Semiotic Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education

Monroe C. Beardsley

Temple University

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MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

Professor of Philosophy
Temple University
Because of the dearth of system, as well as of confidence with which I enter upon this discussion, it will be helpful to me, at least, to set up an initial framework for it. Not that the framework itself is exempt from critical examination; but where it does not go seriously wrong, it may justify itself by sorting and relating the various kinds of questions that will turn up. One of my difficulties is that I have been reading (partly re-reading) my way through the six extant volumes of the Journal of Aesthetic Education, and perhaps I have been reading too fast. This is an excellent journal, admirably edited by Ralph Smith, and it provides a rich sense of the range of questions involved in aesthetic education, as well as many and varied answers to them. But too large a dose can be bewildering. Unless I adopt a simplified schema, even if it is somewhat ad hoc, I can't see how to draw out a few of the questions for special attention, without getting entangled in the rest.

I

The core, or central, or minimal artistic enterprise consists in a person's bringing into being an object or event with the idea of offering it, to others or to himself, for aesthetic apprehension. This is not, of course, the only core-concept that has been proposed (it contrasts radically with that projected in the images of Shelley's skylark and the tower of ivory), but it is, I think, the one that best enables us to account for the important features of the artistic enterprise, in its most complex manifestations.

This core-concept analyzes at once into two complementary activities, which are conveniently referred to as "artistic" and "aesthetic." (1) There is a making or creating. How minimal this activity may be and still be regarded as artistic, is a question that much discussion has left open—as I leave it here. I would want to insist that it consist in a little more than merely picking up a stone or washing its dirt off—perhaps a careful polishing would be enough. And one who causes something to be made, by giving directions, I am also willing to call a maker. (2) There is the (actual, or at least anticipated) apprehension of the work made, i.e., someone's perceiving it or having it (e.g., in reading) as an intentional object. Innumerable disputes also center on the distinction between aesthetic and other possible sorts of apprehension, and again I leave matters open. In using the term "aesthetic apprehension," I do not wish to suggest a special mode of perception or imagination, but only a narrowing of attention to certain features of the work rather than others, plus a willingness to engage one's perceptual, emotional, and intellectual powers in grasping those features. Which sorts of features are to count in characterizing aesthetic apprehension I do not try to say now; I do take it for granted that

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a reasonable distinction can be made.3

The concept of making something for aesthetic apprehension (to use this abbreviated formula) does not pretend to provide a definition of "work of art." But it does provide a sufficient condition, and hence a start on a definition, or at least what might be called a "definitional account," of the concept of work of art. We are not limited here to good or great works of art, so we may feel secure in claiming (what indeed may strike you as all too obvious) that anything made for aesthetic apprehension has as good a claim to being called a work of art as anything can have. Of course, expanding contemporary usage sanctions the labelling as art works of many things that lie beyond the core-concept. These broader concepts of art can be constructed, however, on the basis of the core-concept.

For example, to deal with many of those humanly-made objects in the world that we aesthetically apprehend, we must take account of mixed motives. The idol may have been mainly designed for religious purposes. If some concern for later aesthetic apprehension entered into the maker's motivation, along with other aims, then his making fits the core-concept, as it is to be understood. But suppose in a particular case the maker takes no interest at all in future aesthetic apprehendings, but is wholly wrapped up in his religious or magical or political purpose. Nevertheless, the work might belong to a genre that has been established and acknowledged as a species of artwork; and then this particular work can, in an extended sense, be said to be an artwork, as belonging to that genre, (Once a society produces sculptural works of art, all its sculptures can be placed in the same class, whatever the motive of their making.) Then there are those works that are made, not for aesthetic apprehension, but to make a point about aesthetic apprehension or about art itself—Dada jokes, found objects, "ready-mades," the singer who appears on stage but never sings a note while the accompaniment is played. We can easily extend the concept of art to these objects, too, if we wish. In any case, they can only be understood in relation to, as dependent upon, the core artistic activity.

As the artistic may go beyond the aesthetic in this way, so the aesthetic goes beyond the artistic. But again we can best understand the aesthetic apprehension of nature, I think, as an extension to nature of the activity involved in the core-concept of the artistic enterprise. I do not follow Richard Wollheim in holding that to take the "aesthetic attitude" toward nature is to "regard it as a work of art."4 Nor, would I try to argue that nature could not be appreciated in an aesthetic way before the artistic enterprise evolved,5 though the appearance of humanly-made objects made especially for (or partly for) aesthetic apprehension must greatly have facilitated the aesthetic apprehension of nature. I mean only (and this is one of Wollheim's points) that we gain our clearest understanding of what aesthetic apprehension is from its role in the artistic enterprise, so it makes sense to identify and discriminate this kind of apprehension by reference to works of art.

To complicate the model, we may now introduce a third figure (or, rather, a third role, since it is roles rather than persons we are considering): the critic. But there are really two critics (i.e., two critical roles) to be distinguished: the coach

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and the commentator. The critic as coach (or counsellor, or consultant) addresses himself to the artist: what he offers is a report on what has gone well or ill in the making, and recommendations for improvements, either in the work already made or in works yet to come. This role poses interesting questions about its scope and limits and suitable procedures, but I pass them by at present. The critic as commentator (a rather lame figure of speech, I confess) addresses himself to the receiver of the artwork; his function is to assist apprehension. Taking the work as given, he asks what can be said about it that is both true and useful from the point of view of one who is concerned to make his apprehension of it—his perception of its form and qualities, his grasp of its meanings, his realization of its values—as complete as possible. Of course, critics may perform many other useful tasks (our model is still highly schematic), but talking helpfully about works of art—and, we may want to add, about natural and technological objects in which someone might take, or be induced to take, an aesthetic interest—is the central and basic one.

There enters now a third pair of figures, paralleling the artist-receiver pair and the coach-commentator pair: these are the educators. The artistic educator is concerned with the production of works of art—he essays to develop powers of art creation. His relationship to the critic-coach may be marked in different ways: in one sense, coaching can be considered one of the artistic educator's procedures, along with many others; in another sense, the educator could be said to be concerned with the development of lasting dispositions, i.e., talents, skills, capacities, drives, etc., while the coach is concerned with the improvement of particular works or particular types of work. The aesthetic educator on the other hand, is concerned with the reception of works of art—he essays to develop those powers that are requisite for their successful apprehension. Again, we must not forget that many other functions or goals can legitimately be assigned to the aesthetic educator, but I take this one as the heart of his enterprise. The role of critic-commentator can be subsumed under that of aesthetic educator, since a substantial part of aesthetic education consists of doing criticism. If the role of the critic is more narrowly conceived, he is set in complementary opposition to the aesthetic educator: the more fully the aesthetic educator does his job, we might say, the less there is for the critic to do, since the perfectly equipped and qualified receiver would have no need of special assistance in the apprehension of any work.

It is one of the several unfortunate features of this model that I overlook important distinctions between the concepts of learning and teaching, which are rather subtly related, but not fully coordinate. I do not identify education with schooling, but include under it processes of learning even when not connected with teaching.

II

If we think of aesthetic education in the way I have suggested, a number of important questions arise, some of them no doubt belonging to experimental psychology and related disciplines, but others philosophical and (more specifically) aesthetic. Our choice of underlying principles and of basic methods in
aesthetic education will depend in part on what we know (and we still know too little) about psychological and physiological mechanisms involved, say, in perceiving musical gestalts, in reading spatial relationships within a representational painting, in assigning expressiveness to movements of a dance, in being troubled by the proportions of a building, in construing highly elliptical modern poetry, etc. But our principles and methods will also depend on assumptions about fundamental features of works of art and their place in the whole economy of culture. For example, on some assumptions, aesthetic apprehension might reduce to, or consist largely of, appreciation, or even just emotional response; but on other assumptions, it might be largely a cognitive activity. It is true that unless the powers we acquire or strengthen in the course of aesthetic education include the grasp of some general relationships, the employment of principles, the capacity to order complex data, the understanding of the significance and value of what is going on, we can hardly be said to be dealing with education at all—rather than, say, training. I think we would want to say the same for political education, moral education, and religious education. But some writers have spoken of "visual education," as a part of aesthetic education, in a way that suggests that they are concerned almost exclusively with sharpening perceptual practice, and very little with what could be called thought, theory, or understanding.

My hint of an analogy between aesthetic education and other sorts of education may provoke doubts whether they are all made coordinate species by the same principium divisionis. I believe they are. The activities are different, of course, and the features of the world toward which they are directed are also different; but in each case there is a distinctive activity (or set of activities) and there is a distinctive feature (or set of features). But don't ask me to say right now what political, moral, and religious education are; I have enough problems of my own.

What is needed to ground aesthetic education is a general way of looking at the arts. Perhaps it should be called a theory, though any general proposition about all works of art, of whatever sort, that is not an analytic consequence of a definition is likely to be false. The sort of philosophical principle I have in mind would say what basic category works of art generally, or characteristically, or at their best, belong to—what is to be looked for in any work of art and can probably be found, at least in some degree. Such a principle is the semiotic view of art, by which I mean, the categorization of works of art as, in the broadest sense, signs—that is, carriers of meaning and/or reference. In the twentieth century, there has been a recurrent and serious effort to establish this semiotic view, and thus to subsume aesthetics under the general theory of signs (or symbolic functioning). The work of Charles Morris and of Susanne Langer has had a permanent influence on the course of aesthetic inquiry, has won firm supporters, has provoked a good many critics, and has failed to convince most aestheticians.

The central idea common to both Morris and Langer was that a work of art is (or can be, and if it is a good one must be) an iconic sign, in the sense of Peirce, i.e., a sign that refers in virtue of its similarity to something else. Nelson
Goodman has now given us a new semiotic theory, far more rigorous and systematic, careful and precise, than the iconic signification theory. His book is so difficult, in its terse compactness, and so full of fresh ideas about the arts, that it must be discussed and re-discussed from various points of view, in various contexts. I am concerned here only with one of the main strands of argument in the book, to examine its cogency and to explore briefly its possible implications for aesthetic education.

There is no question that Goodman's work is a substantial improvement over the iconic signification theory, which has always been in difficulties: for example, the difficulty of providing an account of relevant similarity, and the difficulty of explaining how something can signify merely in virtue of similarity.

The art that has always been the most troublesome for any form of semiotic theory is the art of instrumental music (including music in which the human voice is used solely as an instrument for producing musical sounds, not for speaking). In fact, the number of books and essays written even in the past few decades to show that music has, in some manner of speaking, a "meaning" or a "sense" is itself testimony to the difficulty of the task, as well as to its temptingness. The latest book that has come to my hand is by Wilson Coker, who treats musical figures and phrases as "gestures," and finds in music not only reference to psychological states and physical processes but also logical constants, such as negation and material implication, and even general truths about life. There is much that is interesting and challenging in Coker's book, but it is based on a straightforward causal concept of meaning, taken over from the early Morris account, and such a concept cannot, I believe, capture the element of rule-guidance that is essential for reference.

III

A symbol scheme, for Goodman, consists of characters, together with rules for combining them into other characters; a character is a class of marks (visual or auditory or other); and a mark is an inscription if and only if it belongs to a character. A symbol system is a symbol scheme "correlated with a field of reference," that is, provided with semantical rules assigning certain characters to certain objects or events as their referents. Goodman does not quite say, *tout court*, that every work of art is either a character in a symbol system or a class of such characters, but he does try to show, in careful detail, how representational paintings and literary works can be so regarded, and how nonrepresentational paintings and instrumental musical works can also be, and (I believe he would claim) usually are, characters or classes of characters.

The basic semantical relationship on this view is reference—a concept Goodman leaves undefined. Its principal species is denoting—also left undefined, but no doubt to be taken in a standard sense. A predicate (called a "description") such as "(is) straight" is said to denote objects or events, that is, to apply them, or to be a label for them; and the members of its extension are said to "comply with" or "possess" their label (p. 144). Goodman's proposed replacement for iconic signification is a kind of reference distinct from denotation, and in fact involving its converse subrelation. When a label $L$ denotes an object $O$,
and \( O \) also refers to \( L \), then \( O \) is said to exemplify \( L \). This happens most familiarly when we give samples: e.g., a page of one of those fascinating but unmanageable books in the furniture store, made up of pieces of carpeting. Such a page both possesses a label and refers to it, according to Goodman, and in this sense exemplifies it.

In ordinary speech it would be more natural to say that what the sample exemplifies is a property, rather than a label—the compound property of having a certain color, pattern, and weave. But this is "pampering prejudice," we are told (p. 89n). Goodman has ontological scruples about speaking of properties rather than predicates or other labels (p. 54)—"No difficulty or obscurity is removed by such pussyfooting" (p. 87n)—but he concedes to "defer to a prissy prejudice" (p. 87): "the swatch [of cloth in a tailor's book of samples] exemplifies only those properties that it both has and refers to" (p. 53).

It is not easy to think of musical compositions as analogues of the cloth-samples or carpet-samples, as though the composer had something to sell besides the work itself. But exemplificationality becomes aesthetically important, in Goodman’s system, as providing an analysis of the concept of expressiveness. When the predicate exemplified by an object is a metaphorical predicate, we have metaphorical exemplification. And expression is metaphorical exemplification. This proposal is not immediately convertible, since other conditions may be necessary for metaphorical exemplification to be expression (see p. 95); but the subsumption holds. This is what we must mean, or would be well-advised to mean, in talking of what musical compositions express, if we wish our talk to be sensible and verifiable. If we would normally speak of music as expressing certain properties—e.g., triumph or triumphantness—we must cultivate self-discipline and try to get used to saying, instead, that what it expresses is the label "(is) triumphant".

Goodman’s account of metaphor deserves a great deal of discussion on its own, but I don’t go into that here. I only wish to question a consequence of insisting on labels (predicates or, Goodman says, pictures or gestures or anything else that can denote) as exemplificanda. It may be that his account of metaphor breaks down unless we are allowed to speak of properties. Here is the dilemma: On the one hand, Goodman insists that

A symbol must have every property it expresses; what counts is not whether anyone calls the picture sad but whether the picture is sad, whether the label "sad" does in fact apply. "Sad" may apply to a picture even though no one ever happens to use the term in describing the picture; and calling a picture sad by no means makes it so (p. 88).

Very well. Notice the crucial distinction between two idioms that might be mistaken for each other: (1) we may say (tenselessly) that a label applies to, that is, belongs to, denotes, is true of something; (2) we may say that the label has been applied to the object, that is, someone has actually called the object so. Presumably the label "(is) triumphant" applied, say, to the beginning of the finale of Beethoven’s C Minor Symphony from the moment of its composition,
whether or not anyone thought to apply it right away. On the other hand, a metaphorical label, Goodman holds, is one that "belongs but did not originally belong" to the object (p. 89); it has to have been transferred from another domain, and, indeed, despite a certain resistance, which we would commonly describe by saying that only people, not symphonic movements, can be "literally" triumphant. But if there was not time (after the C Minor Symphony was finished, in 1807) when the label "(is) triumphant" did not belong to, apply to, its finale, how could there have been a transfer? Even if it was not actually applied by anyone until somewhat later, it always "belonged." Perhaps we should recast the last-quoted remark, and say that a metaphorical label is one that is applied at a certain time to something in a given domain, but was "originally" applied to things in another domain. This way of speaking harmonizes with other statements that Goodman makes about metaphors, e.g., that "metaphorical application of a label to an object defies an explicit or tacit prior denial of that label to that object" (p. 69).

But it is not easy to reconcile with Goodman's defence against a charge:

Yet by explaining expression in terms of the metaphorical exemplification of labels, I have risked the charge of making what a symbol expresses depend upon what is said about it—of leaving what a picture, for example, expresses to the accident of what terms happen to be used in describing the picture, and hence of crediting the expression achieved not to the artist but to the commentator (pp. 87-88)—

followed by the remark already quoted. The dilemma can be avoided by admitting talk of properties as well as labels—for it is properties that belong to things, and it is labels that are metaphorically extended from one domain to another and it is the absence of certain properties that grounds the "denial" of the label. But I am not sure this is the only way out—only that there is a problem here that does not seem to have been completely disposed of in Goodman's theory.

It is more central to my purpose, however, to raise again the sort of skeptical question that philosophers from Philodemus to Hanslick—not to mention a sizeable company of our contemporaries—have raised against various forms of semiotic music aesthetics. Granted that the music is triumphant; it cannot exemplify, or more particularly express, triumph unless it also refers—and what reason could there be for saying that the music refers to anything at all, much less a mere label? (Was Beethoven interested in labels? After all, he never actually did what his friend Schindler says he seriously thought of doing: giving descriptive titles to all his compositions.)

Is it something about the performance of music, its being offered as a public presentation, that converts mere possession of a metaphorical label into exemplification of it? Are there implicit rules of the music-listening game that enjoin us to take possessions as exemplifications? Or should we reason this way: For Goodman a symbol-scheme is a symbol-system only if at least some characters are correlated with a field of reference; but the scheme, once devised, may
provide for many characters that refer to nothing. One painting represents a sunflower; it has a denotation. Another represents a five-leaf clover; it denotes nothing. It is, however, a five-leaf-clover-picture, i.e., that classificatory label applies to it. Similarly, a music score (according to Goodman) denotes all the performances of it. Two different Charles Ives scores that remain forever unperformed thus have the same (null) denotation; yet they are different characters in the musical symbol scheme (see p. 204). Now some music is set to words, and we might say that to set a melody to words, at least normally, is to correlate it with a field of reference, and when those words, or some of them, also metaphorically apply to the music, we have metaphorical exemplification. When Purcell sets the words of Nahum Tate,

Let the triumphs of Love
And of Beauty be shown!

to one of his rousing dotted-quaver melodies, and the melody is itself triumphant, then this melody does exemplify its label. (We must set aside ironic combinations: when Sullivan sets Gilbert's words, "He is an Englishman!" to a triumphant phrase, the music does not exemplify its label but shows the chorus's feeling that that one deserves moral credit for having succeeded in being born British.) Combining all vocal music, including songs and operas and masses—and adding music used for dance and thus correlated with gestural labels—we would have a large body of referential music. If the rest of it remains nonreferential, it can still be said to belong to a symbol system.

I doubt that Goodman would accept this sort of explanation of the exemplificationality of musical works—or, more exactly, of musical performances, to which the metaphorical predicates apply, rather than to works, which are (on Goodman's view) classes of musical performances. I am pretty sure it would by no means satisfy most of those who hold some form of semiotic view of music, for they would defend the referential character of music that has never been set to words or dance-motions. To concede that Beethoven's finale is, so to speak, triumph-music rather than music-referring-to-triumph would be to concede, after all, a great part of what Hanslick (and perhaps, mutatis mutandis, Philodemus) were arguing for. But to go beyond this account would require appealing to some principle of extrapolation that would be hard to make plausible. For example, we might say that once at least one musical passage has been provided with words, and in that way acquired a label, all musical passages to which that label truly applies, or belongs, also refer to it, since it has now, so to speak, been introduced into the "field of reference" and a semantic rule of correlation has been established. But then, even if we could hear that a musical passage is, say, funky, effervescent, or curdled, we could not know that the passage exemplifies the label until we had shown that a text containing that label had been set to some music that possesses the label.

There is also the problem of our aesthetic commerce with nature: how does that fit into the semiotic scheme? The problem would disappear if we could show that our interest in the beauty and expressiveness of natural objects is of a
radically different character from our interest in the beauty and expressiveness of artworks. But if this claim cannot be substantiated, we would have to explain how we manage to treat nature as if its contents belonged to a symbol system.

If Goodman were to adopt the more restricted account I have suggested—which attempts to say how some music becomes referential, though it entails that much expressive music is not—he would have to be a good deal more cautious about some things he says. In keeping with his aim, which is to propose a general framework for further investigation of all kinds of symbol systems, he is sparing of examples, but at one point he cites Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony as an example of a work containing "emphasis on... the expressive" (p. 93)—so he evidently thinks there is reference there.

But he does tend to take too much for granted in his uses of the term "exemplify." I cite four examples of what I have in mind. (1) "Emphasis on the denotive (representative or descriptive), the exemplificatory ('formal' or 'decorative'), and the expressive in the arts varies with art, artist, and work" (p. 93). Doesn't this suggest that a work of art exemplifies all its formal features? A sonata-allegro movement can be used as an example, can serve as an example, of that structure, but surely (when not so used) it doesn't refer to its own structure. (2) "Pictures may exemplify colors..." (p. 234). Perhaps the modal operator saves this remark from falsity, if we take it as elliptical for "are occasionally used to", but it does not save it from misleadingness. Surely a painting does not automatically refer to the colors it has. (3) "A performance of a musical work usually not only belongs to or complies with but also exemplifies the work or score" (p. 236). What is the warrant for saying this? The performer follows the score, but that doesn't make his performance refer to the score. Nor does the fact that his performance is a member of the class of performances that constitutes the work make his performance refer to that class—unless all objects refer to all the classes they are members of. (4) "We saw that fictive representation and also representation-as are matters of exemplification..." (p. 254). But hold on! We saw no such thing. We did read in Chapter 2 that "'Centaur' or a picture of a centaur exemplifies being a centaur-description or a centaur-picture, or more generally, being a centaur-label" (p. 66). But nothing was said (and nothing had been said in Chapter 1) to support this really remarkable claim. Nor can I think what might be said.

There is an air of prestidigitation here, as all these types of exemplification come out of the hat. The semiotic concept of art is shored up by too many gratuitous assumptions. In a passage that evinces Goodman's strong desire to get away from all accounts of the aesthetic that rely on immediacy, ineffability, passivity, mindless feeling, etc., he remarks:

An experience is exemplificational insofar as concerned with properties exemplified or expressed—i.e., properties possessed and shown forth—by a symbol, not merely things the symbol denotes. Counting such exemplificationality as aesthetic may seem a concession to the tradition that associates the aesthetic with the immediate and nontransparent and so insists that the aesthetic object be taken for what it is in itself rather than as signifying
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anything else. But exemplification, like denotation, relates a symbol to a referent, and the distance from a symbol to what applies to or is exemplified by it is no less than the distance to what it applies to or denotes (p. 253).

This is a proper emphasis. Unquestionably Goodman has given a powerful defense of his semiotic concept of art, and a powerful impetus to further work along these important lines. But we cannot establish the pervasiveness of exemplificationality in the arts merely by applying this term freely to cases of predicate-possession.

V. A. Howard, who has been active in Goodman's Harvard Project Zero, has defended the "Exemplification Theory" of music against what he calls "Soft Formalism".

Which argues that statements like "This music expresses sadness" are reducible to metaphorical descriptions of the form "This music is sad" intended to elucidate literally ineffable structural features, falls to explain metaphorical possession of expressed properties, and does not distinguish which among innumerable metaphorical properties of music are expressed: a piece might be described as an "old war horse" not for any of its musical features but because of its frequent performance.13

The first of these two arguments is clearly a case of special pleading; since metaphorical possession is an element of metaphorical exemplification, the exemplificationist is required just as much as the Soft Formalist to explain metaphorical possession—though Goodman seems to be suggesting at one point that no general explanation is called for:

The question why predicates apply as they do metaphorically is much the same as the question why they apply as they do literally. And if we have no good answer in either case, perhaps that is because there is no real question (p. 78).

If there is a problem (and I am inclined to think there is) it is the same for both theories. The second argument also seems applicable to both. Granted that a musical work may be metaphorically an old war horse (or a testimony to the composer's creative genius, or an insult to the ear—to add two other examples given by Howard),14 though it does not express any of these predicates. The Exemplificationist gets around the difficulty, according to Howard, by saying that

A musical work expresses only those metaphorical properties possessed and referred to by the work as a symbol of a certain kind; that is, solely as music.15

If this marks the distinction satisfactorily, we need only substitute "an object" for "a symbol" to suit the Soft Formalist unless he prefers to avoid the term
"express" altogether. Given the logical relationships between the two theories, it seems plain that Soft Formalism cannot have any difficulties that Exemplificationism doesn't have.

IV

If Goodman were to convince us that works of art are always, or typically, or at their best, characters (or classes of characters) in a symbol system, what conclusions would we draw about the significance of art in human life and culture, about the appropriate ways of teaching people to understand the arts, about the relationship between study of the arts and other fields of human knowledge and inquiry? Aesthetic experience, according to Goodman,

involves making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world. (p. 241).

Or, as the report on Harvard Project Zero says,

many tasks in the arts, like many in science and daily life, involve the processing (i.e., identification, application, interpretation, revision, invention) of symbols.16

Learning to recognize that a picture is in three-point perspective, and to read one figure as roughly twice as far from the picture-plane as another, would be such a task. Recognizing Beethoven's finale and, say, the Wedding March in Mendelssohn's incidental music to Midsummer Night's Dream as both exemplifying triumph, but judging that the triumph exemplified in the former is more decisive and more profound than that exemplified in the latter would be another such task. (This second task sounds more interesting if we take advantage of Goodman's reluctant permission to describe it in terms of properties rather than labels.)

All important human enterprises involve symbolic activity: what distinguishes aesthetic symbolic activity (Goodman says) is that the symbol system operated with has at least some (not necessarily all) of the following four marks or indices:

(1) syntactic density (for any two characters, the scheme provides for a third character differing from each of them less than they differ from each other); (2) semantic density (for any two characters, the system provides for a referent that differs from each of their referents less than those referents differ from each other); (3) syntactic repleteness (every difference between one character and another makes a difference in what they denote); (4) exemplificationality. A literary work, considered as a printed text, is not syntactically dense, but it is exemplificational, in being expressive. A representational painting is dense both ways, expressive, and replete (it differs from a diagram, which is a representation in which only some of the features count in distinguishing one character from another). A musical work is a class of performances that comply with a score,
and the set of performances, taken as exemplifying various metaphorical labels, is both semantically and syntactically dense.

Thus the features that mark aesthetic symbol systems “call for maximum sensitivity of discrimination” (p. 252), delicacy of judgment in distinguishing one character from another or one referent from another, the capacity to note subtle likenesses and differences, and (in the case of exemplification) skill in finding or constructing appropriate labels. It would seem to be these powers—in discerning, in sorting, in metaphorical labelling—which aesthetic education ought to develop, if Goodman’s semiotic view of the arts is right. (He could not regard as adequate such a characterization of aesthetic education as “the development of sensitivity to the aesthetic qualities of things”17—though this would have to be part of the process.) How these, and perhaps other related, powers are to be developed must be determined in the light of relevant psychological knowledge—such as Harvard Project Zero has been in the process of seeking.

My question, however, concerns the special consequences for aesthetic education that follow from the Exemplification Theory but not from the chief alternative, which I do not care to call “Soft Formalism” but which can be called the Exhibition Theory (or Possession Theory): i.e., that works of art have qualities describable by metaphorical predicates which they present for our apprehension but do not refer to.

We might say, for example, that to apprehend music fully, on the Exemplification Theory, we must learn to make refined discriminations among aesthetic qualities; but this is also true on the Exhibition Theory. We might say that on the Exemplification Theory we must learn to apply verbal labels, for it is, strictly speaking, labels that are referred to. There is perhaps a difference here, because the Exhibition Theory does not entail that we must label a quality very precisely in order to perceive it; yet our capacity to perceive subtle differences and hold them in mind might, even on this theory, depend on wielding a rich set of apt labels for descriptive purposes. We might say that the Exemplification Theory could encourage the study of music in a larger social and cultural context, since we would not be in a position to know what a given composition or performance exemplifies until we know the relevant rules of reference; interpretation would require musicological knowledge. But some of this knowledge might also be required in order to know what qualities the work exhibits, unless we succumb to sheer impressionism. And if our Exemplification Theory allows us to infer a reference to any (musical) quality that is exhibited, then we need not seek for particular semantic rules.

Other contrasting implications that suggest themselves, and have on occasion been advanced, do not seem to hold up better. The Exemplification Theory emphasizes the activity and involvement of the receiver—that is true and salutary. But the Exhibition Theory does not entail that the receiver is merely passive and unengaged. The Exemplification Theory recognizes an intellectual as well as perceptual dimension in the musical experience. But the Exhibition Theory need not deny it: following the course of the music is itself a kind of thinking, a thinking in sounds. Besides, the thinking that would be involved in determining what is exemplified has to do, after all, with selecting the appropriate label, not
investigating rules of reference. In fact, it becomes quite difficult to say in what way the educational consequences of the two theories are different. This may suggest that something is wrong with the way they have been contrasted—or it may be taken as an argument that where the Exemplification Theory goes beyond the Exhibition Theory, it lacks a determinate content.

V

My conclusion so far turns out to be rather more negative than I once expected, and would have wished. I console myself with an echo of Aristotle’s truly philosophic reflection, when he found he had to reject the ontology of Plato: I can say that I count myself a friend of Beethoven (though I haven’t put this on my calling-card, like Schindler), but magis amicus veritatis—assuming that truth is what I have got hold of. All is not lost. Underlying the urge to establish a semiotic theory of art, including the most refractory art of music, is sometimes a fear that this is the only way to give substantial content to aesthetic education and thus secure for it a place in the study of the humanities. I believe this fear is unwarranted. Certainly there are many significant kinds of thinking connected with music: the thinking in sounds that is done by the composer, the analysis of the delicate and intricate structures of musical works, the classification of styles and their historical relationships—not to mention the application to musical phenomena of various sciences from anthropology to physics. Yet the question still remains whether music is not capable (along with other arts with capacities music does not possess) of playing a more direct and intimate cognitive role in our experience—a role that would rank it among those things that are most worthy of attention in humanistic education. I want to suggest that it does have such a cognitive role—and one that Goodman’s book has helped to point up and clarify—even if it does not have reference or belong to a symbol system.

I will try to share the unfinished thoughts I have in mind. But first a few words about the humanities. I am hesitant to ask a question like, “Does the study of music (i.e., aesthetic education in music) belong to the humanities?” because the more I think about the humanities, the less I feel I know what I am thinking about. It is often said, in a generic way that the humanities are those disciplines that are concerned with human works and ways, with the things made and things done by mankind. This is broad enough to cover a lot of ground, but even so it leaves out parts of philosophy, such as ontology—and in fact seems to suggest that the point of philosophy is not to philosophize but to study past philosophizing. The difficult problems arise when we try to give the differentia of the species, since obviously the human sciences (the social sciences, or studies, and psychology) are equally concerned with human actions and artifacts. What is distinctive of the humanistic concern with these matters? Many answers have been offered, of course. Among the distinctions invoked are: (1) that between values and facts (but history and much of philosophy are not necessarily concerned with values; and is social science value-free?); (2) that between empirical knowledge and some higher kind of knowledge (but this epistemological dualism has its own serious difficulties); (3) that between an interest in empathy with the objects and events studied and an interest in explaining
them (but unless empathy leads to knowledge, this does not distinguish humanistic study from attending the theater); (4) that between learning how to feel appropriately and learning how to think (but this dichotomy is hard to maintain coherently).

So I don’t have any definitive characterization of the humanities, but at best a brief for one of their features. There is, and there must always be, a vast body of empirical knowledge that is highly important, even indispensable, to human beings in their fundamental striving to get along with each other and with their natural environment, yet does not belong to any science. Some of it consists of singular propositions that are of interest and value to only a few people. Some of it consists in more or less well-confirmed general propositions that grow from reflection on ordinary experience (and extraordinary experiences). At any time any of these propositions may be taken over by the psychologist or sociologist, for example, subjected to methodical inquiry, refined and corrected and made ingredient in a system of scientific knowledge—or perhaps shown to be not true at all. Yet these working beliefs are a part of our equipment as persons and social beings, and their acquisition, mutual adjustment, trying out in the light of experience, is a central part of our education. It is these truths—in so far as they are true—that are the special concern of the humanities, I would say; though I do not say that they are the only truths of the humanities.

Moreover, it is the serious attempt to deal with these propositions—not capable, or not yet capable, of rigorous demonstration or conclusive confirmation, yet having to do (many of them) with some of the most momentous problems that we face as human beings—that must lead, if anything can, to those qualities of mind that have traditionally been claimed as goals of humanistic education: tolerance of other views and lack of dogmatism about our own, sensitivity to a wide range of feelings in other persons, insight into alternative ways of thinking and of living, good judgment about what it is reasonable to believe even where calculation is not possible.

If something like this can be said on behalf of the humanities, we should be able to say it also of aesthetic education—though we need not say exactly the same things about all the arts. Certainly literary works embody and make essential use of generalizations about human actions as well as psychological mechanisms that can be used to explain human actions. Representational paintings, especially those that recall a story or record a scene, evidently also have a cognitive content of some kind, even if it is not easy to analyze. But I have chosen to make music the center of my discussion just because it seems to be the least susceptible to defense along these lines, yet most in need of it. How, then, can music be considered from this point of view?

The first thing we must bear in mind, I think, is that composers and performers together have greatly increased the variety of structures and qualities in the world. Here is one of the significant ways in which man has added, and on the whole commendably, to nature—though we ought also to remember the wise reply of Polixenes in The Winter’s Tale, when Perdita says she cares not for the “streak'd gillyvors, /Which some call nature's bastards”: 

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For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature.

Say there be;
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art,
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes . . . .
The Art itself is nature.

I am not arguing that music-makers have thus done their part to bring us to the best of all possible worlds, which, according to Leibniz, combines the greatest variety with the greatest order. But they have contributed to the potential freedom of humankind, in one of its important dimensions: I mean the range of choiceworthy things the world affords. But I say “potential” because it requires other conditions, political and economic, for any human being to be in a position to make his choices, and for freedom to be actual.

Besides this ontological consideration we can set the epistemological one. Recall the remark of Nelson Goodman’s, quoted above, about “reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world.” Much earlier in his book, where he is discussing representation in paintings, he expands this idea:

Representation or description is apt, effective, illuminating, subtle, intriguing, to the extent that the artist or writer grasps fresh and significant relationships and devises means for making them manifest . . . . If his picture is recognized as almost but not quite referring to the commonplace furniture of the everyday world, or if it calls for and yet resists assignment to a usual kind of picture, it may bring out neglected likenesses and differences, force unaccustomed associations, and in some measure remake our world. And if the point of the picture is not only successfully made but is also well-taken, if the realignments it directly and indirectly effects are interesting and important, the picture—like a crucial experiment—makes a genuine contribution to knowledge (pp. 32-33).

What strikes me is that, although this claim is couched in terms that presuppose the referential character of some pictures, something very like it can be said in terms that do not presuppose reference at all.

As the Imitation Theory of art has insisted from the beginning, many of the properties (the structures and qualities) we find in music belong to families of properties found in other things. On Goodman’s account, a metaphorical predicate always brings with it a “schema,” or set of coordinate predicates, when transferred from its “home realm” to another. The “semantic differential” investigators have shown how pairs of terms (i.e., schemata) like “hot/cold,” “hard/soft” (to which Ernst Gombrich has added “ping/pong”) can effect classifications in an amazing variety of alien realms. When we transfer, say,
“triumph/defeat” or “triumph/struggle/resignation” from life-contexts to passages of music, we not only effect a new classification within music but may also sharpen our use of these terms in their home realm. Moreover, we effect another classification that cuts across the transfer, putting naval triumphs, moral triumphs, musical triumphs together into a new class, or family. The metaphorical predication registers, and helps us to make, a discovery that some property is possessed by both the moral triumph and the musical triumph. This is empirical knowledge, and it does not depend on the assumption that music is referential.

And to see these possibilities of sorting the things of our world, in ways that cut across the categories established for practical and scientific purposes, is no inconsiderable kind of cognition. Especially in an age like ours, where we are overwhelmed by our success in manipulating the physical environment to suit our own purposes—at least to suit the short-range purposes of some of us, who have the power to determine which rivers shall be reduced to sewers, which forests ravaged, which hills and fields stripped of all potentiality of life. To be able, even sometimes perhaps in play, to place the things outside us (that is, natural objects and such created entities as visual designs and musical designs) in the same classes as our own thoughts and feelings may help to wean us from that ruthlessness toward nature (the art over the art) that is one of the curses of Western Civilization. We have achieved a deep alienation of our humanity from our natural environment; perhaps natural piety can be restored through the mediation of art, if artworks can show us, can teach and frequently remind us, that many of those qualities that are so important to us in human life can also be exhibited in physical objects and processes. Such reflections need not engender superstitious terror or enervating sentimentality, but they may enable us to feel for the whole of which we are ourselves a part a kind of affection and respect.
FOOTNOTES


2 Though Jack Glickman, in his note "On Creating," in Kiefer and Munitz, op. cit., has shown that, strictly speaking, creating is not an activity, it involves an activity or activities. For further discussion of this question, see "The Aesthetic Point of View," in Kiefer and Munitz, op. cit.

3 For further discussion of this question, see "The Aesthetic Point of View," in Kiefer and Munitz, op. cit.

4 Art and its Objects, New York: Harper and Row, 1968, pp. 83ff. Wollheim's view has been effectively criticized by Jeanne Wacker, in "Reducing the Aesthetic to Art," read at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division), December, 1972, and by Ted Cohen, commenting on her paper.


9 For example, questions that have been central in the work of Harvard Project Zero: see the report (mimeographed) of September 30, 1972, Basic Abilities Required for Understanding and Creation in the Arts, by Nelson Goodman, David Perkins, Howard Gardner, al.


12 Or to the repeated C major episode in the andante, described by Tovey as "a blaze of triumph" (Essays in Musical Analysis, Oxford 1935, I, 41; cf. I, 44, on the "sustained triumph of the finale").


