4 The Aesthetic Alternative

If we are looking for ways of life in which situations, actions, characters, are evaluated in manners alternative to the moral evaluation, the aesthetic way would have the strongest claim. Strongest, because it has its own standards of better and worse, and because it can be an orientation to the whole range of experience.

To say that there may be an aesthetic way of life is to say more than that ways of life and the actions which happen within them can be appreciated aesthetically. Appreciation is a spectator’s response; the question is not whether a spectator appreciates an action aesthetically, but whether an agent judges what he should do in aesthetic and not in moral terms. ‘Good’ would then be a term of aesthetic approval, and its opposite would be not ‘evil’ but ‘bad’. In a later context I shall be asking whether it is significant that ‘good’ in its moral use has two contraries, ‘bad’ and ‘evil’. Here I am concerned with aesthetic evaluation, and I do not think that ‘evil’ would be used of a work in its aesthetic aspects. Clearly there can be aesthetic expression of evil, and it can make for great art. Such art helps us to understand the evil, but (unless we are confirmed Platonists) understanding need not necessarily imply moral approval or disapproval. Moreover few would want to say that moral considerations should govern aesthetic approvals (Tolstoi was perhaps the last notable artist to say this, though there have been critics, such as Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, who have seen aesthetic criticism in highly moral terms). Aesthetic appreciation is turned towards looking, enjoying, perhaps understanding. What is appreciated may have moral content; indeed serious art, especially in novels, is likely to have this, since it probes into the complexities of human conflicts, achievements, failures, passions. If the artist can help us to see what these are like, he can give us a prolegomenon to morality. Moreover, works of art need not be morally impotent, even if aesthetic judgement of their merit as works of art differs from moral judgement on the kinds of life they are expressing. If they enlarge understanding,
while understanding need not lead to conduct it may do so. Controversies over whether a work of art is obscene show that the distinction between aesthetic appreciation and moral influence cannot always be sharply drawn. Obscenity, especially pornography, is generally produced for commercial exploitation, and so does not necessarily raise a serious argument about a clash between aesthetic and moral values. But that there can be a clash is shown when it is asked whether a genuine work of art may have a 'tendency to deprave'. 'Tendency to deprave' suggests that showing certain passions and practices in pictures, stories or plays will encourage them. The prosecution would have no case at all unless art can be not only morally expressive, but also morally influential. Admiration, horror, fascination, it can be said, not only move people aesthetically but can also affect their behaviour.

It may well be that to separate moral and aesthetic values, looking on works of art as existing in their own right, 'art for art's sake', only happens in a particular state of society. There have been, and probably still are, societies where the work of art is part of a context with a living moral and religious significance. The setting of the Mass is for celebration, not for performance in a concert hall; the picture is an altar-piece directing devotion; the dance is a ritual one. These contexts are religious, and traditional religion is likely to be a carrier of moral values. Moreover, there is an aesthetic aspect not only in works of art, where it predominates, but as an accompaniment in any number of things: getting a shot just right in a game, cooking and serving a meal, importantly in the fittingness of some imaginative actions. The aesthetic aspect, instead of combining with the other aspects, may then be separated off and be made the purpose of the action and its justification. This is probably only possible in a sophisticated society, where the primary activities are less obviously pressing and where moral forms of justification have become suspect.

At one end of the scale there is the refined aestheticism of people, of whom the late Gilbert Murray was an example, who hesitate to make moral judgements, yet want to commend certain kinds of behaviour. This refined type is likely to talk about 'beauty' rather than aesthetic satisfaction, since this latter may come from spectacles of horror as well as of harmony. Perhaps there is an echo here of the Greek conflation of τὸ κάλον, the beautiful, with τὸ ἀγαθόν, the good. The German