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Form or Mere Illusion?*

Tell me, enigmatical man, whom do you love best, your father,
your mother, your sister, or your brother?
I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
Your friends?
Now you use a word whose meaning I have never known.
Your country?
I do not know in what latitude it lies.
Beauty?
I could indeed love her, Goddess and Immortal.
Gold?
I hate it as you hate God.
Then, what do you love, extraordinary stranger?
I love the clouds ... the clouds that pass ... up there ...
up there ... the wonderful clouds!¹

APART FROM ITS AESTHETIC VALUE, the above poem by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) is just as much a document of the social and moral history of the nineteenth century, or of the industrial age, as it is of the history of art and literature. Strictly speaking, it may not include every movement and artist, but it does reflect the spirit of our times. In it you can hear a distinct echo of the whole of contemporary man's spiritual despair, his helplessness, his shortcomings, his unrequited hopes, his longings. The poem is a testament of his failure, or rather the failure of the contemporary social order. And yet, along with these negative aspects, the poem also has traces of man's—or at least the artist's—spiritual labor and struggle against

*“Hai?at yā Nairaṅg-e Naẓar?” from Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī, *Insān aur Admī* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1976), 9–30.

All notes, full names and dates of authors cited were added by the translator.

¹“The Stranger,” from *Paris Spleen 1869*, trans. from the French by Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), 1.

death. However and whatever an artist of the industrial age could affirm is all here in the poem. If he cannot have the whole of life, let it be however much he can have. He does not want to let go until his last breath. Although my purpose here is precisely to critique the shortcomings found in the views of the artists of the last one hundred years, I cannot accept that their creative works promote death or are decadent from an ethical perspective. Likely art does proclaim death, or reflect an individual's or society's weariness with life, or their death wish, nonetheless art does not, indeed cannot, strive for death. Rather, art seeks life, a new balance and harmony, even if complete balance evades its practitioner till the end. After all, he has to face many things that are beyond his control; still he can, at a minimum, point in the direction that might help other seekers along their way. All art is essentially healthy because, although it may talk about sickness, it cannot reject health. Even if an artist is dead inside, the creation of a piece or the very act of creation itself is a harbinger of life. Of course one could say that certain pieces of art are comparatively healthier than others.

When I critique the literature of the last one hundred years, I do not mean to say anywhere that this literature has been harmful to man, or—as some political zealots so often love to say—promotes decadence. I might also make it clear at the outset that the terms used here do not connote what they do among Marxists, who use them in the narrowest possible sense, so soaked in materialism that they give off an odor more offensive than the nauseating aroma rising from rusted copper coins—the reason I have now given up even reading the Communist newspapers. Why waste two annas on them when I can buy a smutty magazine for the same price. When talking about man, literature and literary criticism should at least use a language that reflects the vitality and exuberance of human existence in all its fullness, not economic philosophy.

In Baudelaire's poem we meet a completely new kind of artist—an artist of the industrial age. Different from his predecessors not just in time and milieu, but also in spirit, in that respect it is entirely unprecedented. Wistfulness, despair, sorrow and grief, a sense of life's ephemerality, doubt, rebellion against religion—none of these are new. Never mind Epicurus and other Greek philosophers, even Jeremiah cursed the day he was born, and Habakkuk even went so far as to openly question God's wisdom: "*Thou art* of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity?"² It is not expressions of pain, agony, or rebellion that could possibly distinguish the new artist from the old. Suffering has dogged man

²Habakkuk 1:13 (King James Version).

from eternity and he has always lamented it. Insofar as rebellion against entrenched beliefs and established ways of life is concerned, there are times when the new artist cannot be considered a rebel at all because in those moments his rejection is so profound he has no need to rebel against institutions, laws and traditions that have ceased to exist for him. Why would he want to deny God's existence when he does not believe in his own? He has the ability to become so indifferent to the world around him that the entire universe appears wrapped in a mantle of fog that only now and then flares up for a brief moment. For such a man, "rebel" is an exceedingly inadequate term—it only describes a few moments of his existence, not his whole life.

Rather, the essential difference that sets a new artist apart from an old one is his total disenchantment with not just one or two but with all such things as love and devotion and moral associations. These, at any rate, provided satisfaction to the artist of former times. At least he considered them important enough to rebel against them now and then when they became too oppressive, to make necessary adjustments to them, or conceptualize them in novel ways. The new artist is totally fed up with them, to such an extent that he wants nothing to do even with their destruction, let alone be satisfied by modifying or refashioning them. He desires instead to become indifferent to everything, as though it did not exist. Of course complete indifference is impossible. Moral associations are not just a part of reality, they are a major reality themselves.

Secondly, the new artist does not view himself as a member of society, as a person who lives in the midst of other men, but as a universe unto himself, loath to even think that there might be others around. He does not reflect on how his own attitude might relate to those of others, how the two would interact. He is totally free, he thinks, to settle his affairs on his own and is unwilling to assume responsibility for anyone or anything except himself. He also does not insist that others affirm his right to freedom of choice, he does not want any kind of affirmation from anyone. Period. The word does not even exist in his lexicon. A person asks for affirmation when he thinks the other is important. Likewise the word "right" does not represent him. "Right" is a political and collective concept. The chemical compounds and the laws of the world he thinks he *is* are different and act according to their own logic. (I might mention that I have used the word "affairs" in the widest possible sense, which includes everything from the concept of good and evil to fornication with hotel maids.)

Without the prompting of some fiery "Progressive" provocateur, I know that this concept of the individual, even if not entirely erroneous, is

nonetheless inadequate. Man may well be a universe unto himself, but this universe keeps colliding with other similar universes every instant. Well, the new artist is not unaware of this collision, or the complexities that come in its wake. Indeed, he knows them intensely and suffers tragically from the knowledge—all of which is well beyond Marx and Engels, who, after all, are pamphleteers. If the literary reformer Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) had felt the crushing intensity of such knowledge for even ten minutes, he would have started to vomit blood. It does not cost much to expound on good and evil from the cozy corridors of Harvard.

Now, count all the things Baudelaire cannot love: first of all, “God,” but do not overlook his scathing jibes about the materialism, rationalism, and atheism of the industrial age. When he says that he hates God, the intended offenders are the god and religion of the capitalist society that exploits them to promote its own interests. Next comes “country.” Baudelaire is fed up with that too, because country is that strange place where ordinary bread is called “cake,” a piece of which drives men to kill one another. Such men know nothing of love, whether of one’s mother, father, brother, sister, or friends, because the love of money has poisoned even the mainsprings of life, leaving them without their former elixir. Baudelaire, of course, cannot love money, especially money acquired dishonestly. The fact is, the pursuit of money has gripped society so relentlessly that it craves nothing else. Every other ideal has lost its meaning, has actually become downright dangerous. Such a society, especially a Marxist society, looks upon the artist as some strange, wild creature that poses a threat to the social order. According to Baudelaire, if some poet asked for a couple of bourgeois to tend his stable, people’s jaws would drop in wonder, horror and wrath; conversely, if a bourgeois asked for a plate of poet-meat shish kabobs, no one would so much as bat an eyelid in surprise, in fact this would be considered something quite appropriate. (And come to think of it, our Progressives would not even balk at eating a poet alive.) Why, as Baudelaire says in one of his poems, even a poet’s mother, let alone anyone else, curses him for having been born from her womb. Another basic relationship, sex and love, has also been poisoned for the artist by the unrestrained worship of Mammon. In one poem Baudelaire dreams of being surrounded by a crowd of filthy, grubby, fiendish men who are poking fun at him while their sweetheart is clinging to them in an intimate embrace; she is kissing them and having sex with them just to spite him. Another example of the new poet’s sexual relations: After much pining and waiting, Tristan Corbière (1845–1875) spots his ladylove (likely some restaurant waitress) in the street one day. A beaming Corbière sets out behind her looking so disheveled that she glances

back, puts two centimes in his hand and smiles. Time was when love was the essence of life. Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), on the other hand, considered women merely wild animals who trapped their mate and moaned with them—all for a three-minute orgasm! He congratulates himself that he did not become a slave to his desire like everyone else; rather, he resisted it and never embraced or kissed a woman in his life.

Such then is the condition of the new artist. Regardless what color or form attachment might assume, he is altogether free of it,³ not because of some lofty purpose or monkish self-denial, but rather because freedom from attachment gives his spirit a sense of exaltation. He is compelled to dissociate himself from all human attachments and moral considerations because materialist values have corrupted the very institutions that are the manifestations of these basic relationships. The new artist sees everything around him poised against goodness, truth, and beauty—his true gods. The contemporary situation disillusiones him to the point where he feels obliged to distance himself even from the very subjects of his poetry, the wellspring of his art, namely, human and moral relationships. He cannot accept the values that are current and popular in his society, and lacks the power to have society accept his own. Hence he looks at everything with skepticism and flees from anything that might be dubbed good or bad, true or false. His other affliction is that in spite of his unflinching attachment to his own values, he is not so insensitive or unimaginative as to consider them necessarily above or superior to every other. So, he tries, in whatever way he can, to steer clear of the conundrum of values altogether and spare himself the need to answer questions about the truth or falsehood, the goodness or badness of anything, perhaps because his answers might not satisfy even him. His tendency to doubt and his uncertainty might appear to be signs of moral decay, but if new artists lack the self-assurance of sheep and cattle, there is at least one man who does not feel sorry for that at all.

The spiritual problems and the disillusionment of these artists cannot be brushed aside nonchalantly. Nevertheless, a purely artistic problem does arise: a person may abandon ethical norms, but is it possible to create a piece of art without such norms—whether it is conscious or unconscious is beside the point? There has to be some kind of connection and relationship between the parts and the whole of an artistic work, as there should be a relationship between the work and those it affects. Further, this relationship must be rooted in some standard.

³Allusion to a line from the Persian poet Ḥāfiḡ: *Ze bar ĉe raṅg ta'alluq pezīrad āzādast.*

Not just psychological, this can even turn into a biological problem. However, looking at it merely from the artist's vantage, we would call it a major artistic snag. The concept of "art for art's sake" was introduced to solve it. Here, too, I shall vehemently deny that "art for art's sake" is an ethically decadent concept. I have already shown above how even trifling moral relationships have become impossible for the artist. The concept "art for art's sake" is not so much a disengagement from morality as it is the pursuit of a new kind of morality for the artist—however imperfect and riddled with flaws this might be. Goodness and truth are discussable concepts and can be laid out rationally with appreciable success. Then too, society plays a major role in formulating standards of goodness and truth and no one is immune from contact with the material aspects of these standards in their everyday life. They are overwhelmingly collective in nature and derive their legitimacy to a large extent from their common acceptance. Argumentation, forcing others to accept one's views or accepting theirs—such things looked quite absurd and meaningless, perhaps even immoral to the new artists. Their artistic problem compelled them to take recourse in "beauty"—the third element of the ethical trinity. "Beauty" tends to be a comparatively more individualistic concept, has to do more with sensory experience than intellect. Hence one can proclaim its reality with greater authenticity and certitude. It also does not leave much room for discussion.

The demise of all other ethical relationships drives the new artist to cling to "beauty" as his last resort, but beauty too can have a commonly accepted standard, which, to the new artist, is reason enough to consider it false. Hence, he is loath to assist in establishing anything at all, unwilling to accept such responsibility. He does not believe in permanent values, or if anything, only in their relativity. Consequently, he does not volunteer to offer any enduring standard of beauty. Baudelaire loves the clouds that flit away. In other words, the beauty the new artists subscribe to is indeterminate, it keeps changing—not some timeless concept but only the product of a fleeting impression.

The final touchstone of art thus becomes purely aesthetic. Although the new artist continually says that beauty and truth are one and the same thing, in the end these words reveal yet another turmoil.

When the Greeks proclaimed beauty and truth and goodness a unity, they stressed all three equally, not beauty alone. Just as truth could produce balance and harmony in formal relationships, likewise truth as a concept, or the moment when truth is achieved, should also be beautiful. By contrast, the new artists have been too impatient to rid themselves of truth and goodness and disengage beauty from the trinity. They have not

been able to see how truth and goodness could remain pure and uncorrupted in a greed-ridden society. Whenever they declare the unity of truth and beauty, what they strive for is to somehow escape responsibility for thinking about or setting up standards for truth and goodness. In spite of this vociferous declaration, their effort has been concentrated mainly on turning art into an aesthetically satisfying collection of formal relationships in which ethical or unaesthetic elements carry no significance. In other words, conferring an objective status on art that cannot be subjected to the tribunal of ethical standards, exactly like a tree or a stone that cannot be considered good or bad from a moral point of view. All one can do is accept their existence.

After all, psychologically and biologically a definitive and total objectivity is not accessible in art. Not, at least, until a chemical change occurs in man or a work of art is born from his stomach like a baby. Anyway, alongside the individualism and subjectivity of the new artist, one also notices a tendency to make a work of art as much as possible an objective element based on aesthetic and technical considerations and increasingly free of ethical standards. Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) presents the concept of “pure poetry.” Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) proposes that poetic lines should be music, first and foremost and maximally, anything else is “just literature.” “Impressionism” makes its appearance in painting; it does not look at life as a whole and is satisfied with merely a fleeting impression, which makes technique paramount. In the novel, Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) clamors for the independence of art and its superiority, and very nearly turns it into a religion requiring monkish sacrifices and exercises. Subject is irrelevant to him, expression is everything. And there are the Naturalists. Although not exactly lovers of art, they do study man with the impersonal objectivity of a scientist dissecting an animal. Naturally what a scientist attempts to discover does not come within the purview of ethical standards. So, in foisting the objectivity of science on art, the Naturalists, too, in fact, attempt, even if unconsciously, to distance themselves from ethical issues and judgments.

In short, the end result of all the theorizing and conceptualization of this period was that artists, exhausted from the ethical struggle and despairing of success, wanted to somehow disengage the concept of beauty from those of truth and goodness. They could not see any way for honest artistic creation except through such disengagement. Since truth and goodness are such important concepts that they could not be set aside, they talked themselves into believing that beauty inherently included the other two.

It is likely that assigning beauty an independent and supreme status

would not pose great harm to artists in a well-balanced society. There, concepts of truth and goodness are clearly recognizable to its people and are firmly anchored in their hearts. The bonding between an artist and the people is close and durable. The artist continually derives new life from it and the values of his nation are fused into his blood. All this prevents his art from being crippled by any subjective belief regarding beauty because the creation of art is, to a large extent, an unconscious act. Conversely, if balance and harmony are missing in society, classes are continually at each other's throats. No single accepted and authentic way of life is in place; the relationship between the artist and the people has snapped and he is left to fall back on his own spiritual resources. He is tired of the unending moral battle, is apprehensive of all moral judgments. During such a period, to place one's trust in the independence of beauty and the freedom of art is tantamount to setting out on a voyage across the Pacific holding on to a plank, if not a straw. But let's not forget that the artist is courting all these dangers for the sake of a higher morality and truth. When Baudelaire says, "To recriminate, to protest, and even to demand justice—isn't that being something of a *Philistine* oneself?"⁴ surely he is proclaiming the independence of art and the artist, but even more, he is revealing his desperate struggle to save himself from the filth of industrial morality.

It is possible that conceptually the higher morality was not fully evident to these artists. Still they did think that they might catch a glimpse of it if they could escape the tentacles of established morality. I admit that it is a highly negative emotion, but, as the proverb goes: once bitten, twice shy. Exposed to the lies of their times so frequently and so profoundly, they had come to fear their own selves, let alone others, which in itself is a higher moral principle. Only a few artists have the capacity to follow it.

Another tendency of the new artists: According to the concepts I have mentioned in the foregoing, while a finished artistic piece does effectively become an objective and aesthetic phenomenon and rises above moral considerations, it still has to deal with the problem of "subject." "Subject" may or may not be important in itself, but an artistic work must necessarily have one, more so in literature. Even if moral reflections and views are

⁴"Théophile Gautier," in *Baudelaire as Literary Critic: Selected Essays*, introd. and tr. by Lois Boe Hyslop and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), p. 156. The French original: "Récriminer, faire de l'opposition, et même réclamer la justice, n'est-ce pas s'emphilistiner quelque peu?" ("Théophile Gautier" (1859)), in *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec, rev. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 678. Sincere thanks to Anis Memon who located both the original and the translation.

set aside, there is no escape from making emotions and feelings the subject. The problem with emotions is that they instantly bring us back to moral standards. The end result was that whereas earlier it was just moral considerations, now the new artists even became leery of emotions. Are emotions worth having? Bereft of a moral concept all five of man's senses become defunct, to say nothing of his mind or spirit. The twentieth-century artist increasingly senses that his emotions and feelings have all died. (I for one feel that WWII has not wrought any major change and the problems of the artist remain unresolved.) The expression of this death, its causes and consequences, are all laid out here in these four lines of T. S. Eliot (1888–1965):

I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
 Since what is kept must be adulterated?
 I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
 How should I use them for your closer contact?⁵

Although “feelings” abound, indeed crushingly, in post-1930 English poetry their reality has also been graphically exposed by Eliot, who says:

Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
 With pungent sauces, [...] ⁶

Thus the artist fears that emotions are threatened with extinction and doubts the value of those few that are still left. Just as he refuses to accept values from others, he hesitates to force his own emotions on others, so much so that he does not even want to accept any responsibility for his emotions—the reason objectivity is accorded such exaggerated emphasis. Another aspect of giving a wide berth to emotions is the artist's relentless disagreement with society in the matter of values, which drives him to think himself, if not superior to, at least different from others. Indeed he consciously strives to keep himself aloof and different from them. This passion assumes such crazy proportions as to make a Baudelaire declare that he boils children and eats them.⁷ The artist does not want to resemble the degenerated lot in anything at all. If others have emotions, he should have none. He should be above such things as gods and should not be affected by them. And even if he is affected and does have emotions, they

⁵“Gerontion,” lines 57–60.

⁶*Ibid.*, lines 63–64.

⁷This is exactly how Askari has it; however, I was unable to trace it back to any of Baudelaire's poems. Anis Memon pointed out that a somewhat similar line about “boiling and eating my heart” (“*Je fais bouillir et je mange mon cœur*”) occurs in a poem “Les Ténèbres,” in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

should not be revealed to others—which is the chief characteristic of the Baudelairean “Dandy.”

Wariness of emotions led the new artist to adopt one of two methods: either forage for totally new and vague emotions no one had experienced before and present them as riddles so the degenerates would not even suspect they had anything to do with them—a method opted for by Verlaine and Mallarmé; or, alternatively, try to rid oneself of subject and meaning altogether. So the notion was floated that, like music, poetry too should be free of associations. Listening to a composition, a person hardly thinks about the fact that a particular sound is from a partridge or a quail, one hears it as pure sound and enjoys the manner in which it is arranged and harmonized with other sounds. Poetry should aspire to that so when it is heard it does not call for meaning, and sound alone provides complete gratification. Flaubert tried to free fiction, or prose, of semantic baggage. He felt the present time was hardly congenial for the production of great literature. It was so sordid, filthy, and grotesque that a person could not even conceive of thinking about it and beauty together. And yet the present was the only time the new artist could draw on for his subject. The only recourse left now was to push the filth and ugliness of his subject as far away as possible, or at least neutralize it through his art and style. This does away with the importance of subject itself and makes style paramount. Can one not create a work without subject merely by writing? Flaubert’s fear of his own emotions is worth examining. On the one hand, all his life he kept saying that his novels amounted to nothing. They sought to represent the middle class—a trite and vulgar subject. If he could find a subject he liked, he would be able to do a lot. On the other hand, he longed to write a novel that had no subject, one that survived on the strength of pure style. So we find a strange phenomenon during this period: artists bending over backwards to create without any substance.

This is an absurd struggle, especially in literature. While in music and painting it is perhaps possible to a degree to confine a work to the domain of aesthetics (after all sounds, lines, and colors do possess some measure of autonomous objectivity; one can arrange lines in a way that may not result in great art, but their arrangement does appear pleasing, which may be enough), words do not have such independence or such autonomy as lines and sounds. Words are not pure sounds, and neither are they natural. They are an invention of man and they are invented for a specific purpose. They are signs. They guide the mind to a particular thought and a specific meaning. Making them “pure” means divesting them of their semantic content, which would obliterate all distinction between words and sounds. That is to say, literature would meld into music and disappear. Thus literature, if it must keep its status intact, cannot rid itself of subject and meaning. Literature without meaning is a rarity

indeed.

Anyway this strategy was unworkable in practical terms, but at least it did help crystallize one thing for the artist: that style and operative design were the essential elements. So he started worshipping “form” and exaggerated its importance so much that Paul Valéry (1871–1945) was even prompted to say the real object of an artist’s endeavor was the pursuit of the proper technique. If he could only find that, he did not even have to create anything. The artist no longer looked for emotions, subjects or anything else. All he cared about was “form”—the sole object of his pursuit. If, however, he is called upon to define “form,” he enumerates purely aesthetic characteristics and says that harmony between the parts and the whole is essential for objective beauty. When he does mention “form” he means thereby a plethora of things, as if “form” alone stands for the entire creative piece. For him then, form is such a magical entity that its achievement subsumes acquisition of everything else—emotions, thoughts, subjects, you name it. But he would never admit that he has packed so many elements into his concept of form, rather he will insist on its being a purely aesthetic concept. And he pursues this purely aesthetic concept with such relentless zeal that it is reminiscent of a mystic’s eagerness for union with God. One might even say that this pursuit of form has in fact become a kind of mysticism in itself, with all the attendant ecstasy and agony.

Considering it from a practical and not merely theoretical perspective, can a concept of form in which it is equated with objective relations whose sole purpose lies in aesthetic gratification ever be real, especially in literature? Of course a beautiful form can be created by the arrangement of sounds in a musical composition, but how would such a melding of sounds be possible in a novel five hundred pages long, one that also shows the process of growth and development and entertains from beginning to end? Even if this were somehow possible, would you define the resulting piece as literature or music? A major limitation of literature is that words cannot be shorn of their meanings. Inescapably, you will have to devise two kinds of arrangements, two separate blueprints: words arranged according to sound and words arranged according to meaning. This would be like two forms rolled into a single piece: physical and semantic. As I said, it is impossible to maintain the arrangement of sounds over five hundred pages, but a semantic form can. In a work of art the physical form would inevitably depend on the semantic structure, and one cannot imagine meanings without reference to values. The criteria of beauty and ugliness alone cannot help determine the semantic arrangement of words; the concepts of good and evil, truth and falsehood will inevitably intrude in such a determination. Amazing— isn’t it—that through a circuitous excursus one is again confronted with the very object he had

tried to escape! An artist is condemned to remain saddled with morality whether he likes it or not.

An amusing example: Lately some painters have claimed they want to completely free colors of any underlying associations, quite like musical sounds that are free and pure. Consequently they draw a cube or a rectangle, chop it up into big sections and small, coloring one section yellow, another blue, and still another white. Interpretation: yellow represents heaven, or pure joy; red stands for hell, or pure torment, and so on and so forth. "He had hardly flapped his wings before he was captured again!" (*Uṛnē na pā'ē thē ke griftār ham bū'ē.*) Truly, morality is such a snare, and so close to the nest that one cannot flee it.

Morality is also indispensable for the fulfillment of form because in nature every form is invested with a certain purpose. Nature's laws determine the form of everything. It is the same in a work of art. Its semantic form is unattainable without an underlying moral concept. Although James Joyce (1882–1941) is faulted for his aestheticism and remoteness from life, the fact is he has expressed reality quite audaciously. His artist Stephen considers art an embodiment of the concept of beauty. He too wants to create art but has not yet succeeded. Perhaps he still lacks any concept of beauty. Toward the end of the novel Stephen says he is going to mold the as-yet-unborn conscience of his generation in the crucible of his soul. What this means is that he is searching for a concept of goodness and truth, and through it hopes to arrive at a concept of beauty. Beauty too is born only from conscience. One cannot even dream of beauty in isolation from conscience. Ezra Pound (1885–1972) went even so far as to say that "form" was not at all necessary for "art." For instance, he rejects it in Homer's work, i.e., what it has come to connote in the nineteenth century.

Whether necessary or not, pure aesthetic form is entirely meaningless in literature. It is a mirage. Attainable only to the extent that fairies are attainable. The torment Flaubert suffered in its pursuit is of course an object lesson for all. But for the Progressives and other enemies of literature, one thing is quite disturbing about artists, namely, there is no objection that you can raise that they are not already aware of. Flaubert has variously said that the greatness of exceptional writers does not rest on art or style alone. They also write quite badly now and then. In spite of that, or perhaps even because of that, it does not negatively affect their greatness. After accepting all this he again insists art and style are the last resort of second-raters like himself. He went through so much agony and emotional suffering in his craze for "art" that he cried. Sometimes he said that the demon of art was eating away his body and soul; sometimes he cried out, "Art, Art, bitter deception, nameless phantom which gleams and

lures us to our ruin!”⁸ He knew all too well that what he needed for energy and the power to create was not “style” but a new conception of life, a new standard of morality. Waiting for a subject of his own liking meant only searching for a new order of values. He had witnessed the force with which life erupts into being in his *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and found it exhilarating for both body and soul, but how might he accept the path life had already taken and how might he be in accord with it? Flaubert searched for this “how?” all his life long and never did find it. Although he saw a glimpse of this “accord” in *A Simple Soul*, it failed to satisfy him permanently. He continued to search for a new meaning, though he did not dare—in view of the reasons I have given at the beginning of this essay—to admit it. What he was looking for was a “new morality,” what he kept telling himself he needed was “art.” This one shortcoming was the root-cause of all his spiritual torment.

This more or less holds for other artists too. They are looking for “meaning” in the guise of “form.” Life in the industrial age has neither face nor form, and the organic connecting tissue between the parts and the whole has snapped. Life and what it depends on no longer have an identifiable purpose. Consequently, the meaning is gradually fading away. So long as life had purpose, meaning, harmony and form, artists did not have to strive consciously for them. Today when these qualities have disappeared and the artist lacks the courage to restore them to society, he inevitably turns toward “art” in the hope of finding a substitute. Since the sense of harmony lacking in real life becomes possible in a work of art, he assumes that such a work is an entity apart from life and he is loath to apply life’s values to it. Since the milieu fails to provide life with a standard of values and an established order, he demands the principles of artistic creation and the order of its elements from aesthetics. For instance, an already established structure was available to earlier novelists. A man falls in love with a woman, difficulties arise, finally these are resolved, they get married, and live together happily ever after. Today no such structure of life is available. Every life assumes a new form or remains formless like many other lives. Before, as soon as the novel ended our interest in its protagonist waned. We assumed that nothing important was likely to happen later. The protagonist would live the rest of his life like other people. At the end of modern short stories and novels, however, the protagonist discovers a completely new direction and sets off, and even if that is not the case, he finds that his life has no fixed point of arrival, it is

⁸The original French reads: “O l’art, l’art, déception amère, fantôme sans nom qui brille et qui vous perd...” (letter to Ernest Chevalier (26 Dec. 1838)), in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 5 vols. ((Paris: Conard, 1910), vol. 1, p. 39). I am grateful to Anis Memon who located the quote and also translated it.

an interminable journey. In other words, a writer can end a novel wherever he wishes, or write several sequels to it if he so chooses. Life does not tell him where to begin and end. It does not provide any meaningful form. One is left to fall back on aesthetic form for the sake of the creative work, and form at its purest is not accessible, so the artist is compelled to look for meaning on his own. At this point the search for form becomes a search for morality. Contemporary art is not just a substitute for life, it is in fact a search for life and its meaning. One can say as much about any art, but it applies with special cogency to new art. As such, new art holds great importance, this because other methods to find life have not been too successful and the job of finding and delivering meaning to man has devolved on the artist.

It would be a grievous mistake to assume that the artist is not aware of this whole process. Ignorance of himself is not one of the qualities of an artist. Surely he desired to become indifferent to morality, but there was no way he could get rid of it. People complained of Flaubert that he had completely dissociated himself from politics, to which he replied that his problem was that he was too involved in it. He had likewise observed after the French defeat in 1870 that had they cared to read his *Sentimental Education* this would never have happened. Not just Flaubert, the majority of artists were intimately involved—perhaps against their wishes—in politics. Flaubert has summed up their state in just one sentence: democracy is as much a part of man's blood as syphilis bacteria—how can he avoid it?⁹

Some moral concept or other is found in every novel of Flaubert and Joyce, the element that gives them artistic cohesion and beauty. While in Joyce the moral concept remains in the background, the entire growth of a Flaubertian novel hinges on this concept, and its entire dynamism comes from it.

Finally, it would not be out of place to review, however briefly, the relationship between psychology and form. The dawn of new psychology gave new artists the hope that it might ultimately free them from the shackles of morality. Well, it can. If it is assumed that man is a plaything of psychological forces or instincts, he is absolved from bearing responsibility for his actions, which, in turn, also does away with volition and choice. When he has no self-will, the ability to act independently, the whole question of ethical values is wiped out. However, the trouble is, psychology simultaneously does away with form because it renders the formless life in the industrial age even more formless. Psychology equates man with a process that continues interminably until death. The process itself has many branches, such as thinking, feeling, and the like. Inasmuch

⁹The translator was unable to locate the source of this paraphrased quote.

as psychology is not encumbered by morality, such a process has no purpose. Another thing to consider is that every instant of the process is at variance with every other instant and entirely unique, which makes it well nigh impossible to order them into a cohesive form. The process is also devoid of any kind of harmony, so the process alone is the artist's "subject"—a subject that has neither harmony nor form nor morality, being an anathema, cannot be sued for help—in such a case what form can the piece possibly have? Total impressionism is just not possible in literature, and if it were possible at all the resulting piece would be without harmony or form. The writer is forced to isolate one small piece from the process, but where should it begin and where end? Here aesthetics cannot offer any help, nor can psychology. The moment you decide on particular beginning and ending points, immediately the question of preference for one thing over another, the question of values, of moral standards, will arise. This is true in *all* spheres of life, let alone literature. Unalloyed psychology, not tempered with morality, is utterly useless. Without ethics psychology has no meaning. People who do not consider this limitation and do not use caution fall prey to industrial morality in spite of their neutrality. For instance, a psychologist will say that Baudelaire had very little self-will, Henry Ford a lot. How so? Baudelaire did not make money, Ford made millions. Only poets know the amount of will it takes to create poetry, the stress and intensity of which may be gauged by the Qur'anic lines: "Had we revealed this Book to the mountain, it would have blown it to pieces."¹⁰ Ford can come nowhere close to bearing such immense pressure. However, these psychologists would hardly say no to someone asking for a plate of shish kabobs made from of an artist's flesh. Even if one escaped the tentacles of industrial ethics, it would be impossible to take one step without the support of some kind of ethics. The Surrealists did try to produce an unalloyed psychological art that was entirely unconscious and free of morality, but even they had to look to Marxism to infuse that art with meaning.

In short, whether aesthetics or psychology, nothing can free an artist from moral responsibility. That his primary objective is the creation of beauty there can be no doubt, but by throwing goodness and truth overboard there is little chance that he will find it. They cooked up the fiction of "form" to somehow escape morality but all their roaming brought them back to where they had started.

In this essay I have mentioned a certain tendency among contemporary artists and shown their ultimate failure to shirk morality. This tendency is more theoretical than practical. Concomitantly, among these very

¹⁰Had We sent this Qur'an down on a mountain, you [Muhammad] would have seen it humbled and split asunder through fear of God (Qur'an 59:21).

same artists one finds an intense desire, the likes of which cannot be found in politics, philosophy or other branches of human activity, to analyze the moral condition of their times and construct a new morality. If they hesitate to express moral opinions and views, this too is a sign of their regard for honesty and truth. The fact is, without claiming to be prophets and despite admissions of their powerlessness, they have radically changed the life of a sensitive man of their times, which is nothing less than a great revolution. Is it not enough that they never for a moment practiced hypocrisy or lied about themselves?

A person looks in vain among the greatest moral teachers for the revolutionary ethics that lie behind this one line of Baudelaire: “—*Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!*” (“—Hypocrite reader!—You!—My twin!—My brother!”¹¹). Whatever the artists have done during the past one hundred years is not at all shameful for art and literature. On the contrary, their creations give fresh evidence of truth, power, and the importance of art. They have shown that while others can be bought with the glitter of money, big positions, or tempting colorful ideals, an artist, so long as he is an artist, is above buying and selling because the greatest reality for him is his senses, which do not lie. In the end the cry “Art for Art’s Sake” is a moral fact and helps morality.

Whenever a political or moral upheaval takes place, I lament, “If only people had read Baudelaire!” □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

¹¹Translated by Roy Campbell, from Marthiel & Jackson Matthews, eds., *The Flowers of Evil* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 4–5.