

## Rand's Aesthetics: A Personal View

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In this essay, I make no attempt to provide a general review of Torres and Kamhi's book. I shall make a few remarks about views expressed in the book, and some of my own views on the same subject, interspersing them occasionally with memories of my discussions with Rand herself.

Some salient topics in aesthetics include: the nature of aesthetic experience, aesthetic perception, aesthetic judgment, beauty and aesthetic value. Topics in philosophy of art include: the nature of art, artistic expression, representation and symbolism in art, truth and credibility in art, art and reality. I almost never had any general discussion of these topics with Rand, nor—at the time I knew her—had she written on them. Our discussions on art could better be described as artistic criticism and especially literary criticism.

At her request, our first few discussions were entirely about the aesthetic aspects of *Atlas Shrugged*: its organization, its characterization, its development. I had virtually no negative criticisms at all, but pointed out in detail aspects of the plot and the main themes with which she was without doubt already familiar; in view of the negative reviews the book had received in the press (this was in 1960), hearing my comments evidently pleased her. Only after three or four long evenings of discussion on *Atlas* did we branch out in later discussions, not to general aesthetics, but to general philosophy.

At the time I became acquainted with Rand, I had published several works on the philosophy of art. The first was my doctoral dissertation at Columbia, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (1946), my first sustained work in this area. Having come to Columbia just two years

before from an M.A. in English at the University of Iowa, I was proud and somewhat frightened to have on my oral exam committee such renowned figures as Meyer Schapiro (art), Douglas Moore (music), Lionel Trilling (literature), and distinguished philosophers such as Irwin Edman, John Herman Randall, and Paul Otto Kristeller.

Since that time I have occasionally written essays in philosophy of art, some of which I shall refer to in the present paper. My usual procedure was to take some issue that presented a problem for me or which continued to bother me in some way, and then try to clarify or resolve it more for my own clarification than for that of my readers. I had written a few of these essays at the time I knew Ayn Rand, and gave her copies of them, though I have no evidence that she ever read them.

### Creation and Related Concepts

I begin, somewhat arbitrarily, with the concept of artistic creation. In my paper "Artistic Creativity" (Hospers 1985), I characterized creation as a novel arrangement of preexisting elements in a medium (paints, words, musical tones etc.); the creativity consists in discovering combinations of these elements that did not previously exist. Now, in the year 2000, I am pleased to read for the first time Rand's words on this: "'Creation' means the power to bring into existence an arrangement (or combination or integration) of natural elements that had not existed before" (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 47). I also agreed with Rand's statement that "'creation' does not (and metaphysically cannot) mean the power to bring something into existence out of nothing," although in traditional accounts of creation such as St. Augustine's, creation had been assumed to be *ex nihilo*. I attacked the intelligibility of the "*ex nihilo*": Suppose God said "Let there be light" and light appeared, and said "Let there be stars" and suddenly the sky is strewn with stars, would this be creation, since there was no material that was molded or formed? Where in all this is the *process*? If God says "Let there be stars" and presto!, stars appear, how does he know that it is his edict that has

brought the stars into existence? One gives a command and suddenly the thing pops into existence; this would surely be a strange and surprising sequence of events, but is it creation?

Besides creating a work of art, what was the artist doing? One answer is: he was giving a *representation* of things in the world around us. (Not imitation: one may imitate other works of art, but the painter doesn't imitate a tree, he represents it. "Imitation" is a poor translation of the Greek "mimesis.") And many artists do this, among other things: novelists represent people (real or imaginary) and painters represent objects in nature (usually in altered or stylized ways).

But if one asks, "Is all art representational?" the main exception would seem to be music. What do the Brandenburg concertos or Mozart's quartets represent? These would seem to be, as Monroe Beardsley once put it, "not recreation but pure creation." One can plausibly say that a painter can show us some aspects of what nature looks like, but can we plausibly say that music shows us what nature sounds like? (Musical sounds, as opposed to noises, seldom occur at all in nature.) If it is said that music can represent emotions such as sadness or triumph, should not one rather say that music can *express*, or be expressive of, these emotions?

Some music, usually referred to as program music, may (as we say) "represent" the pines of Rome or Don Quixote's misadventures. But there is nothing to connect Cervantes' hero with the music of Richard Strauss' tone-poem "Don Quixote" except the words in the title: if Strauss had changed the title, would we then say that the music now "represents" something different? The composer's fiat is all that connects the music with the sounds emanating from the orchestra (such as woodwinds that, with some exercise of imagination, can be interpreted as the bleating of sheep); should this tenuous connection be called representation? When Walter Pater, in a famous passage from *The Renaissance*, wrote that all arts aspire to the condition of music, he didn't mean that they lacked emotional character, but that they should "throw off the mortal coils" of dependence on representation.

It is sometimes said that every work of art constitutes a "little

world" created by the artist (in contrast to the "big world out there," which we all inhabit), a "microcosm" of that big world. This may be an acceptable way of speaking (depending on what one means by it): the "world of the late Beethoven quartets" is a unique world, different from any world that any artist before or since has created—i.e., these works have a unique kind of other-worldly quality. But does that make them a microcosm?

As always, when we say something, let us spell out what we mean, lest we become entrapped in our own words. A musician and Randian scholar, Roger Bissell (1999), is among those who have presented the "microcosm" view: "Art," he says, "is one important form in which human beings are able to create a world-in-miniature, a *microcosm*. The frame for the painting, the pedestal for the statue, the proscenium for the stage—these all mark the esthetic boundary between this world and the world of an artwork, and they all testify to the truth of Rand's definition." It's true that the pedestal and the proscenium sets the work of art apart from its physical environment. But is that tantamount to saying that the work of art constitutes a different *world*? Bissell quotes Rand approvingly that "music represents the concretized abstraction of existence—i.e. a world in which one feels joyous or sad or triumphant or resigned . . ." (59). Well, call it a world if you like, but what is there to choose between saying that and saying simply that the music expresses a variety of states of feeling?

"Not all art is representation, but all art is *expression*." Thus begins the Romantic theory of art: "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," in Wordsworth's famous phrase. "Poetry is the expression of powerful feelings."<sup>1</sup> According to the contemporary philosopher R. G. Collingwood, the artist begins in an inchoate state of confusion, unable to articulate or organize what he feels, and he gradually extricates himself from that state by writing, painting, or composing. When he has done this, his oppression has lightened, his tension relieved; he has "got it out of his system." As Collingwood (1938, 109) puts it:

At first, he is conscious of having an emotion, but not

conscious of what this emotion is. All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he can say about his emotion is: "I feel . . . I don't know what I feel." From this helpless and oppressed condition, he extricates himself by doing something which we call *expressing himself*.

So pervasive is this way of conceiving art that even today if one asks a student at an easel "What are you doing?" she is likely to say "I'm expressing myself (or expressing my feelings, etc.)." This is surely not what Bach would have said if he had been asked this question while composing the Goldberg Variations. Rather, he once described himself as a kind of humble artisan trying to do God's work. Still, as he himself recognized, his works are full of emotion.

My favorite phrase to characterize art, which must have become a bore to my students, is: "In art, all percepts are suffused with affect." In art, the percepts—tones, words, colors and shapes—whether through association or their own intrinsic character, are felt as expressing (or in some way containing, or embodying) a vast variety of feelings. Surely that is why art is so often described in terms of feeling, and is sometimes described as "the language of feeling," feelings far more subtly differentiated than language can convey. When people are sad, they move slowly; their movements are not loud or rapid, and they speak softly and low—just as the music we call sad tends to be slow rather than rapid, and soft rather than strident. But even within the general category of sadness, the "gentle melancholy" of a Mozart quintet is far different from the "lost and desolate sadness" we often encounter in Mahler. We distinguish in music countless varieties and degrees of sadness that we lack a vocabulary of the subtlety that would be required to describe it in words.

It is true that people often disagree about the expressive character of a given passage (seldom is an entire work expressive of the same feelings, for the emotional content constantly changes)—and not, I think, simply because of the inadequacy of words for describing

nuances of feeling. For example, one may find a single line by Picasso enormously expressive, even if the line is not part of the representation of a human figure, although Rand and Randians have no truck with non-representational painting.

In my paper, "The Concept of Artistic Expression" (1954–55), I made a fourfold distinction: expression as a process (what the artist is doing when he creates); expression and evocation of feeling; expression and communication of feeling; and expression as expressiveness, a felt quality of the work of art. I was trying to un-confuse readers who often speak and think about expression in misleading and inconsistent ways. That paper has been much anthologized, and some readers have told me that I ought to take out a patent on the concept.<sup>2</sup>

I don't know whether, when Brahms wrote, he had emotions, or whether he was expressing those he had. Indeed, those he had may not have been at all those that we recognize, or seem to recognize, in the music when we hear it. I suspect that when he was writing the searing Finale to his Symphony No. 1, that his state of mind was not characterized by emotions at all, but with trying to finish this cadence or wondering by what musical means (what notes) he was going to finish writing the movement. I suspect that Richard Strauss was correct in his *Autobiography* (1926) when he wrote: "I work very coldly, without agitation, without emotion even. One must be completely master of oneself to organize that changing, moving, flowing chessboard: orchestration. The mind which composed 'Tristan' must have been as cool as marble" (quoted in Osborne 1955, 162). But what he felt when he wrote, and what emotions he may have infused into the work, may be two different things. That, at any rate, is the view I have come to after occasional reflection about it through the years.

How much of what I have said about expression would Rand have agreed with? I wish I knew. I wish I knew whether she believed that the emotions we attribute to a work of music (as opposed to the emotions we feel when we hear it) are really "in the work itself," and if so, in what way. When I read Torres and Kamhi's description of Rand's view—"What music presents, then, are certain *auditory concretes*

... that have emotive and existential significance. That is why music, in Rand's analysis, possesses an *objective*, albeit generalized, core of meaning" (2000, 80)—I do not have, from this description, a clear enough handle on her view to say more about it without further elucidation. What, for example, is meant by "emotive and existential significance"? Having read these words, I'm afraid I don't know where to go with them—as so often happens, I think I understand the meaning of each individual word, but not the whole collocation.

Collingwood believed that the process of artistic creation was a process of exploring and articulating the artist's own emotions. As a generalization about artistic creation, I strongly doubt this; does the creative process of every artist consist in the exploration of his own psyche? But there is one feature of his view that both Rand and I would enthusiastically agree with: that the process of creation is not one of communicating (or trying to communicate) anything to the audience: the creator is quite indifferent to the presence or absence of an audience. Artistic creation is a self-centered activity: first and foremost, one must satisfy oneself. Other people are simply outsiders who may or may not comprehend what one is doing. When they do, they are the fortunate beneficiaries of something they did not create. In the phrase of John Stuart Mill (1869), in his too-little-known essay "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," the viewers and listeners are not participants in the process, but *eavesdroppers* on the artist's life and work.

## Art and Truth

When is something to be called art? The ancient Greek answer seems to me a good one: Something is art if it is man-made, and not simply a part of nature unaffected by human beings. Rocks, trees, and stars are nature; human beings had no part in making them. (Someone may have planted the trees, but the tree itself is nature, not art.) Art is whatever changes man has rung on nature. Art is artifice (i.e., artificial, an artifact). The rock is natural, but if you carve your initials on it, the carving is art. The plants are natural, but your arrangement of them into a garden is art. That is not to say that it is

good art—a different and much more complicated question—but simply that it is something that man has made.

Once we classify something as art, there is a further and (to modern man at least) familiar distinction between fine art and useful art. Plumbers, electricians, house-builders, and welders are all engaged in useful art; the activity has a practical end in view, which is achieved once the activity has been completed. By contrast, fine arts are there for people to enjoy and appreciate for their own sakes. There isn't much you can do with a poem or a symphony except enjoy it; it serves no other end. (A work of fine art may have been created partly for money, but the intended effect of the work is appreciation, not the furtherance of the appreciator's financial interests.)

Architecture is usually considered a borderline case, both a fine art and a practical art, but I (with Rand) tend to favor the latter: whether a home, a museum, or a temple, a work of architecture always serves some function (other than to be enjoyed for its own sake).

Painting involves primarily the sense of sight, and music the sense of hearing. These are the media by which we receive the sensory input. Sculpture and architecture, it is usually agreed, involve both sight and touch. Literature (poetry, novel, drama) by contrast is not a sensory art at all: you can read it from the printed page or hear the words uttered, but both the sight and the sound would be nothing without knowing the meanings of the words, and these are apprehended by the intellect. The arts of performance are all mixed arts: drama is the written play plus its performance on the stage; a symphony is music plus performance by the various instruments of the orchestra; a song is music plus words plus performance. The various arts can do these things because, as Rand correctly says, the arts "do not deal with the sensory field of awareness as such, but with *the sensory field as perceived by a conceptual consciousness*" (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 66). Animals can't appreciate paintings or poems.

Once this is said, however, we must add that each of the fine arts also does other things, such as represent objects, express emotions, convey truths about the world, and communicate a "sense of life."

It is primarily these "other things" that make art interesting to us.

Before saying anything about sense of life, I should perhaps say a few words about the concept of truth in art. When a work of art, particularly a work of literature, has "something to say," what it says may or may not be true. Sometimes, as with allegations about "fate" or "destiny" or God's influence in human affairs, the statement is either unintelligible or impossible to agree on in any way to discover whether it is true. In any case, a statement in a work of art does not have to be true in order to make the work aesthetically valuable (Rand and I agreed on this): Tolstoy's philosophy of history, it is usually agreed, is a mass of errors, but his *War and Peace* is a great novel for all that.

The main area in which truth is relevant, I hold, is in the depiction of the characters in literature: they must be true to human nature if we are to find them acceptable. One need not always have in a novel a "deep" (three-dimensional) characterization, but even in a less profound, two-dimensional characterization, the fictional character must not flout human nature, that is, he must feel and act as a person thus far depicted would (with some probability) feel and act. This of course is Aristotle's criterion of characterization presented in his *Poetics*. We, as readers, must be convinced that a character as depicted by the author might have done what the author presents him as doing ("probably or necessarily," as Aristotle said) in the circumstances described. Otherwise we do not find the character believable (credible, plausible): he is not "true to how people really feel and act." The character may be embroiled in highly implausible situations, but he must still "live and breathe before us" as an actual human being, with motivations we find at least intelligible, else we cannot empathize with the character or imaginatively share his fate. There is much more to it than this, and I am greatly condensing the account.<sup>3</sup> But when I presented it once to Rand she agreed with it, and was pleased with my Aristotelianism on this issue.<sup>4</sup>

But there is another aspect to truth in art which had been gradually developing in my thought for some time—I mean statements which, I thought, were in some way implicit but never actually stated. Sometimes, I thought, a speaker or writer suggests something

he does not say. If a person says “they had children and got married,” the suggestion is that they had the children first, although the speaker doesn’t say this and he couldn’t be taken to court over it; or if a physician says, “Of course the man didn’t recover; I wasn’t his physician,” what is suggested is that this is the cause of the patient’s non-recovery. An author may suggest throughout a whole work something he doesn’t state—for example, that human beings are playthings of a cruel Fate, in Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, where it remains implicit until one passage near the end when Hardy writes: “The President of the Immortals had had his sport with Tess.” By this time, the explicit statement is, in my view, no longer required: the reader is already aware of what is suggested but not stated.

Can such statements be said to be implied? Not if one means “logically implied,” the way “A is larger than B” implies “B is smaller than A.” But there is a more “common-sense” way of using “imply,” as in G. E. Moore’s example: when I say that I went to the movies last Tuesday, I imply that I believe that I went. (If someone said “You didn’t believe you went,” one could retort, “I do believe I went, and I implied that when I said I went.”) It is not clear to me just what this sense is supposed to involve, so I prefer to state my case by using the word “suggest”—though it too is not free of vagueness. In some cases (such as “They had children and got married”), what is suggested to the reader is clear enough, but in other cases one might say “That’s what is suggested to you, but not to me!” leading sometimes to endless disputes as to “what the author really meant.”<sup>5</sup>

How I wish we had discussed the issue—for at that time I had not yet heard the phrase “sense of life,” which Ayn Rand originated. Even now I am not sure that my idea of it is very complete—various statements have different emphases. “The integrated sum of a man’s basic values is his sense of life,” says Rand (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 39). Is this a definition? “A sense of life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence” (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 35). Is this also a definition? I am not sure;

but I find Nathaniel Branden’s account very helpful in developing an account of what is involved. Branden writes: “Long before he is old enough to grasp such a concept as metaphysics, man . . . acquires a certain *implicit* view of life. Every choice and value-judgment [he makes] implies some estimate of himself and of the world around him” (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 35–36). But consider if someone says to me, “You know what Rachmaninoff’s sense of life is? It’s self-pity!” Is this about sense of life at all? If it’s about what the prevailing tone or mood of Rachmaninoff’s music is, then I disagree: this doesn’t seem to me about what most of his music is (or seems to be) expressive of. But that isn’t the same as sense of life, is it? Rand did say that music as well as the other arts reveal an artist’s sense of life. “A sense of life is a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics, an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence.” Is this really present in Rachmaninoff? I’m not sure, and I’m not sure how to find out. Rand found Rachmaninoff’s music uniquely “life-affirming” (surely that’s one reason why he was her favorite composer), but is this the same as his sense of life? Is this life-affirming quality something more than what I would call the “expressive content” of his work—something that is also a pre-conceptual equivalent of metaphysics?, a subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and of existence? I am not sure. I don’t know where the boundaries of the concept are, and that it is my comprehension of the concept that is inadequate.

For example: A musical passage may be expressive of triumph even if the composer had no experience of triumph in the process of creation. The feeling embodied in the music may not be anything like what the composer experienced in creating it. Very well, one now wants to ask: Is it also like this with sense of life? Can an artist communicate a sense of life that reflects nothing of his own life? Or is it necessary for the sense of life to reflect some aspect of his actual beliefs, philosophy, or personality? Can sense of life be biography-independent? I am far from clear about how these questions should be answered.

Freud believed that a study of literature revealed a great deal about the author’s unconscious motivations. His disciple, Ernest

Jones, in his essay "A Psychoanalytic Study of Hamlet," made numerous inferences about Hamlet's unconscious mind, using specific texts from *Hamlet* as a basis. Regardless of whether Jones' inferences are justified, can we say that they have to do with Shakespeare's sense of life?

Shakespeare is a perennially puzzling case: we can say a great deal about each of Shakespeare's characters but nothing plausible that I can think of about Shakespeare the man, who seems to lie forever hidden behind his characters. We have no idea what Shakespeare believed, but only what various characters in his plays believed. The moment you say "Shakespeare believed in women's rights because . . ." (citing some character in *Twelfth Night*), I can say the opposite on the basis of (for example) *The Taming of the Shrew*. I might be able to say something plausible about Iago's sense of life, or Macbeth's, but not Shakespeare's. Shall we say then that, in Shakespeare's case, there wasn't any? Or that even after reading all of Shakespeare's plays we are in no position to say what it was? Hamlet and Lear and Prospero all had certain beliefs; are these to be counted as part of the sense of life of these characters?

## Beauty and Aesthetic Value

Central to most aesthetic theories is an account of the beautiful—what sort of quality beauty is, and what is one's justification for attributing this quality to objects. Controversies about beauty have gone on for centuries. I suppose it is "natural" (in some sense) to assume that for every substantive there is a substance and that for every adjective there is a quality: "This is beautiful" is grammatically similar to "This is five feet tall." One is easily led to conclude that beauty, like size, is something that is "objective," that is, that it exists "out there in the world" quite independently of the existence of observers. The problem then is to determine what kind of quality it is—whether a simple or a complex quality, whether it is different in nature than it is in art, whether it varies from one art-form to another, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

The inability to discover such a quality, or at any rate to agree on

what it is, has led most modern aestheticians to describe beauty in a way that is called "subjective"—not that beauty is "in the mind" or that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" (it's not the eye that is beautiful!) but that it depends on some relation between the object and the perceiving mind. Samuel Alexander (1839–1938) wrote: "The beauty in a beautiful object does not exist except insofar as it satisfies the mind which is actually contemplating it" (Alexander [1933] 1968, 183). George Santayana (1863–1952) wrote: "Beauty is pleasure perceived as a quality of a thing" (Santayana 1896). What distinguishes aesthetic pleasures from other pleasures is that in aesthetic pleasure we project our pleasure onto the object and think of it as a quality of the object. Curt Ducasse (1881–1967) wrote: "Beauty is that property of an object which consists in the capacity of the object to cause pleasure in a subject who contemplates it. It is just as natural that the same object should affect different minds differently—as it is that the same tepid water should feel warm to a hand that is cold but cool to a hand that is hot" (Ducasse 1944, 90).

As far as I know, Ayn Rand had nothing to say in print about beauty, but she did briefly refer to "esthetic value." There is a difference; beauty has to do with (as Kant put it) being pleasing to the senses, as sensory arts like music and painting can be. But we don't often describe novels or tragic dramas as beautiful, though we may ascribe to them a high degree of aesthetic value: we may call Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* a great work of art, although few would be inclined to describe it as beautiful. What then can we say of aesthetic value—is it an objective quality of art?

When we say that crossword puzzles are interesting, we surely admit that they may be interesting to one person but not to another: interestingness is very much a to-you-or-to-me characteristic. The same can be said about referring to a work of art as fascinating ("Well, it doesn't fascinate *me!*"), or boring, or rewarding, or intriguing. If you consider calculus intriguing and I don't, is one of us mistaken? No, we say, you have one attitude or feeling toward it and I have another—"it's a subjective matter," we say. Why can't aesthetic value be subjective in the same way—"I find it valuable" (I value it) but you may not—and do we have to say that then one of us

is mistaken? Didn't Ayn Rand say that you may value something and I may not—you may act to gain and keep it, and I may not—and isn't this tantamount to saying that it is valuable to you but not to me? Isn't value always *to* someone?

If you say there are nine planets around the sun and I say there aren't, one of us is mistaken. If you say that a Rachmaninoff symphony has great aesthetic value, and I say it doesn't, is one of us mistaken? As would seem to befit the term "Objectivism," one would expect Rand to say: "Yes—aesthetic value is indeed objective." And she does say this, though only in passing. She distinguishes finding something aesthetically valuable from liking it: One may like it and yet find it inconsequential, and one may consider it a great work of art and yet not like it. ("I thought that 'The Pawnbroker' was a fine movie, but it would take all the king's horses to make me see it again," wrote Sidney Hook (1965).) Well, let's all admit that a work of art can be great even though you or I may not like it; who would disagree with that? But Rand goes further. Greatness, she argues, "refers to objective qualities, apart from one's personal response" (Torres and Kamhi 2000, 58). "One does not have to agree with an artist (nor even to enjoy him)," she says, "in order to evaluate his work. In essence, an objective evaluation requires that one identify the artist's theme, the abstract meaning of his work (exclusively by identifying the evidence contained in the work and allowing no other, outside considerations), then evaluate the means by which he conveys it—i.e., taking *his* theme as criterion, [one must] evaluate the purely esthetic elements of the work, the technical mastery (or lack of it) with which he projects (or fails to project) *his* view of life" (quoted in Torres and Kamhi 2000, 58).

Now this is quite an assortment. The artist's theme counts (how much, we are not told); also the "abstract meaning" (I'm not clear what this is), and the means by which he conveys it, that is, the technical mastery of his medium that his work displays. I don't know whether there are other items that should be included, and how much weight each is supposed to bear. Renoir is sometimes said to be the master of his medium, but Cézanne (though it never came easily to him) was nevertheless described as the greater painter because of the

greater depth or profundity of his work. It was said of Flaubert that "he had nothing to say, but he said it very well." In what direction is such a remark to count? Is "what he conveys" to be counted more heavily in determining aesthetic value than "how he conveys it"? (Is "how he conveys it" the same as style?) I am not sure that we have here any clear criteria of evaluation, or any reason why some criteria should be accepted rather than others. I would hate to try to judge the aesthetic value of any particular work of art, on the basis of what Rand says about objective criteria.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes six elements of a tragedy; the four most important of which are plot, characterization, diction, and "thought" (intellectual content). Rand considers plot to be by far the most important of these, and characterization to be secondary to the plot. There should be only as much characterization as the plot requires—and while agreeing with this, I would add that there are some works that are simply character studies, or that through the use of language and the creation of atmosphere are valuable in spite of comparative plotlessness (as in William Faulkner's stories "A Rose for Emily" and "That Evening Sun"). (The predominance of one feature may make up for the absence of another.) Moreover, some works of fiction are "just stories" with no strong element of thought or theme—as opposed to *Atlas Shrugged*, in which every character embodies some important theme or idea, and lives in our minds as a concrete illustration of that idea more than as a person who vividly lives and breathes before us like those of Dickens or George Eliot. It's not clear which is to count more, vividness of characterization or the instantiation of a concept or idea.

Aristotle was speaking only of tragedy, though scholars and critics have often extended his dicta to cover all narrative literature. But do they provide a guideline for judging the aesthetic value of works of literature (never mind the other arts)? Is there any set of clear criteria that we can use in judging the "objective value" of works of literature? Are there any general criteria to be found? We can *suggest* criteria—lots of them have been suggested, such as theme and variations, development toward a goal, organic unity, acceptability to the aesthetic imagination—but can we *justify* any of the general criteria

that we might propose? In view of the vast diversity of works of art, especially from one art form to another, one despairs of any chances of success in such a forbidding enterprise.

And perhaps one should despair—though in passing let me mention, extremely briefly, the three criteria for fine art that are proposed by Professor Monroe Beardsley in his now-classic work *Aesthetics* (1958). One criterion is the classic Aristotelian one, unity: A work of art must “hang together, each part adding to the whole. A drama in which the parts fail to be absorbed in the whole, in which parts ‘stick out,’ or a movie in which the thread seems to be lost halfway through, fails to fulfill the requirement of overall unity.” If a reader asks, “What’s this scene in there for?,” this is something of an indication that unity has not been achieved. A second criterion is complexity. Other things being equal, a very simple work with few parts, such as a single melody or a painting with nothing but blue sky above and dark ocean below, is not complex enough to sustain attention. But the complexity must not be so great as to destroy the unity. (Does the gravedigger’s scene in *Hamlet* disturb the unity, as it seems to, or does it contribute to it in the end? Some say yes, some no.) And the third is intensity, which is more difficult to explain in words; the work should have some marked “regional quality”—the vivacity of the opening of a Vivaldi concerto, the anguish in some of Mahler’s symphonies, the “cry of terror” in Edvard Munch’s painting. Intensity is what bowls you over or blows you away in the curse of *King Lear* (Act 1, Scene 4) on his eldest daughter Goneril:

Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!  
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend  
To make this creature fruitful!  
Into her womb convey sterility!  
Dry up in her the organs of increase;  
And from her derogate body never spring  
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen; that it may live,  
And be a thwart disnatur’d torment to her!  
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;

With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;  
Turn all her mother’s pains and benefits  
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel  
How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is  
To have a thankless child!

One might suggest that a reader who gets no idea of intensity from this passage is not likely to grasp it at all.

Readers could disagree endlessly about the extent to which a suggested criterion is fulfilled in a particular case. They could also disagree about whether there should be more of one and less of another in case of conflict. (Shakespeare’s plays have much more complexity than do those of Aeschylus, which gives them more “fullness of life,” and many readers prefer them for that reason; but others prefer the Greek tragedies because of their higher degree of unity, their “thin strong line of action” (with no subplots) leading inexorably to a shattering conclusion.) They could also suggest other criteria than those three, such as technical mastery of the medium, which do not seem to be included in the three and yet are believed to be of considerable importance.

Perhaps the criteria suggested are simply *inductive generalizations* from long experience—works that have these features to a high degree have been found to be the most aesthetically satisfying in the long run. And indeed this may be the way to go: One could say that the greatest works of art are those which, throughout the ages and amidst a variety of different temperaments, have “passed the test of time” and have been found to give us the maximum of aesthetic experiences. This is what David Hume (1898) argued in his essay “On the Standard of Taste,” and in this tangle of overlapping and conflicting suggestions, this may be the most satisfactory resting-place for our theories.

### Postscript

Before concluding, I want to mention my discussion with Rand about Shakespeare. The discussion I wanted to have was about her

allegation in one of the Nathaniel Branden Institute lectures that Shakespeare was a determinist. (She expressed this view to several people, apparently; see Branden 1986, 241–42). My thought on the matter was: if you mean the general “vanilla-flavored” sense according to which everything that happens has a cause (whether we ever find it or not), I suppose one can grant that Shakespeare along with millions of other people could be called a determinist. But not in any of the special senses that have a bite: if you mean economic determinism, that the outcome for you is solely dependent on economic conditions such as poverty, that isn’t true; and if you mean psychological determinism, that certain events in your childhood determined the final “outcome” of your life, that isn’t true either—there are too many counter-examples. It is seldom the case that certain early events A, B, C, together render inevitable a later outcome X. The outcome for Iago was not determined solely by his genes or his environment; like most of Shakespeare’s characters, it was primarily his own free decisions that brought on his fate. Shakespeare, I thought, should be considered an exemplar of freedom, not of determinism.

That was the conversation I wanted to have with her, and started to have one evening when something she said led the discussion in an aesthetic direction. What she said was that she didn’t like Bach and didn’t like Shakespeare. Since Bach and Shakespeare were on my short list of greatest artists of all time, I was stunned. Something must be wrong! What could I possibly say to change her mind? Shakespeare’s plots aren’t always that convincing—I gave her that, though I still thought they were among the best in the world. But what I treasure most in Shakespeare is his poetry. How could I convince her that he was a wordsmith second to none?

Since I had memorized many passages of Shakespeare through the years, and still had them in my memory-bank, I decided to quote some Shakespeare to her from memory. I quoted a passage that I considered to be one of the most intense in all the world’s literature, Claudio’s disquisition on death in Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure* (Act 3, Scene 1):

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;  
 To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;  
 This sensible warm motion to become  
 A kneaded clod; and the dilated spirit  
 To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
 In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;  
 To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,  
 And blown with restless violence round about  
 The pendant world; or to be worse than worst  
 Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts  
 Imagine howling; ‘tis too horrible!  
 The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
 That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
 Can lay on nature is a paradise  
 To what we fear of death.

Though I uttered the lines with what I thought were the proper dramatic intonations, I saw that I wasn’t having much effect. Rather than let her speak, I hastened to make up for a possible mistake: lest she protest that what was expressed was an unduly pessimistic or fatalistic view, I said that the lines were uttered by Angelo, who was to be executed the following morning, and in view of that the lines would seem of less than a “malevolent universe” variety. But I didn’t want to emphasize the truth or falsity of what was stated in the lines, but only to illustrate Shakespeare’s magical way with words, which made the thoughts compelling and memorable. As if to forestall her possible objections, I went back immediately to my memory-bank and quoted to her Prospero’s “farewell to his kingdom” from Shakespeare’s last play, *The Tempest*—lines in which, I thought, no one could discover a malevolent universe:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
 As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
 Are melted into air, into thin air;  
 And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on, and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep. (Act 4, Scene 1)

She was uncharacteristically silent for some moments. I remembered that people reading a poem of any depth in a language not their own are at a disadvantage, because of the vast array of connotations of each word and phrase that are familiar to people who know the language since early childhood. But I could see that she was impressed—though, I concluded later, less by Shakespeare's word-magic than by my own intense manner of delivering the lines, and my obvious sincerity in trying to make a point to her convincingly.

She stood up then and took an anthology of poetry from the bookshelf, showing me some poems of Swinburne that she liked. I liked them too, but for me they were as water unto wine. I had failed utterly in the attempt to communicate to her what had moved and excited me so much. I tried to hide my disappointment. This was, and remained, my Big Defeat with her—one that "hit me where it hurt" more than the outcome of any philosophic discussions we ever had. I had tried and failed. I have never quite got over it to this day.

I still encounter passages of music and poetry that I find exceptionally moving or memorable, and wonder what are the sources of their extraordinary power, and whether these can be described by citing any of the usual criteria. Such is the uniqueness of any of these passages, I find, and so wanting the language we try to use to describe them, that no attempt at description does the job. Perhaps showing, rather than explaining, would succeed—but then, I reflected, that hadn't worked with her either. How then do you get someone to share your enthusiasm for something you care about deeply? I tried once again, thinking of her, when I tried to evoke enthusiasm for an unusually affecting passage in Berlioz' *Requiem*.

Toward the end of the Offertory movement of Berlioz's

*Requiem*, the music, now quiet and stately after the turbulence that has gone before, remains sombrely in the minor key, then seems once or twice as if it were about to turn into the major, but after a brief tendency in that direction, hovering on the brink, settles back into the minor ("sanctum, quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini eius"); then for a few moments everything hangs on a single note (B flat) in the strings as if hesitant as to where to go, and then from the bass strings we get an E flat and G that quietly but firmly turn the chord into the major key ("Domine, Jesu Christe, Amen"). At this moment there pervades the music an unearthly peaceful splendor; but just when we think the movement is concluding in a state of quiescence, the melody in the treble slowly ascends step by step while the one in the bass simultaneously descends, down to E flat in the bass, and the effect is as if the heavens are opening, almost as if we ourselves are being levitated off the earth. This double magic, first the transition from minor to major, followed by the ascent of the high tones while the low tones descend further, seldom fails in my experience to move listeners to a kind of awed and silent rapture. . . . Long after repeatedly experiencing this passage I read Franz Liszt's statement when he heard it: "This surpasses all."

Yet if one were to describe all the harmonic and contrapuntal devices used by Berlioz in this minute or two of music, one could not say, for example, that "Make the minor chords tremble on the verge of turning into major chords once or twice before you actually do it" is a good general rule for producing great music. Any student of music could compose a passage fulfilling that requirement, and in most cases the results would be disastrous. But in *this* passage of music, prepared for in just the way Berlioz did it in the preceding measures, produces the unique and indescribable quality we value. It is not that there are no qualities that help to make works of art great, but that these qualities so resist verbal

description, and are so dependent on their immediate context, that they cannot be ripped from that context and then singled out as qualities that help to produce greatness wherever they occur, independently of that context. (Hospers 1982, 327)

What did I learn from all this? At least the following: Do your best to understand where the other person is coming from, go over the material again to make sure you've got it right, do your best to get an unsimplified grasp of what the other person is saying, and meanwhile, try to be crystal clear yourself in what you're saying. From then on, it's in the lap of the gods. Even now I don't think I've been very successful. But the experience of discussing these matters with Rand herself—the memory of that will be with me always.

## Notes

1. This is from the 1800 preface to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. For an extended discussion of the Romantic theory of art, see Beardsley 1966, especially Chapter 10, "Romanticism."
2. The paper has been anthologized, for example, in successive editions of *A Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, edited by Alsbury Castell, published by Macmillan. See also Hospers 1956.
3. I describe it in detail in Hospers 1958. The outlines of this view are in Aristotle's *Poetics*. See especially Butcher 1895, 25–40.
4. See also Hospers 1980; 1982; and my paper on truth in literature, together with criticisms of it in Hook 1965.
5. I gave a copy of my paper on this to Ayn Rand, but she never commented on it. The paper is Hospers 1960, which was also reprinted in several aesthetics anthologies. On a related aspect of the same issue, I should perhaps state for the record that I wrote the following passage in 1960:

Although we sometimes draw inferences from works of literature to their authors, it may happen that we *think* we are doing this when we are actually doing something else. Suppose that on walking through an empty building I see written on the blackboard a great many incendiary remarks and obscene epithets. I do not know who the author is, and presumably the words were not intended specifically for me. I may suspect that the author had vitriolic feelings when he wrote the words, but this is not the inference that I normally make. He may have written it as a joke, or at random as a kind of verbal doodling, or seriously for someone's attention; I do not know. Accordingly, I do not infer anything at all about the author. I conclude only that inflammatory language is being used—no matter by

whom or for what purpose. Nor do I *infer* this; this language *is* inflammatory, and I do not so much infer this as *recognize* it as such; I make no inferences from it whatever.

We are sometimes in this situation with regard to works of literature. When we see the line, "I fall up on the thorns of life! I bleed," whether or not we know that Shelley wrote it, we can say that the lines are despairing in tone. This is what they are, and they remain so even if neither Shelley nor the reader was despairing. We simply recognize them as lines of a certain character, the word "despairing" refers to a property of the poem, not of its author. Often what may first pass as inductive inference to propositions about the author is not only not an inductive inference but is not an inference at all. (Hospers 1960, 43)

6. See, for example, T. E. Jessop's "The Definition of Beauty," in Hospers 1969.

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