XI The Freedom of the Beautiful

The human need to admire and create beautiful objects, events, and utterances is as ancient as the mind, as ubiquitous as language, and as intimate as selfhood. But there is no such thing as a uniformity of taste. On the contrary, the spectrum of what has been judged beautiful at different epochs and places is immensely wide. The non-uniformity of aesthetic judgment is much more impressive than are specific rules that might have guided peoples’ tastes.

It is the thesis of this chapter that there do not, for there cannot, exist universal and stable instructions as to what constitutes consummate beauty, but there is nonetheless an underlying need for it. Among the three principles that can guide man’s behavior, the true is the most restrictive category, the good is less so, while the beautiful pertains to free experimentation with yet undetermined forms, events, and utterances. This freedom is made possible by the capacity of conscious experience to rove unrestricted among, what I shall call, the moods of temporality, and then return, as it were, and tell us about its journey.

1 Timelessness

Earlier we spoke of the Augustinian uncertainty principle according to which the mature experience of nootemporality obtains from the balance of two opposing traits: time felt and time understood. The unresolvability of this opposition is manifest in the existential tension of the mind. This tension is that of individuation, of the self, of a burden from which, as far as one can tell, man has tried to escape as soon as he was able to experience it. One class of such escapes is associated with the ordinary idea of timelessness.

It is an empirical fact that as one leaves the middle region
of the Augustinian balance for altered states of consciousness, a feeling of selflessness, elation, timelessness may be experienced.

For instance, attention may be restricted to an unchanging single item or process. The being-like component of the existential stress is thus emphasized and the becoming-like repressed; the unresolvable conflict of individuation lessens and the Umwelt of the mind becomes one that resembles the eotemporal. The direction of time vanishes; the definition of nowness and selfhood loosen up. This state of elation may be called the *ecstasy of the forest*. It is also possible to restrict one’s attention to ceaseless change, as through the *ecstasy of the dance*. This is another very ancient method of lessening the burden of individuation. The tension of selfhood lessens, the direction of time retreats from consciousness, and the Umwelt of the mind is again eotemporal. Natural selection has taken advantage of these ecstasies and incorporated them into its methods that lure humans into preserving their species. Sexual intercourse offers in one fell swoop the timelessness of the dance, followed by that of the forest, in the *ecstasy of the bower*. The eotemporal Umwelt that often characterizes the state of mind after intercourse easily blends into that decreased level of self-awareness which is the hallmark of sleep.

Religious and political systems have employed many methods that help decrease the unresolvable stresses of selfhood. The promise of lessening tension attracts and keeps people in the fold. The *ecstasy of the chalice* of Christianity is one means whereby the individual may experience an oceanic feeling of eternity and then journey back to self awareness and serve the ideology of the chalice.

Alcohol was the not-so-secret weapon of the slave traders of the 17th and 18th centuries, and has remained that of some of the slave states of the 20th century. Heroin has been a weapon of Oriental militarists of our own epoch, both Japanese and South East Asian. Drug-induced loss of the sense of time has often been regarded as divine in origin. In our secular epoch drug-induced states of consciousness are often described as transcendental. Let me class the plant-produced conditions (whether by chewing, smoking, or fermenting and drinking) as the *ecstasies of the*