its sensual origin:

> It may .. lead us a little towards the original of all our notions and knowledge of we remark how great a dependence our words have on common sensible ideas; and how those which are made use of to stand for actions and notions quite removed from sense, have their rise from thence, and from obvious sensible ideas are transferred to more abstruse significations, and made to stand for ideas that come not under the cognizance of our senses; e.g., to 'imagine' 'apprehend', 'comprehend' ...etc., are all words taken from the operations of sensible things and applied to certain modes of thinking... I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas.
>
> (Locke *Essay* Bk.3 Ch.1, sec.5)

If indeed, our minds start off as "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas," as Locke says, it would be necessary to derive all our ideas either from divine revelation or from sensible objects.[3] In the latter case, it could

then be said that paintings, like all other sensible objects, contain innate ideas that are perceptible to the senses.

Kant's famous rebuttal of this theory forms one of the cornerstones of modern philosophical idealism. We may suppose that any of our ideas are derived from sensible "intuitions", but these particular intuitions cannot be apprehended as related to one another without abstract concepts of relation that are not given by the intuitions themselves. as Kant said: "The conjunction of the manifold in general can never be given us by the senses," it is always

> a spontaneous act of the faculty of representation...we cannot represent anything as conjoined in the object without having previously conjoined it ourselves of all mental notions, that of conjunction is the only one which cannot be given through objects, but can be originated only by the subject itself.
>
> (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, sec.15)

Consciousness may be conceived, in Leibniz's words, as an "expression of the many in the one,"[4] but such a conception of consciousness is only possible if our manifold intuitions are united by prior concepts of abstract relation: "Concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."[5] This has become a fundamental tenet of scientific methodology upheld by such philosophers of science as Karl Popper, Jacob Bronowski and Nelson Goodman. Popper's adamant criticism of what he terms "the bucket theory of the mind" (the theory that sense impressions are deposited in the mind and subsequently interpreted and abstracted) has done much to throw it into disrepute. By opposing this Bucket theory with his "searchlight theory", he has attempted to emphasize the active nature of all organic sense perception.[6] The Kantian dictum that the virgin mind is empty and the innocent eye blind, that the reception and interpretation of sense data are not separable operations, has come to be echoed by all the sciences. Even physics, which sought to base itself entirely on the study of the motion of particles or material points such as electrons, has found that such points cannot be defined as entities with an independent existence, but can only be clearly described in relation to the

electromagnetic field as a whole. Thus "field physics" has gradually developed and superseded classical "mechanical" physics. In biology too, it has come to be recognized that for organic systems as for symbolic systems, "the whole is prior to the part."[7]

As the mother of all symbolic systems, this holds true for language itself. A language is not simply a mechanical aggregate of terms. Humboldt maintained that we cannot gain a true insight into the character and function of human speech so long as we think of it as a mere collection of words. The real difference between languages is not a difference of sounds or signs but of "world-perspectives" (*Weltansichten*). The words and rules which according to our ordinary notions make up a language really exist only in the act of connected speech. To treat them as separate, independent entities is "nothing but the dead product of our bungling scientific analysis."[8]

A sentence is not simply a collection of words. It is a unit which binds together particular words with abstract relations. These relations are not given in the words themselves, but in the way the words are ordered when put together. Only these abstract relations, providing logical connections between words, can make them meaningful. The way that words are articulated is rigidly rule based, so that only certain words in certain orders are meaningful. A meaningful statement in any language is one that conforms to the rules of sentence formation. Even false statements, such as "The present King of France is bald." can be meaningful. As such, the linguistic criterion of meaningfulness is both objective and pervasive, since it is implicit that anyone who understands a language understands tacitly the rules by which that language is formulated, and can therefore distinguish between meaningful and meaningless statements. Only the objective unity of the sentence allows cognitions to be brought under what Kant called "the objective unity of apperception."[9] In language this unity is expressed in the little word of relation "is", which conjoins subject and predicate. Only by this "is" do we state that the representations in question necessarily belong to each other, and

are not merely connected by fortuitous, psychological associations.[10]

Paintings, too, have rules for "articulating" cognitions within a pictorial composition, but functionally such rules in no way resemble those that govern the abstract relations that articulate words. While the formal rigidity and pervasiveness of linguistic conventions allows one to distinguish meaningful form meaningless statements, the "grammar" of painting cannot warrant any such distinction between meaningful and meaningless pictures, since in practice pictorial conventions are neither rigid nor pervasive. It may, for example, be a convention that pictures are rectangular in shape, but this convention is not rigid, since pictures are not logically required to be rectangular, and consequently it is not pervasive, since some pictures are, in fact, unrectangular. One can easily substitute any other pictorial convention for "rectangularity" in the preceding statement. In short, pictorial conventions are unlike linguistic conventions, since they are not based on logical or objective criteria, such as the linguistic criterion of meaningfulness. If then, pictorial conventions are neither rigid, pervasive nor based on objective criteria,they must be basically habitual; governed by subjective, psychological criteria such as association, recognition and identification. Since, furthermore, it is notorious from psychology that the same visual appearances can be interpreted in different ways spontaneously or by an act of will, an objectively or scientifically valid criticism of painting must be ruled out. Any attempt to objectify or systematize our rules of pictorial interpretation can only result in the elevation of subjective opinion to the status of dogma. This is reflected in the practise of all interpretative systems, be they mimeticist, expressionist, formalist, Freudian, Marxist or structuralist. It seems that the only hard-and-fast rules that painters are required to adhere to are the laws of physics, which unlike grammatical rules, cannot (thankfully) be broken. Thus, the "grammar of painting" can be nothing but a metaphor.

If it is not possible to objectively distinguish meaningful from meaningless pictures, this can only be because there is no distinction to make. In other

words, pictures can have no objective meaning. There are no objective rules governing the relations between various elements of a picture. While these elements are bound together to form a perceptual unity, they are bound together physically rather than symbolically. There is no physical analogy for the abstract relations which combine sensuous particulars together into a conceptual unity. If for example, one tries to conceive of a pictorial analogy for the simple symbolic statement 2+2=4 (two plus two equals four), one can easily imagine a picture with four objects, or a triptych with two pictures of two objects and a third with all four together, but we are left without any necessary logical connection between these objects.

It maybe objected that the ways in which cognitions are combined in paintings do *seem* meaningful. This can be acknowledged, providing that the distinction between appearance and reality is also acknowledged; a picture *seems*, but not *is*, meaningful. After all, what combination of sensuous elements could not be interpreted meaningfully? A language without abstract concepts where all statements are meaningful no matter what order the "words" are in is an interesting hypothesis, if an absurd one. One could, trivially describe painting as such a language, since any collection of objects at all can fit such a broad definition, but it would still not be a symbolic system. One must again emphasize that like any symbolic system, normal language is not simply a collection of signs, since as with any system, the whole is prior to, and greater than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, in all symbolic systems, the distinction between meaningful and meaningless statements is fundamental to their symbolic function. Patently, painting cannot be such a symbolic system. Is there any reason, then, for calling painting a symbolic system capable of articulating meaning? What if, with Courbet, we renounce all claim to the realm of abstract ideas while maintaining the idea that painting is a language?

Painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist in the representation of *real and existing things*. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all the visible objects; an object which is *abstract*, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting."[11]

This cannot help us, however, for while a language which consisted of all visible objects would have an unlimited "vocabulary", without abstract relations between the "words" it could be nothing more than an open-ended list, without any meaning at all. Language can have meaning only by conjoining abstract and concrete, universal and particular, signs. A picture of a chair might be conceived of as expressing the simple factual statement:

"This is a chair."

But even this statement expresses the abstract concept of "being", which articulates the relationship between the subject and predicate of the sentence. If, following Courbet's proposal, we acknowledge that such an abstract concept is not within the realm of painting, such a picture would express the statement:

"This Chair."

This is not an objectively meaningful statement in any language, since there is no relation between the two words beyond association, which is not a sufficient criterion of meaningfulness. The fact is that painting can only be considered a meaningful language if it is able to express such basic abstract concepts as "being". For a demonstration of painting's incapacity in this respect, one need only look again at Magritte's "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*", which to general consternation and amusement, displays painting's dependence on language for the assertion or denial of the abstract concept of "being".

It has been suggested that , while Magritte's picture does not mean "This is a pipe", it could mean "This is a picture of a pipe." yet this apparently innocuous interpretation betrays remarkable confusion. Magritte's picture may well *be* a picture of a pipe, but to conclude from this that it *means* a picture of a pipe is to confuse being with meaning. To furthermore say that the picture *means* that it *is* a picture of a pipe is to make the mistake reflexive. The picture thus does not simply exist, but is actively articulating the meaning of its existence through self-reference. One might be led from this to speculate as to whether all inanimate objects are capable of expressing the meaning of their existence.

If this sort of interpretation, for all its metaphysical contortions, offered us some insight into the nature of pictorial symbolism or meaning, it would be of value. However, interpreting a picture of a pipe as meaning "This is a picture of a pipe" is breathtakingly vacuous. Meaning and representation are not after all, considered to be entirely reflexive and self-referential. Something is generally thought to be a representation only if it stands for, refers to or symbolizes (and thus means) *something else*.

If, for arguments sake, we ignore the distinction between things that are abstractly conceived and concretely perceived, and assume that the picture of a pipe does not simply represent itself, but some other (conceptual or perceptual) pipe, we still cannot establish any relation of reference between the image and the imaged object. The conventional solution to this is to say that a picture represents its object if it resembles it, but this begs the question: "At what point does the resemblance between the picture and its object become too weak to support the representational relationship between the two?" Rauschenberg's telegram, *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I say so*, is surely the limiting case here, but even the most "realistic" portrait painting or photograph is much more like any other picture than it is like the person portrayed. Resemblance, in fact, has nothing to do with representation; almost anything can represent almost anything else. A red rose can represent love and an ambassador can represent a nation. Indeed a red rose can represent a nation and a ambassador can represent love, although this might require some social adaption. To quote Goodman,

> The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference.[13]

There can be no better example of the difficulties of establishing a relationship of reference between a picture and its object than Nelson Goodman's own failed attempt. His book, *Languages of Art* has been praised for its

uncompromising logical consistency, and hailed as "the first work of analytical philosophy to make a sustained contribution to aesthetics."[14] Goodman's aim in this book is to put forward a comprehensive theory of the symbolic forms of art. He naturally treats pictorial representation as a form of symbolism, since strictly speaking, a picture cannot be said to represent an object unless it symbolizes it. Since, furthermore, a picture cannot symbolize an object unless it refers to it, Goodman wisely excludes resemblance as a criterion of representation, since it does not address the necessary conditions of reference. In seeking a form of symbolism that fulfils these criteria, Goodman finds only one that is capable of establishing the requisite relationship of reference between a picture and its object. Only *denotation* - the relationship between a linguistic predicate and what it applies to - fulfills all the necessary requirements.

Subsuming pictorial representation under denotation has certain consequences. A proper name is a predicate with unique denotation, but predicates may also denote severally members of a given class. In like manner pictures, too, may have unique or multiple denotation. Pictures of things like unicorns, which do not exist, can have neither unique nor multiple, but only *null* denotation, since to denote nothing that exists is not to denote at all. Such pictures are not in fact denotational two-place predicates but unbreakable one-place predicates or class-terms, like "desk" and "table". Thus a picture which, in common parlance, is said to "represent a unicorn" does not in fact represent or refer to any such thing, but being an unbreakable one-place predicate is rather a "unicorn-picture".

> Saying that a picture represents so-and-so is highly ambiguous as between saying what the picture denotes and saying what kind of picture it is ... if we cannot determine whether a picture denotes anything or not, we can only proceed as if it did not - that is confine ourselves to considering what kind of picture it is. Thus cases of indeterminate denotation are treated in the same way as cases of null-denotation.[15]

Goodman is rightly admired for his logical consistency, for while this analysis

can add little to our practical understanding of pictures, it is logically inscrutable. This theory does, however, yield some strange consequences. For example, while a picture, like a predicate, is supposed to denote what it represents, what a picture *expresses* is made dependent upon what predicates it is denoted by. Therefore, just as a painting is grey if only if the predicate "grey" applies to it, so a painting can express sadness or be sad if and only if the predicate "sad" applies to it.[16] Expression is thus assimilated to the relationship between a sample and a label; a painting expresses what it exemplifies. While anything may be denoted, only labels can be exemplified. Such labels may be abstract class concepts (as in "sad") having multiple denotation, "but a singular label may equally well be exemplified by what it denotes,"[17] Goodman himself saw the problem with this:

> Treating all exemplification as fundamentally of labels raises... the question whether all exemplification is indeed entirely dependent upon language. Does exemplification emerge only as language develops? Are only words exemplified? The general answer is that not all labels are predicates; predicates are labels from linguistic systems. Symbols from other systems - gestual pictorial, diagrammatic, etc. - may be exemplified and otherwise function much as predicates of a language. Such non-linguistic systems, some of them developed before the advent or acquisition of language, are in constant use.[18]

However, when we examine this concept of non-linguistic exemplification, we are faced with a paradox. One might, for example presume that a non-linguistic gesture, such as a smile, would exemplify "happiness", an abstract label with multiple denotation. But "happiness' is a predicate from a linguistic system. If one does away with all such linguistic labels, what labels are left? Because language is so pervasive for us, its formative influence on our conception of the world often goes unnoticed. For example, when using words, we take their reference for granted. It is natural for us to conceive of a certain smile as *referring to* or exemplifying a certain mental state, and we tend to presume that even in the absence of language, such a smile would be understood in this way. One cannot deny that gestural forms of communication predate the development of language. Nor is it in doubt that

rage, terror, despair, grief, desire, playfulness, pleasure and a myriad of other emotions can be expressed by means of gesture. The vital question is whether gestural or other prelinguistic forms of communication entail reference.

Much effort has been spent on trying to identify differences between human language, and non-linguistic systems of communication, as they are found among animals. One of the most striking differences between the two is that non-linguistic systems of communication appear to be devoid of exemplification, or any other form of objective referential relationship that distinguishes an object from a predicate or label.[19] For example, animals appear to be incapable of distinguishing between a danger signal and the source of danger itself. They cannot experience fear without expressing it and cannot express or receive the danger signal without simultaneously feeling it, whether or not here is an objective situation to which the signal "refers". For animals, the distinction between the signal which "denotes" the danger, and the danger that "exemplifies" the signal, simply doesn't exist. For them, both are subjectively united and inseparable.

In human language, reference between an object and its predicate can be established precisely because the two are differentiated. It is only because subject and predicate can be taken apart or conjoined by words of relation such as "is", that we are able to say whether or not one represents, refers, describes, denotes, symbolizes or means, the other. This ability is entirely dependent on the grammatical structure of human language, which allows a statement like "grass is green" to be broken down into three concepts; a subject called "grass", a predicate called"green" and a relation called "is". Bronowski has noted that while, for human language, one can say that "in the beginning was the word", for communication in general it is more accurate to say that "in the beginning was the sentence." An animal utters a cry which is a unitary sentence. It cannot take it apart and put the back first and the front afterward and get a new meaning, the way we do when we say "John loves Lucy" and "Lucy loves John."[20] Since the animal message is a sentence,

we must have begun, like animals, speaking in sentences. Yet somehow, we managed to take the sentence apart so that we could arrange the words in different ways, and thus create the truly human world of meaning. Yet this begs Bronowski's question, "How did the words come to fall out of the sentence in the first place?"[21] As he says himself:

> Nobody knows how this happened, and it really is the great mystery about how language came to be. Nobody would believe that it could happen, except for the fact that it actually has.[22]

For linguists, it is not simply the fact of language which requires explanation, but also its structure. Genetic solutions cannot solve systematic problems. Even if human language and animal communciation are connected genetically, a comparative analysis of their structures disclose such radical differences that the transition from one type to the other "must always remain logically a *metabasis eis allo genos*, a transition from one genus to another."[23] The material connection between the two does not exclude, but rather accentuates their functional heterogeneity.[24] Of course, some animals, such as apes, display many antecedents of human symbolic processes, nor does evolutionary theory exclude a sort of original creation in this respect. As Cassirer says, "The fact of sudden mutation and emergent evolution has to be admittd."[25] Yet one indispensible element of language does appear to be missing from all purely non-linguistic systems of communication; objective reference and meaning.

As has been pointed out, something cannot truly represent, symbolize or mean something else unless it refers to it. In the absence of such reference, we cannot say that sign and object necessarily relate to each other, and are not merely connected by fortuitous, psychological associations. Thus, systems of communication that are incapable of reference are not truly symbolic or representational; they can neither objectively designate nor describe objects. animal communications, be they vocal or gestural, are like this; they are not true symbolic systems, but merely systems of signs. That such systems can

be complex and sensitive is not in question. Dogs, for example, are extremely susceptible to signs, and can react to the slightest changes in the behaviour of their masters, right down to facial expression and modulation of the voice. The relation between the sign and the object, however, remains one of direct association. In the absence of relations of reference between the two, this association is sustained purely by habituation and conditioning. To quote Cassirer:

> All the phenomena which are commonly described as conditioned reflexes are not only very far from but even opposed to the essential character of human symbolic thought. Symbols - in the proper sense of the term - cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong to two different universes of discourse: a signal is part of the physical world of being; a symbol is part of the human world of meaning. Signals are 'operators'; symbols are 'designators'... In Pavlov's experiments the dogs could easily be trained to reach for food only upon being given special signs; they would not eat until they heard a particular sound which could be chosen at the discretion of the experimentor. But this bears no analogy, as it has often been intepreted, to human symbolism; on the contrary, it is in opposition to human symbolism. A genuine human symbol is characterized not by uniformity but by its versatility. It is not rigid or inflexible but mobile... For this variability and mobility there is apparently no parallel in the animal world[26]

How then, does this affect Goodman's theory of pictorial representation? Let us recall that Goodman insisted that a picture can only be a true symbol or representation of an object if it refers to it. He found that the only relationship between a picture and its object that would satisfy the criterion of reference is denotation. It is thus central to his thesis that for a picture to entail abstract relations of reference, such as denotation and exemplification, such relations cannot be confined to linguistic systems, but must also be present in other "symbol systems" such as gesture (which must be independent of language since it predates it). Without abstract relations of reference, such non-linguistic systems as gesture and pictorial representation could not truly be described as symbolic systems. Yet it is precisely this conclusion that has been arrived at by linguists and anthropologists; abstract relations of objective reference are entirely unique to linguistic systems. Since reference is

necessary for symbolization, it is a mistake to describe non-linguistic systems as symbolic. As Chomsky said, if it were possible to show that prelinguistic "symbolic systems" shared specific abstract properties with natural language, Goodman's arguments would have some force; but Chomsky finds,

> not the slightest reason to believe that this is so. Goodman's argument is based on a metaphorical use of the term 'symbol system', and collapses as soon as we try to give this term a precise meaning.[27]

In this case, Goodman's attempt to define pictorial representation as a symbolic system is flawed. He is, of course, right in saying that only denotation can establish objective reference between a picture and its object, and to insist that unless it refers to its object, a picture cannot truly represent or symbolize it. Yet the only obvious conclusion that can be drawn from these maxims is that pictures are neither symbolic nor representational in the strict sense of these words. If Goodman's requisite relations of reference between pictures and their objects cannot be established without the aid of language, it is not the pictures themselves, but the words that are doing the representing. Again, Rauschenberg's *This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I say so* is the limiting case. Goodman is correct to insist that pictures can only constitute a symbolic system if their meaning is independent of what is said about them: "A symbol must have the property that it expresses; what counts is not whether anyone calls the picture sad but whether it *is* sad, whether the label does in fact apply." [28]

We have come back again to this small word of relation "*is*", which alone is capable of uniting subject and predicate, sample and label, and for which there is no sensuous pictorial analogy. Our inability to establish whether or not a picture really *is* sad might be tragic, if the objective were not so trivial. As Cassirer noted, it is not only pointless trying to subsume pictures under psychological class concepts; it also betrays "an unpenetrating taste."[29]

It seems then, that painting is not a symbolic system, but a system of *signs*.

It does not in fact represent or symbolize its objects, but *signifies* them. In so far as painting is communicational, it shares more common ground with animal communication than with language, being based (like the former) on habitual, and subjective, rather than logically necessary and objective, criteria. As such, paintings, in themselves, are incapable of mediating truly abstract or symbolic thought or meaning.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. See note to chapter I.

2. Croce, *Aesthetic*

3. Russell, *A history of Western Philosophy* p.589.

4. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* p.100

5. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.56.

6. Popper, "The Problem of Induction" in Miller *A Pocket Popper* p. 105.

7. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* P.121.

8. Ibid., p. 120, 121.

9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B. Sec.15 p. 131.

10 "Judgement is nothing but the manner in which all modes of knowledge are brought to the objective unity of apperception. This is what is intended by the copula 'is'. It is employed to distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective. It indicates their relation to original apperception and its necessary unity." - Ibid., Sec.19 B p. 142.

11. Quoted by Nochlin, *Realism* p.23.

12. Goodman, *Languages of Art* p.5.

13. Ibid., p.5.

14. Scruton, "Art, Language and Nelson Goodman" in *The Politics of Culture* p. 58.

15. Goodman, *Languages of Art* p.23, 26.

16. Ibid., p.50.

17. Ibid., p.56.

18. Ibid., p.56.

19. Bronowski, *The Origins of Knowledge* and Imagination p.37.

20. Ibid., p.36.

21. Ibid., p. 38.

22. Ibid., p. 37.

23. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p. 115.

24. Ibid., p.112.

25. Ibid., p.31.

26. Ibid., p.32, 37.

27. Chomsky, *Language & Mind* p.174, 176.

28. Goodman, Languages of Art p.88.

29. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.150.

CHAPTER 3.

PICTORIAL SIGN SYSTEMS
RESONANCE AND ALLEGORY

There have been systems of signs developed within the tradition of painting that are conventionally taken to infer abstract ideas or mental states. These conform to two basic models, neither of which constitutes an autonomous language.

The first of these systems makes use of a fixed number of abstract "dimensions", each of which is associated with a physical pictorial "dimension" in such a way that the selection of a particular point along the physical dimension determines and signals a particular point along the associated abstract dimension. In such a system, the abstract dimension is unlimited, in so far as there are a theoretically infinite number of points on each dimension, and thus a potentially infinite range of signals.[1]

Kandinsky is the most famous proponent of this system, which he applied to his own paintings.[2] In these, each pictorial "dimension" consists of the continuous range of colours between three sets of colours (blue and yellow, violet and orange, red and green), giving three dimensions, and the continuous range of tones between black and white, giving a fourth dimension, in such a way that the selection of a particular colour in this four-dimensional system signals a corresponding particular spiritual feeling. The relation between the two is supposedly because the vibration of the colour causes a corresponding involuntary "resonance" in our souls. The greater the strength and frequency of the colour's vibrations, the greater the strength and frequency of the resonance.

Whether or not one believes in Kandinsky's remarkable system of spiritual vibrations is not at issue here. The question is whether this system, even on

its own terms,is capable of articulating abstract thought. Let us take Kandinsky's word that yellow communicates physical aggression and excitement, while blue communicates feelings of spiritual peace, and that every point on the continuous scale from one to the other constitutes some point between these feelings. let us also presume that the three other dimensions of this system function similarly. What can one say within this abstract "language"? The range of what can be communicated is confined to various combinations of just eight signals, and even this is further limited by redundancy within the system. For example, the tonal range from bright yellow to darkest blue subsumes most of the tonal range from white to black. In fact, the potential of this system to communicate abstract thoughts or feelings corresponds, not with human language, but with birdsong, and other related forms of animal communication. Animals, after all, experience internal states, and communicate the quality and intensity of the feeling by selecting a correspondingly intense signal from a range of signals with varying intensity. The European robin, for example, communicates its intention to defend its territory by alternating high and low pitch signals.[3] The greater the frequency of alternation, the correspondingly greater its intention to defend its territory. In other words, robins too use a physical range of signals allied to an abstract range of internal states. Bees can even use such systems to refer, not to internal states, but to objects outside their immediate sensory experience. The frequency and direction of their dances correspond to the proximity and direction of a source of nectar.[4]

The comparison of Kandinsky's paintings with the language of the birds and the bees is not meant to be derogatory, or reflect on his intelligence or ability as a painter. It is only to point out that as systems of signs, they are of comparable sophistication, and capable of articulating the same level of abstract consciousness. As Noam Chomsky has pointed out:

> When we move to the level of abstraction at which human and animal language fall together, almost all other behaviour is included as well.[5]

Chomsky used the example of walking, which is quite capable of expressing the character or internal state of a person, since one can walk aggressively, or tranquilly or excitedly. There are, in fact, an unlimited number of ways of walking, all of which can express an abstract, internal state:

> I can even signal my interest in reaching a certain goal by the speed and intensity with which I walk.[6]

If, however, one were to attempt to have a conversation with someone, where the sole medium of communication was walking, one would very quickly come up against the inadequacy of such a system to communicate one's thought. Walking, in short, is not a language.

The second form of sign system developed within the painting tradition also has a parallel in the animal kingdom. This system consists of a fixed and unrelated finite number of signals, each of which is associated with a fixed meaning from a finite behaviourial repertoire. The most obvious examples of this system in the animal kingdom occur among the higher mammals, such as primates and dogs.[7] This system allows them, under appropriate circumstances, to utter a statement concerning these circumstances. For example, when such an animal finds itself in danger, it may utter an alarm signal that communicates the immediate relevance of the concept of danger to its companions.

Allegory functions in a similar way in the context of painting. In an appropriate context, a painter may use an allegorical sign to communicate to an audience a statement relating to the immediate circumstances depicted by the picture. If these particular circumstances exemplify justice, the painter can include a sign that signals the immediate relevance of the abstract concept of justice in the picture.

While this system enables painters and other animals to exclaim "Justice!" or "Danger!" under appropriate circumstances, this does not amount to *access* to

these abstract ideas. After all, we are unable to say anything about justice or danger, nor can we abstract the quality of justice or danger from the immediate circumstances in which the signal is emitted. For an animal, the concept of danger is inseparable from the physical circumstances of danger. In an allegory, the concept of justice is likewise physically embodied and inseparable from its physical manifestations. The sign for justice is relevant and appropriate on in so far as it refers to a particular manifestation of justice; some just act or person. We cannot say anything *about* the concept of justice, beyond implying its immediate circumstantial relevance in the context of the picture. Thus instead of a true symbol - something which facilitates symbolic thought - we get a signal, which relates the well-trained observer to his metaphysical object in the same way that a bell related Pavlov's dog with his dinner.

In so far as one is habituated to relating an abstract concept with a physical stimulus (such as a painting), one's capacity for real abstract thought is proportionally diminished. If for example, one accepts the austere allegorical system of Mondrian (where formal elements such as horizontal and vertical lines represent the concepts of active masculinity and passive femininity respectively) one is not consequently enabled to say anything *about* these concepts, or to ask *how* horizontal lines are related to femininity. One must simply habituate oneself to associating femininity with horizontality. In so far as such systems are accepted, they *diminish* the chances of subsequent thought.

The abstract symbolism of human language, which allows us to express an infinity of new thoughts, ideas and feelings, and to make the finest intellectual distinctions, is something entirely different.

There have been attempts, most notably by the psychologists B.F. Skinner,[8] to show that human language is in fact based upon the two forms of animal communication outlined above, but the fact remains that a person who relied on such systems to express him or herself would normally be considered a

cretin. Painters are often considered inarticulate, but even their level of communicational sophistication is generally superior to the systems that their paintings employ, nor would they expect their paintings to stimulate an equivalent response. As Chomsky has noted, if you are shown a beautiful painting, 'It does not appear totally obvious that in this case the way to impress the owner is to shriek 'beautiful' in a loud, high-pitched voice repeatedly and with no delay (high response strength)."[9] In any case, as Chomsky says:

> When I make some arbitrary statement in a human language - say, that 'the rise of supranational corporations poses new dangers for human freedom' - I am not selecting a point along some linguistic dimension that signals a corresponding point along some nonlinguistic dimension, nor am I selecting a signal from a finite behaviourial repertoire, innate or learned ... There is nothing useful to be said about behaviour or thought at the level of abstraction at which animal and human communication fall together.[10]

Despite the token reference of allegorical paintings to abstract concepts, such paintings are not, in fact, any more meaningful than non-allegorical paintings. The allegorical sign remains an alien presence within the physical sensuous context of the painting, signifying an abstract dimension of meaning that the painting itself is incapable of articulating. The painting remains without an abstract relation that would unite its sensuous particulars meaningfully. It is, in fact, theoretically impossible to develop a completely concrete symbolism that is capable of expressing *abstract* meaning.

II HIEROGLYPHICS AND IDEOGRAMS

Hieroglyphics have long been misconceived as a system of allegories or ideograms - concrete visual symbols for abstract ideas - thus fostering the idea that there could indeed be a concrete symbolism that could express abstract ideas, which would fuse being and meaning, the physical and the spiritual worlds, and which would thus not consist of merely conventional signs, but would express the very nature and essence of things. When Diderot described

works of art as hieroglyphs, he meant it in precisely these terms.[11] Diderot, however, was speaking from ignorance, for hieroglyphics had not yet been deciphered, nor could they be deciphered so long as such misconceptions, which date from classical times, held sway. Chompollion succeeded in understanding hieroglyphics precisely because he understood that concrete signs could only stand for concrete objects. Thus, a beetle, for example, could be symbolized by a picture of a beetle. However, the only way that the Egyptians could articulate abstract concepts was by *breaking* the "natural" and direct relationship between the object and the sign. Instead of the picture representing the object it depicted, it was made to represent *the sound of the word for the object it depicted*. Therefore the picture of the beetle could also represent the similar sounding - but more abstract,- word "became".[12] This phonetic principle allowed the combination of pictures as phonetic units so that, for example, the word for the abstract quality "strong" (pronounced *nht*) could be spelt using the sign for "wood" (pronounced *ht* and signified by a branch) and the water sign which had the phonetic value *n* (from the word *nwy*, meaning "flood") These were combined to make the word . Thus, while hieroglyphics were based on the representation of concrete objects, they could only be made to articulate verbs and abstract concepts by complex devices that short-circuited the direct relation between object and symbol and instead transcribed human speech, which has never had a problem articulating verbs and concepts. Starting off from the direct representation of the objects of speech turned out to be more of a diversion than an advantage, since just as we ignore the physical properties of words and perceive only the "sound" of them, so the ancient Egyptians, when confronted by had to ignore the physical qualities of water and wood, and observed only the "sound" of them. The result is that a system of signs based on an apparently natural relationship between words and objects ends up having to destroy the relationship and instead imitate spoken language in order to communicate meaningful statements, and evolves into a system that is awkward, confusing and esoteric. One might, perhaps, assume that the Chinese pictograph of a man represents the abstract concept of maleness. To be told, however, that

the sign for "woman" is a pictograph of a man and a broom might lead to mirth or speculation, unless it is explained that the broom has a purely phonetic value - akin to *wo* in the English word "*wo*man".[13]

There is, of course, nothing to stop painters who wish to express abstract ideas learning to use hieroglyphs, although it might take about twenty years to achieve full literate proficiency.[14] Even if they did, only archaeologists would be able to understand their pictures. Few painters seem prepared to go to such lengths to establish an adequate visual symbolism. After all, ordinary phonetic writing is more economical and always to hand, if one needs to express the "true meaning" of one's work. Painting therefore, which doesn't have an adequate symbolism for the expression of meaning, has a meaning expressed for it - by *language*.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Chomsky, *Language and mind* p.69.

2. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art pp.27-45.*

3. Thorpe, *Birdsong* p.81.

4. Bronowski, *The origins of Knowledge and Imagination* p. 27.

5. Chomsky, *Language and Mind* p. 68.

6. Ibid., p. 68,69.

7. Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal* p.30.

8. Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal* p.7.

9. Ibid., p.10.

10. Chomsky, *Language and Mind* p.70.

11. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* p.142.

12. Goody & Watt, *Language, Social Change and Social Conflict* p.320.

13. Ibid., p.322.

14. Ibid., p.322.

CHAPTER 4.
THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PAINTING & SCIENCE.

Based on the preceding chapters, the following fundamental distinction emerges between painting on the one hand, and language and science on the other.

Language and science are the two main processes by which we ascertain and determine our concepts of the external world. Through them, we classify our sense perceptions and bring them under general notions and general rules in order to give them objective meaning. Such a classification is the result of a persistent effort toward simplification. What science is searching for is some central feature of a given object from which all its particular qualities may be derived. This is possible only because of the scientific bias towards the common and constant features of our surroundings. Science disregards multiplicity and variation as contingent to its purpose, since any attempt to apprehend the innumerable aspects of things within a single formula would be in vain. Such a formula, like Newton's law of gravitation, seems to comprise and explain the whole structure of our material universe. It would seem as though reality were not only accessible to our scientific abstractions, but exhaustible by them. But abstraction, which shows us the way to higher classes of things, is always an impoverishment of reality.[1] The process of abstraction is a process of subtraction and depletion so far as direct sense perception is concerned. Generality is attainable only by disregarding particularity. "General science" (*sciential generalis*), as Leibniz repeatedly emphasized, is only complete with the development of a general characteristic (*characteristica generalis*). But what for science constitutes its purest form, its ultimate goal, when applied to painting, constitutes a death penalty, depriving it of all phenomenal content, making its sensuous particularity contingent to its function.[2]

Scientists and mathematicians - Bertrand Russell for one - have often asserted

that their works provoke aesthetic emotions and are in fact ruled by canons of elegance and beauty.[3] Others have claimed that art and science are equally pure and usless; done for their own sake and the joys of contemplation. We may of course pay tribute to the unity and comprehensiveness of the human imagination, as exemplified in all its achievements. We may even say that in so far as both paintings and science exhibit a definite teleological structure, both may be described in terms of the classical formulation of beauty; "a unity in the manifold". But between the two cases, there is a difference.[4] Language and science depend upon one and the same process of abstraction; painting maybe described as a continuous process of concretion. Language and science are abbreviations of reality; painting is a *particularization* of reality. The thinking that goes into painting is rarely abstract and need never be articulate; it need never emerge as idea at all.[5] On the other hand, a lover of mathematics can conceive of a beautiful equation purely as an abstract idea; it need never, indeed *can* never, emerge as an object. Every painting, however, is first and foremost an object, and as such is entirely dependent upon the particular, sensuous properties that are ignored by science, or else conceptually simplified and deductively generalized until they disappear. Science, which is symbolic and mathematical, fashions everything in it's own image. Thus it maintains that solid matter is "immaterial", nothing but pure energy and symbolic relations mathematically expressed. Barzun has told of how, at the end of the last century, some intellectuals were able to convince themselves that they should no longer admire a sunset. It was, after all, due to nothing but the refraction of white light through dust particles in layers of air of different density. To *paint* a sunset, which was nothing more than the mechanical interaction of purposeless bits of matter, would be to compound the ignorant mistake of admiring emptiness.[6] The sensuous immediacy and concrete richness of subjective experience was deemed irrelevant, indeed suspect, by scientists, who could be heard saying that poetry consisted of dubious statements dressed up in fancy words, and that painting could not survive photography.[7] Objective truth, which was a monopoly of science, conquered subjective experience and human feeling wherever it was found.

Painters' traditional theoretical claims to external reality, based on ideas of truth to nature, were of little defence against scientific imperialism. Since the concrete sensuousness of reality was denied by scientists (matter may *look* solid, but the 'holes' are bigger than the particles) so art theorists declared that paintings too were not matter, but pure form, relations only. Human content - political, social, moral, emotional, sensual - were declared "mere surplusage."[8]

When people first sought an explantation for their universe, it could, at first, only be described and explained as a reflection of the social order, governed by celestial entities who mirrored our human concerns, our political, social and moral life. God was made in the image of man; nature conceived as a society of life and our terrestrial values and interests transposed onto the heavens. Astronomy and physics could not arise except from the starting point of astrology, but it could only progress by gradually purging itself of its anthropocentric content, making the universe reflect, not our confused and fluctuating social world of human values and organic sense experience, but the ideal world of mathematical abstractions, which negates all values and desires; all subjective feelings; all sensuality.[9] Just as human values and the central position of man has been displaced from the scientific world, so were attempts made to banish the human image from its central position in the visual arts. For the arts however, such attempts to decontaminate them of human value and subjective interest can never quite succeed. Paintings, in themselves, contain no objective truth, nor any means of establishing objective detachment. Therefore the anthropomorphic aspect of paintings cannot be purged, since there is nothing with which to purge it, but can only be repressed. Even if unwittingly, paintings continue to reflect our moral values and subjective feelings towards the human body, society and the world at large. The formal rectitude of a Mondrian painting, since dispatched through a sensuous medium - base matter - reveals more puritanism than conceptual purity. Nor has the adoption of scientific nomenclature achieved much more than the debauchery of language. Paintings are promiscuously labelled 'events' 'investigations',

'experiments', and described in terms of 'energy' and 'independent space'. Paintings, however, do not give off energy unless they are set light to, nor are they experiments, nor do they solve problems. A true scientific problem has set terms, identical for all workers and the solution removes the problem. In painting there are *difficulties*, which must be overcome again and again, and differently by different painters. As Barzun says "Those who work to formula, even their own formula, we think little of."[11] In any case, paintings resist formulation; their manifold sensuous qualities defy conceptual simplification and deductive generalization. The sensuous aspects of things are innumerable, and vary from moment to moment. This is why aesthetic experience is so much more immediate and multifarious in painting than in the diluted abstractions of science. Heraclitus' dictum that the sun is new everyday is true for the painter, if not for the scientist. A painter who puts his faith in the scientist's analysis of a sunset is guilty of putting more faith in the abstract and general than in the concrete and particular. He forgets Blake's aphorism: "To generalize is to be an idiot to particularize is alone the distinction of merit. General knowledges are those knowledges that idiots possess."[12]

Blake was always vehement in repelling science, but we do not need to call scientists idiots in order to see that he was right about painting. We come back to this basic feature; that painting particularizes.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p. 144.

2. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* pp.349,350.

3. Barzun, *The Use & Abuse of Art* p.117.

4. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.143.

5. Barzun, *The Use & Abuse of Art* p.118.

6. Ibid., p.53.

7. Ibid., p.101.

8. Clive Bell, quoted in Barzun p.102.

9. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* pp.48, 49.

10. Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* p. 106.

11. Ibid., p.108.

12. Ibid., p.112.

CHAPTER 5

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND PAINTING

> Whoever studies general Linguistic, that is to say philosophical Linguistic, studies aesthetic problems, and vice versa. Philosophy of language and philosophy of art are the same thing - Croce *Aesthetic* p.142.

Painting's long and difficult relationship with linguistic philosophy is hardly surprising. Discussion of painting is naturally conducted through words, and it is inevitable that within this linguistic discourse, characteristics are attributed to painting that are in fact a product of the medium through which it is conducted - language. It is also inevitable that, because of this, the most profound implications for the theory of painting depend upon the state of knowledge in those fields that language itself finds most difficult to deal with; ontology, epistemology and the meaning of meaning.[1] The difficulty stems from the fact that when we attempt to define the relationship between language and the world (between words and their objects), we discover ourselves, so to speak, unable to see the wood for the trees. Linguistically all objects appear to be names or symbols; physically all symbols appear to be objects.[2] Historically all paintings are defined as one or the other (or both) depending on the prevailing tendency in linguistic theory, epistemology and ontology.

Ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians', attempted to solve all their epistemological problems by using hieroglyphs, whose meaning was intended

to stand directly for the objects depicted. They only succeeded in blurring the difference between words and objects, but the subsequent confusion was beneficial in one respect, since it blurred the distinction between painting and writing. After all, paintings were objects, and objects were symbols, therefore symbols (as painted) were objects and paintings (as objects) were symbols. Thus painting and writing, art and art criticism, were united in a golden age, at peace with nature and linguistic theory.

The distinction between words and objects became evident only among cultures which developed and used phonetic writing, which symbolized, not the objects of speech, but speech itself: its phonetic and syntactic structure. By imitating the mechanism of verbal discourse and making the written sign stand for certain sounds, the acquisition of writing was simplified and its scope extended, for while the number and type of objects of speech that may enter a vocabulary is unlimited, the number of sounds recognised in any single language is no more than forty.[3] By modelling writing on speech, anything that could be talked about could be written down. However, the absence of any clear connection between words and their objects raised difficult epistemological problems; for it the two were unrelated, the fact of knowledge would be unaccountable. That language and thought were inseparable was a fact accepted by Greek philosophers, and expressed in their concept of the *Logos*. Grammar and logic were conceived as two branches of the same subject. Language and *thought* were representations of the same symbolic process, but if there were no natural link between the symbol and its object, one could not *mean* the other. Just as, for the Greeks, there had to be a partial identity between being and *thought* (the reality known and the knowing subject) so there had to be an (at least partial) identity between the physical object and its abstract symbol. The Egyptians had bypassed this epistemological problem by making the written symbol imitate its object. For the Greeks, whose symbols imitated not objects but sounds, the only way to square the circle was to make those sounds imitate objects too. Thus was the linguistic theory of *onomatopoeisis*, or mimesis, born. Since language was seen as imitative, so was everything else. Since this linguistic theory was derived from epistemology, so painting and its brethren arts acquired the same aims as epistemology - truth. Mimetic theorist proclaimed that all beaurty was,

in fact, truth. The fact that all truth certainly isn't beauty, that in the arts, pleasing fancies are often preferable to harsh realities, were conveniently circumnavigated by presuming an error on nature's part.

One way or another, mimesis caused the least problems to those arts that facilitated mimetic interpretation. Since the theoretical status of each art tends to be a function of how well it fits the theory, painting did quite well, being established as the archetypal art form, to be emulated by the other arts. Lyric poets were saddled with Horace's dictum *ut picture poesis* (a poem is a picture).

A more serviceable theory than mimesis was developed by the Sophists, whose more pragmatic, formal concerns with language as an instrument of persuasion (and of deceit) led them to doubt the existence of any self-evident relation between language and reality or truth. In their view, language was not descriptive, but abstract; its real purpose was instrumental. It was a tool, which when employed by those skilled in its use, could manipulate people; arouse their emotions and prompt them to action. This facility was purely structural; independent of content or context.

This theory, with its emphasis on skill (on language as an acquired art) was easily applicable to most arts, especially non-object-based arts such as poetry, drama and music, and continues to see service today. However, this theory's denial of truth as a relevant criterion for assessing the arts, made it intellectually suspect and deprived it of the prestige accorded to mimesis.

A third linguistic theory was developed by natural scientists, starting with Democritus, who sought a mechanistic explanation for language and who believed that the most conspicuous feature of language was being neglected by former theories. Democritus maintained that the most elementary human utterances are neither descriptions, nor are they intended to persuade. They are interjections and ejaculations - spontaneous and involuntary expressions of an internal emotional state. Thus they are natural and not arbitrary, but bear no resemblance to the nature or appearance of physical things. This theory offered

a solution to the problem of the origin of language; making it a development of the fundamental communicative instincts possessed by all animals, and as such, it appears to be borne out by evolutionary theory. However, the interjectional or expressionist theory of language has turned out to be far less informative than it at first appeared, for as it was pointed out earlier, it is not only the origin but the structure of language that calls for explanation. Structurally, human language is nothing so brutal as a mechanical system of instinctive and spontaneous ejaculations. That is precisely the communicative level of those who have not yet learned language, or cannot learn it. Furthermore, to say that language is expressive of an internal state is quite uninformative, since anything that any sentient creature does can, trivially, be described as an expression of its internal state.

One might think that a mechanistic, stimulus-response theory would not be welcome among the arts, but nothing is more pervasive than its aesthetic manifestation, the romantic inspiration-expression theory. Its success is due to its synthesis of the previous two theories. While it acknowledges mimetic claims that language is both natural and representational (maintaining truth to nature as the measure of quality), language is interpreted as representing not external objective nature, but our internal, subjective natures. Emotional veracity - truth to ones feelings - is therefore the only guarantee of quality in speech and in art. It follows from this that linguistic formalism (the conventional use of language to persuade or mislead) is regarded as a corruption and suppression of the true purpose of language, which in its natural state expresses pure emotion spontaneously. The true genius was someone who overcame convention and recaptured this natural state, whereby emotions are so naively experienced that they express themselves involuntarily.

Expressionist theory re-emerged from a two thousand year obscurity during the Enlightenment, where, in the hands of proponents such as Rousseau, it formed an important element in anti-authoritarian philosophy, offering a critique of the corruption of language by the state, and promoting the right of the individual to freedom of speech. It also bestowed critical approval on artistic independence and on poetry and music, whose status had suffered under the

mimetic hegemony. Music had always been sidelined by mimesis; its well-known ,"therapeutic", powers - its ability to soothe the savage beast - tended to prejudice mimeticists against it, since along with drama, it lent credence to the sophistic theories of the morally reprobate and rabble rousing pragmatists. Lord Chesterfield wrote in 1749 that while painting and sculpture were worthy to be called liberal arts, being connected with history and poetry, music was connected "with nothing that I know of but bad company".[7] At a push, however, music too could be seen as imitative, not of physical reality, but of peoples' subjective feelings and characters. Interjectional theory changed nothing of substance here beyond emphasizing personal expression rather than the description of other people's feelings, but since it claimed that the representation of subjective feelings had priority over the representation of objects, music went from being the lowliest of the arts to being the archetypal art form.

Lyric poetry also benefitted form no longer having to paint with words; Simonides' dictum that "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture" within the mimetic context had always worked to the disadvantage of poetry, for how could a poet's metaphorical symbolism compare to the "natural symbolism" of the painter? The characterization of poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth) reversed the advantage within the expressionist context, giving it joint sovereignty with music over the less expressive, merely descriptive arts. Of course, the advantage was largely one of prestige; expressionism was hardly less ridiculous than mimesis. The characterisation of language, music, poetry or any other art as the involuntary expression of feeling has proved even more tyranncial and destructive in the long run, with its bias toward frantic emotion, and justification of any artistic self-indulgence.

The prestige of poetry was further consolidated by the German romantic idealists such as Schlegel, who, applying linguistic theories developed by Cartesian rationalists, sought to clearly establish the primacy of poetry among the arts. Descartes' linguistic theory, unlike expressionist theory, sought a clear distinction between the purely mechanical and involuntary interjection

and the (fully human) voluntary and propositional language of normal people. He found that normal human language, unlike animal "language", has a logical structure (or generative grammar) which, once acquired, allows people to generate and understand an unlimited number of expressions new to their experience, and he termed this the creative aspect of normal language use. Schlegel deduced from this that, since the medium of poetry is language, which is abstract, infinite in scope and expresses the boundless creativity of the human mind, it was therefore valid to use the term "poetical" to describe the element of creativity and imagination in any artistic endeavour.[8] A work of art was thus creative only in so far as it expressed abstract ideas.

One result of all this theorizing was the gradual erosion of prestige that painting had enjoyed under mimetic theory. Unlike naturally confessional forms such as lyric poetry, a painting's verisimilitude to the state of mind of its creator at the time of its creation was far more difficult to assess than its verisimilitude to external objects. Furthermore, veracity to one tended to preclude the other (the objective and subjective being at opposite poles). Music, although not naturally confessional, could more easily be interpreted subjectively, since it did not normally seek to imitate objective reality. The physical, sensuous and concrete format of paintings likewise made them doubtful purveyors of abstract thought or metaphysical ideas. Music, although sensual, again escapes, since it isn't object-based and, as a score, can be interpreted abstractly, without recourse to an actual performance.

Painters (as well as sculptors and novelists) were thus led into either a conservative and uncompromising defence of mimesis, or to surrender theoretical prestige to music and poetry, the former to be emulated as pure form, the latter as pure idea.

Subsequent linguistic theories have done little to rehabilitate painting theoretically. Behaviourism, another stimulus-response theory which claimed that language is learnt by conditioning (imitating other peoples behaviour and being rewarded for doing so) was far too cynical to be welcome in the arts. Structuralist criticism, based on structural linguistics, has dutifully proclaimed

paintings to be ‹structures›, but since almost everything can be interpreted as a structure, that title carries little exclusive status. Logically, the gap between saying that a painting is a structure, and saying that painting is a language, is as wide as ever.

As pure rhetoric, the slogan "painting is a language" is metaphorically effective in so far as it implies that painters are "misunderstood" and need their works explained to the uncomprehending. Yet this approach to understanding what a painter "means" risks obscuring what a painting is - an object and not a symbol. A symbol is not real; it has no *actual* existence as part of the physical world. It is abstract, defined purely by its symbolic function. It has no being, but only a meaning. An object such as a painting has an actual existence as part of the physical world, but as a thing in itself, it has no meaning. It can be interpreted symbolically and indeed ascribed limitless possible meanings, but these meanings are not a product of the painting itself, but of the potentially limitless frames of reference within which it can be interpreted linguistically. The actual object is finite, but its potential for abstract symbolic interpretation is infinite.

This distinction, between actuality and possibility, is vital for the unimpeded function of critical interpretation, for if the distinction is obscured, the difference between being and meaning will no longer be perceived. Thus people faced with a painting - an object - behave as though it were a symbol and ask " what does it mean?" This is a question which cannot but receive an inadequate answer. Faced with such a question, one can only reasonably offer one or more frames of reference within which the painting can be interpreted meaningfully, but this meaning is teleological or functional rather than transcendental. The question of what, apart from all frames of reference, the painting means in itself must go forever unanswered, except insofar as it comes to be seen as an intellectual phantasm - a fallacy in formulation. Paintings do not have single actual meanings; they have unlimited possible meanings. This is true of all objects, and indeed of the world as a whole. As Goodman says in *Ways of Worldmaking;*

> Frames of reference seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description and each of two statements [namely, "the sun always moves" and "the sun never moves"] relates what is described to such a system. If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference, but if you insist that I tell you how it is apart form all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described.[9]

Thus paintings tend to acquire the characteristics of their system of description; language. And yet it is only because there is no self-contained language of painting, that paintings will continue to be described and interpreted through words. This in itself is not a cause for complaint; critical exegesis - the symbolic interpretation of the world - is a pervasive human activity, fundamental to our nature as an *animal symbolicum*, and to the ways in which we make life meaningful. It is only because painting, as a process, operates close to the border between objects and abstract symbols; between the *mundus sensibilis* and the *mundus intelligibilis*, that confusion between the two arises. Paintings, after all, have their own physical structure: indeed they have their own very literal "frame of reference", within which sensory particulars are physically ordered and integrated, subjected to formulation and contextualization. This, in itself, is a significant activity, for our ability to make sense of the infinite complexity and multiplicity of visual phenomena is largely dependent upon their formulation in the visual arts. It is only when these diverse phenomena are subjected to selective interpretation - when they are made to take their place within a context - that they take an order. Visual appearances cannot be regarded as things in themselves, independently of their modes of signification; only within them can they be described at all. Thus our perception of order and form in natural appearances is concurrent with, and dependent upon, their formulation in the visual arts. For example, our concept of the picturesque is concurrent with and dependent upon the constructive processes of "picturing".[10]

In this light, the physical frame of reference of a painting, which subjects the sensuous particulars contained within it to formulation and thus interpretation, and the abstract frame of reference within which the painting itself is interpreted, have clear parallels. We ofter attempt to find a linguistic parallel

for the function of a particular sensuous element within the context of a painting. This, however, must be distinguished from any possible meaning of the picture as a whole, just as we must distinguish between what a sensuous element means, within the context of a painting, and what it might possibly mean in itself. The principle is the same in both cases, for the conventions that subject sensuous phenomena to formulation in paint and the symbolic systems that subject paintings to formulation through language are both essentially concerned with the interpretation of reality. In painting, this interpretation, in Cassirer's words, is "not by concepts but by intuitions; not through the medium of thought but through that of sensuous forms".[11] In an abstract symbolic context paintings (among other things) are naturally interpreted as informative, expressive and symbolic - as "structures" and "texts" - just as through paintings, visual experience itself become a structured "text". The vital distinction between paintings and words is not between meanings, but between being and meaning; between what is due to a painting itself, and what is due to its interpretation. This distinction applies to all physical phenomena. Paintings are not, of themselves, more meaningful than urinals or hat stands: each sets of objects may be interpreted as texts , "structures" and "symbols", but this does not make them a language - it is rather the reverse. The claim that paintings, a collection of objects, constitute a language must logically extend to any other collection of objects as well. No linguistic theory can remain informative if the concept of language is so trivialized. This is why no informative linguistic theory offers any support for the idea that painting is a language.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. "The problem which linguistic tries to solve, and the errors in which linguistic has been involved, are the same that respectively occupy and complicate Aesthetic". Croce *Aesthetic* p.143.

2. Consider, for example, the colour red. Is red a physical property located in objects, or is it merely a symbol or name? Intuition strongly suggests that the colour red physically exists, but the symbolic logic of science draws the opposite conclusion. A Galileo said, "tastes, odours, colours, and so on are no more than mere names so far as the objects in which we locate them are concerned, they reside only in consciousness".

   - Stillman Drake, *Galileo* p.70.

3. J. Goody and I. Watt, *Language, Social Change and Social Conflict* p.322.

4. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p. 112.

5 Ibid, p.138.

6. Ibid, p.114.

7. Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* p.31.

8 Chomsky, *Language and Mind* p.100, 102.

9. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* p.259.

10 Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p. 146.

11. Ibid, p.146.

CHAPTER 6

ART AND PHILOSOPHY

> What kind of thing must art be, if it is to have the two characteristics of being expressive and imaginative? The answer is "Art must be a language".
>
> - Collingwood *Principles of Art* p. 273

The arts, as we know them, embrace an infinity of diverse experiences, from the magnificent and sublime to the charming and decorative. The variety of individual idioms and the heterogeneity of artistic forms can appear in quite a different light depending on whether they are looked on from an aesthetic - philosophical or an art-historical point of view. The historian rejoices in this variety, and plunges into the ocean of art without hoping to sound its real depth. In all ages philosophy has moved in the opposite direction.[1] Leibniz insisted that without a *characteristica generalis* we can never have *scientia generalis*. Thus the philosopher of art seeks not diversity but unity among the arts. Only if it is possible to achieve a *systematic* survey of its various manifestations - if it is possible to uncover their typical and consistent features - can the ideal of a "universal characteristic" be fulfilled for art as it is for language, mathematics and science. We might then possess a kind of grammar of the symbolic function of art, which would encompass and define its terms. This ultimate reduction of the diverse forms of the arts to manifestations of one form, Art, is fundamental to the concept of aesthetic philosophy. For, if we renounce this unity, a strictly systematic understanding of these forms would be unattainable.[2] Their totality could no longer be looked upon as an autonomous, self-contained system of meaning. The philosophy of art would necessarily amount to no more than its history; the specific character and scope of its particular forms could be described, but they would no longer express a common ideal content. If it is the case that, as A.J. Ayer said, there is "no quality which can be uniformly correlated to what is properly described as aesthetic experience",[3] then the concept of aesthetics is entirely without foundation. Practical experience would suggest that this is, in fact, the case. As Barzun said:

> Deep down, everybody knows that the aesthetic is really not one type of experience, but is raised to a false unity in order to have a unity of sorts.[4]

In practice, any unity of meaning among the arts has been of a functional rather than substantial kind. Religion and the state have historically favoured the arts exactly by providing an *external* unity of purpose. Individualism, however, has emancipated us from absolutism of church and state, leaving both artists and other earnest souls seeking a new community of worship, a new outlet for piety. The moral status of such "materialist" formats as still-life, landscape and genre painting has always been open to doubt. Like the other "high arts", painting's traditional claims to intellectual seriousness have largely rested upon its perceived ability to express the more transcendent ideals of the community. This apparent power of the arts to evoke transcendence in the service of religion had led many to equate the two. It was not difficult, by sleight of hand, to substitute one for the other. A surrogate was found for the *infame* church, and it turned out to be art. The unity of purpose and meaning, the spiritual value of art, which had heretofore been provided by religion, was attributed to art itself. Art became its own ideal, "autonomous", end in itself, and its true nature was conceived as being spiritual. Rousseau pointed to man's perception of the ideal in nature, which was experienced naturally like the promptings of conscience. Art fused the physical and the spiritual world, the actual and the ideal, being and meaning, and revealed the divine in man as nature revealed God.[5]

Only with the development of this conception could aesthetic philosophy come into being. It has already been pointed out that the ideal cannot be expressed by sensuous means alone, for it is abstract; it lies forever beyond the senses. The ideal can only be expressed *symbolically*. If, therefore, every true work of art expressed some common ideal content, each one could not consist simply of a particular sensuous object, but must also be part of a common symbolic system. Thus aesthetics was provided with its "universal characteristic" since, on this basis, art, like language, mathematics and science, could be defined as a symbolic system. The defining characteristic

which encompassed every work of art was that each partook of the symbolic structure of art, a purely abstract symbolic system. Thus could all the forms of the arts be reduced to manifestations of the one ideal form, Art, and thus could their totality be looked upon as a self contained system of meaning - a language.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.129

2. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* p.92

3. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* p.194

4. Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* p.92

5. Ibid, p.26

CHAPTER 7
ART, LANGUAGE AND ABSTRACTION

It may seem bizarre, even comical, that after establishing beyond reasonable doubt that painting is neither abstract nor a symbol system, we arrive at the conclusion that Art, the postulated universal characteristic of all individual work of art, *a priori*, is both abstract and symbolic. Why else would so many great thinkers have been propounding symbolic theories of art for the last two-and-a-half centuries? The roll call of philosophers who have put their weight behind such theories is impressive: Baumgarten, Diderot, Kant, Hegel, Heine, Fichte, Schelling,Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, Croce, Collingwood and Goodman, to name just some. Does this undermine my thesis? On the contrary, my thesis undermines theirs. All these philosophers would, I think, have described paintings as works of art; yet as I have already demonstrated, a coherent and practical account of pictorial symbolism has yet to be made, and indeed, after more than two hundred years, the venture is beginning to look both futile and theoretically dubious. Scruton has pointed out that, while the theory that art is a symbolic activity - the "sensuous embodiment" of the idea - is almost universally accepted, "nobody has yet been able to give a convincing account of this 'symbolism'"[1]

The hypothesis that aesthetics is founded upon - that all the arts have a characteristic in common and that this characteristic is a shared symbolism and ideal content - remains entirely unsubstantiated, nor does it appear to have facilitated any significant improvement either in the making or understanding of works of art. Indeed, one may even say that the postulate of a common ideal content and symbolism for all art has been a source of error, confusion and discontent for many artists. A couple of examples may illustrate the point.

I A LANGUAGE AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

For those who were led by aesthetic theories to believe that art could express abstract ideas, the metaphysical implications were obviously enormous, since

the sensuous manifestation of ideas in art would offer proof of the *actual existence* of a higher reality; a spiritual realm. Since art alone could integrate the world of the spirit and the world of the senses, it was, declared Schlegel, the only clue to the true nature of reality. As Heine said "Colours and shapes... are no more than symbols of the idea, symbols which rise in the mind of the artist when the sacred world spirit moves it."[2] The role, therefore, which classical antiquity had assigned to the poet was attributed to every true artist - a seer, a prophet, a mouthpiece of God. Yet for those painters of sincerely spiritual inclination, eager to fulfil their allotted role, what was there to guide them? Our knowledge of art, after all, lies precisely in the phenomenal world of individual, materially tangible forms that we experience sensually, yet in the sheer sensuous variety and particularity of subjects, opinions, intentions and idioms embodied in these forms they seemed irreducible to any common purpose or meaning. This diversity was, therefore, a cause of strife, for just as the heterogeneity of religious belief had sapped religion's pretensions to knowledge of the true nature of existence, so the heterodox nature of art tended to discredit artistic claims to universal knowledge. Clearly something was wrong; either paintings were manifesting the one true nature of reality in garbled form, or they were not manifesting it at all. Yet since idealists were not likely to give up the postulate of an ideal content for art, there had to be another explanation. It was not hard to find a precedent for this problem. Transcendental religions and philosophies have always had to deal with the lack of any distinguishable connection between the world of true ideas and the phenomenal world, and have always refused to regard the heterogeneity of belief as a necessary and unavoidable fact. The absence of any formal connection between the spiritual and the sensuous, the divine and the terrestrial, the abstract and the concrete, was because man had lost this connection. In many mythologies we find striking analogies to the Biblical tale of the Tower of Babel; that callamitous event when humankind lost the *Lingua Adamica*, which was not merely a conventional symbolism, but a universal language - the language in which God spoke to us and which revealed the true nature of reality.[3] Since man had lost this connection with God, religion was subject to corruption and decay.

We find a similar pattern in idealist notions of language, such as mimesis, for here too, words cannot represent objects or concepts unless they symbolically partake of their true nature in sensuous forms; otherwise true knowledge would be impossible. Here, too, the diversity of languages obscured the natural connection between words and their meanings, while the diversity of opinions and beliefs about the nature of the world cast doubt upon the possibility of true knowledge. In mimetic theory both found common cause. True knowledge, like true meaning, is eternal, yet language as we know it is subject to change and decay. Therefore the degeneration of knowledge was due to the degeneration of language. If we are to detect the bond uniting words with their meanings, we have to discover the etymon, the true original form, of every word. Thus in mimetic theory, etymology was not only the basis of linguistics, but also of epistemology.[4] Only if we could discover the one true original language of our ancestors, the *Lingua Adamica*, would we have a common symbolism which did not consist of merely conventional signs, but would express the very nature and essence of things. Only then could we posses true knowledge and understanding of the world.

Up until the nineteenth century, mimetic etymologies suffered from no theoretical or historical scruples. Linguistic science finally caught up with such speculations, but by then they had transcended the limits of the 5000 year old phonetic written records and had been transformed into religious "etymologies", which claimed that all ancient religions shared a common ideal content and symbolism. The first of these, the *Origine de tous les Cultes ou Religion Universelle* by Dupuis (1794) managed to synthesise all eastern and western religions into a single system of thought, asserting that each one embodied heaven-and-earth, sun-and-moon and male-and-female dualities, along with a tripartite mind-matter-spirit concept (as evidenced by the universality of triune Godheads) which reduced Christian monotheism and trinitarianism to latter day imitations of earlier doctrines. Dupuis thus provided the foundation for almost all nineteenth-century occultist doctrines, including Mme. Blavatsky's Theosophy.[5]

For idealist painters who took their cue from such currents of thought the

implications were obvious. The lack of any apparent universal content in contemporary painting was not due to the nature of painting, but to the loss of the universal symbolism, for the idea could not become sensuously manifest without it. This loss was, therefore, the fault of painters, who in immersing themselves solely in the sensuous, concrete and particular, had lost sight of the spiritual, abstract and universal dimension of art. An understanding of the true nature of reality could not be gained by painting particular, ephemeral phenomena. Only by painting that which always persists - the universal, homogenous underlying order could such an aim be achieved. As Mondrian said, "Naturalistic painting gives too much prominence to the particular. The universal is what all art seeks to represent."[6] The recurrence of certain geometrical shapes and colours in different religious iconographies suggested to painters that true reality was inhabited by ideas in the form of geometrical shapes and colours, and that these 'thought-forms' could convey precise spiritual meanings, thus providing these painters with the basics of a universal symbolism. The role of the painter was to use his or her spiritual insight to recover this natural symbolism and make it objectively manifest, for only then would painting be fulfilling its symbolic function the sensuous manifestation of the idea. We would then, through painting, be shown the very essence and nature of reality; our lives would be spiritualized, we would gain true knowledge and understanding of the universe, and live in harmony with nature and with one another.

As Dostoevski expressed it in *The Grand Inquisitor*,

> This craving for a community of worship ... and indeed for a universal unity... is the misery of every man individually and of all men collectively from the beginning of time.

It has been "The source of all religious wars and the root of all attempts at a universal state." [7] The wars and recriminations that accompanied attempts to establish 'universal' painting have been of a relatively harmless kind, but the attempts have fared no better for all that. It is ironic that in attempting to fulfil the promise of a universal symbolism for art, painting itself has suffered the fate of all symbolic systems. The aim of all symbolism, from religious symbolism to language itself, is to unite people through communication. Yet

just as there is no greater obstacle to this unity than the diversity of religions or of languages, so it is with all symbolic forms. In practice, painting can only be universally appreciated to the extent that it is *not* symbolic. The postulate of a symbolic nature for art has therefore not benefitted but impeded the understanding and appreciation of painters who sought to bring the 'true' symbolic nature of painting to the fore. They have suffered the mythical fate of the builders of the Tower of Babel they too sought to obtain divine wisdom, to reach the spiritual realm by physical, sensuous means, and their punishment was the isolation of being forever misunderstood. Instead of transcending convention and discovering the one true universal pictorial symbolism, they achieved the opposite-the proliferation of arbitrary and esoteric pictorial conventions and idioms, each one exclusive of the others, and none of them a true symbolism. Paul Ziff is of course right to say that:

> Those who are fond of drawing facile analogies between art and language tend to overlook the fact that undertaking a discourse of a language is subject to drastic cultural restrictions whereas appreciating a work of art is not; one who cannot speak a word of Persian need have no difficulty in appreciating a fine Persian carpet.
>
> Ziff, *Antiaesthetics*[9]

But this is true onlyin so far as the work of art can be appreciated in the same terms as Persian carpets - those of design and craft. Idealist "abstract" artists such as Mondrian and Kandinsky never intended their works to be appreciated in those terms; they wanted their works to be understood *symbolically*. Even for famous artists such as these, an understanding of the intended symbolic meaning of their works is subject to even more drastic cultural restrictions than language itself. Probably fewer people understand the intended "meaning" of a Mondrian painting than speak Dutch, and this situation is likely to deteriorate as Mondrian and his paintings sink further into the vast abyss of history. This is no great loss; after all, Mondrian displayed no great insight or understanding with regard to his own works. In themselves, they are no more spiritual, symbolic or universal than the works of any other painter. His paintings are not general or abstract, but *concrete, and particular* constructions of wood, canvas and paint. If he thought that those *concrete particular* arrangements of line and colour represented "true reality", he is to be pitied, and admonished for his delusions. Scientific methodology teaches

us that, unless we preserve the distinction between being and meaning, the actual and the ideal - the concrete and the abstract - we risk confusing the real and the imaginary and thus suffering the grossest delusions, not only about the nature of our world, but also about the capacity of the human intellect. It is for this reason that the attempt through painting to conflate being and meaning, making the ideal physically manifest and the symbol sensuously incarnate in the picture (the word of *man* made flesh) is not only futile, but presumptuous and regressive.

If painting is indeed symbolic, it may reveal as Rousseau claimed, the divine in man. As yet, the divine in man remains as elusive as the symbolic in painting. Unless the nature of this 'symbolism' can be elucidated, claims that paintings can embody meanings, ideas, spiritual values, mathematical proportions or any other abstract entities remain undemonstrated.

CONCEPTUALIST THEORIES OF ART AND ABSTRACTION

Over the course of the last century, the distinction between the actual and the ideal, between being and meaning, and between objects and concepts, has become far more apparent to artists, as they have attempted to deal with the legacy of the first 'abstract' painters. However, the growing awareness that objects such as paintings, can neither be universal, abstract, symbolic or conceptual, has been coupled with a widespread reluctance to abandon the idea that art is all these things, and has led many artists to claim that art has nothing to do with objects at all:

> Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion; it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object as such, and believes that it can exist in and for itself, without things.[10]

In other words, it is not the art-object, but art itself which is viewed as completely abstract and symbolic. This stance apparently allows for the need to distinguish objects from concepts, while maintaining that art is autonomous, conceptual and symbolic in nature. Many artists have claimed that this peculiar theoretical development comprises a revelation of the true nature of

art, that proves yet again that art transcends all physical limitations, and that the art-object is no more than the "physical residue of the artist's ideas."[11] If the artist's ideas are abstract, then the concrete object cannot be an adequate vehicle for his or her thoughts and should therefore be abandoned. As Joseph Kosuth said:

> My own art, my own attempt is to deal with abstraction in a way which is real for me and not a metaphoric kind of abstraction or one that grew morphologically out of traditional art, but an abstraction in what abstraction really means.[12]

Kosuth has even gone so far as to say that since art "only exists conceptually", it hardly existed at all before Duchamp, who was the first truly conceptual artist. Yet if art really is an abstract metaphysical entity which exists in and for itself, it proves to be a curiously self-negating concept. If we take the metaphysical concept of the thing-in-itself seriously, and describe art as such a thing, it must be an absolute entity that cannot be grounded in any higher form, and therefore exists only in and for itself. This, however, empties art of all phenomenal content, and thus discloses no necessary transition to the multiplicity of phenomena enacted in its name. The phenomenal "accidents" of art (objects and events) remain accessible to consciousness, but the naked essence of art itself, like all other metaphysical substances, is, as Cassirer said, inevitably "lost in the void of abstraction."[13] This is because the thing-in-itself, being completely abstracted, and therefore metaphysically absolute, contains nothing but its own definition, and is devoid of all phenomenal consequence or positive concretion. Since, however, art has no phenomenal manifestations, it proves rather difficult to define, since looking at some phenomenon and asking "Is this Art?" obviously can't be productive. Indeed, almost all that can be said about the nature of art, defined as a thing-in-itself, has been summed up succinctly by Ad Reinhardt:

> The one thing to say about art is that it is one thing. Art is art-as-art and everything else is everything else. Art as art is nothing but art. Art is not what is not art.[14]

This may not sound like much, but it does nevertheless preserve the unity and integrity of the art-concept: Whatever it is, it is still "*one thing*". Indeed the

only other possible insight into the nature of this metaphysical entity is that, if art containes its own definition and is thus meaningful in itself, it must be a form of abstract symbolism - *a language*. How then, was the language of art to be distinguished from language in general? It could no longer, after all, be defined in its old aesthetic terms, as a physical, sensuous language. Although much discussion has focused on this issue in conceptual-art circles, not one distinguishing feature of art has yet been found, and the endeavour appears to be both futile and intellectually vacuous. One can only conclude the argument is circular: the language of art is in fact no more than ordinary language, and art, defined as a thing-in-itself, is an intellectual phantasm.

Roberta Smith has described conceptual art as "the first crack in the facade of abstract infallibility"[15], and it does seem to be the case, that by elevating the concept of art to the status of a logically consistent absurdity, conceptualists have done a service to those painters whose work they sought to invalidate. By establishing a distinction between the concrete art-object and the abstract art-concept and revealing no necessary transition from one to the other they have relieved art-objects (such as paintings) of their long proclaimed theoretical obligation to be either abstract, or conceptual.

The seemingly inexorable prevalence of abstraction in painting was finally halted as art itself dematerialized and became completely abstract, leaving its objects behind. The subsequent reassertion of the plurality of the arts over the absolutism of the unified art-concept seems, to my mind, a step in the right direction. Be that as it may, it should be acknowledged that my basic argument - that paintings cannot embody concepts, meanings, values or other abstract entities - is tacitly accepted as a tenet of conceptualist art theory. As such, theories that art is a language offer no coherent opposition to my thesis that art is neither a language, nor abstract.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. Scruton, *The Politics of Culture* p.58.

2. Quoted in Gombrich, 'Hegel, The Father of Art History'.

3. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.112.

4. Ibid., p.130.

5. Welsh, "Sacred Geometry, French Symbolism and Early Abstraction" in Weisberger (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art* pp.64, 65.

6. Quoted in Jaffe, *De StiJl*, 1970, p.122.

7. Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* p.93.

8. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* p.130.

9. Ziff, *Antiaesthetics*, p.88.

10. *Conceptual Art & Conceptual Aspects* Exhibition Catalogue, New York Cultural Centre, 1970, p.56, quoted in Stangos (ed.) *Concepts of Modern Art* p.244.

11. Kosuth, Joseph, "Art After Philosophy" in *Studio International*, October 1969 p. 134-137.

12. Quoted in Lippard, *Six Years,* p.130.

13. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* p. 98.

14. Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy" in *Studio International,*

October 1969, p.134-137.

15. Stangos (Ed.) *Concepts of Modern Art* p.269.

CONCLUSION

It may now be perceived, that starting from the postulate of a distinction between being and meaning, between the actual and the ideal, between objects and symbols or concepts, and between concretion and abstraction, we are drawn to conclude that paintings are actual concrete objects, and not in themselves either ideal, meaningful, symbolic, conceptual or abstract. This not only necessitates a distinction between paintings and abstract entities, but also undermines the relationship between paintings (as objects) and art (as a concept), and suggests that the postulate that all works of art share a common symbolism and ideal content is flawed. This my argument, although being confined to the province of painting for the sake of simplicity and clarity, has implications for all the arts. Most of what has been said about painting can be applied easily to other object-based arts, although literature, music, dance and theatre must be considered separately. This is because, as A.J. Ayer said:

> Whatever else they may be, a picture, a piece of sculpture and a work of architecture are all physical objects, [whereas] a work of literature is a series of words, considered not as physical tokens but a types, a piece of music a series of notes, again as types rather than tokens.[1]

The specific character and scope of all these forms can be described, as I have attempted to do for painting, but they cannot share a common ideal content, nor sould they have a common philosophy imposed upon them. In practice, the symbolic essence common to all works of art has proved a dubious and elusive metaphysical entity, and given the sterile condition of contemporary aesthetics, it seems reasonable to conclude that a practical philosophy of art can amount to little more than its history. Such an approach may be considered to rob painting and the other arts of all their claims to value. This is not my intention, although it certainly implies that there is no criterion of *objective* value in the arts. This, too, I believe, is *borne* out by practical experience. My primary intention has been to define painting in a way that protects what I believe to be its specific character, as a process of concretion rather than of abstraction. Such is the general bias towards the abstractive processes of language and science that refuting claims that painting, too, is

abstract, and meaningful, may be considered by some to rob it of all claims to significance. It is, however, my belief that the abstractions of language and science are not the only sources of value and significance, nor should they be. By refuting claims that some of our most precious cultural assets are abstract or conceptual, we may begin to value paintings, not for what they supposedly mean but for what they are - objects.

1. Ayer Philosophy in the Twentieth Century p.196.

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