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Aesthetic Experience Regained*

This is not the ideal historical moment for discoursing on aesthetic theory. That ought to be done with quietness and patience. But a quiet voice is all too easily drowned out by the cries of anguish and of anger we hear around us, and patience is a virtue that only those who live in a less terrified society can afford to cultivate. Even hardened aestheticians (an obvious oxymoron) may suffer from doubts that beauty or significant form is what the world needs most right now, when quite different goods—intelligence and charity, for instance—are more likely to restore our sense of community and stop us from creating a society whose answer to all problems—aesthetic and otherwise—will be violent repression. When so many of us in this troubled land do not seem to care very much even for one another—much less for the ravaged nature and crumbling cities our descendents will inherit—the aesthetic point of view becomes difficult to sustain. It may even seem absurd.

But though it would be more than human never to feel such doubts, it would be less than human to succumb to them. If all rational reflection on the domain of art must be indefinitely postponed, we have already lost our struggle, and reduced the chances that others can win theirs later. It is not as though we were shutting our eyes to reality by resolving to continue our aesthetic dialogue, but rather that we refuse to let certain important things be lost sight of.

It is in this spirit that I speak to you tonight. I draw some comfort—which it is yours to share—from the nature of my mission. I have cast myself in the role of do-gooder. Not quite as much of a do-gooder as my title suggests, of course: it's not salvation that I have to offer—but something more like hot soup. Call it a conceptual rescue operation—an attempt to rehabilitate or maybe even rejuvenate a concept that has played an important role in twentieth century aesthetics, but has lost its respectability in sophisticated circles, and is in peril of its very life.

I

It would be interesting to know who first used the term aesthetic experience with intent to mark out a kind of experience that is obtainable from some of the works of nature and some of the technological works of man, but is characteristically and preeminently afforded by works of art. Interest in the typical effects—both immediate and delayed—of music and tragic drama goes back, of course, a long way in the history of aesthetics. And the emergence of a quasi-scientific psychology in the eighteenth century gave much impetus to this empirical inquiry. But these earlier students preferred narrower—some would say better—terms to describe the effects they were particularly interested in, whether, like Aristotle, they welcomed these effects or, like

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* Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics at the University of Texas, October 25, 1968.
Plato, viewed them with alarm. They spoke of feeding and watering the passions (in Jowett’s poetic version), of catharsis (to be sure), of instruction and delight, transport, pleasure, or peculiar operations of the transcendental faculties of understanding. But the concept of a kind of experience must be much more recent.

Whatever its origin, this concept undoubtedly achieved its fullest development and its richest application in the aesthetic theory of John Dewey. I think it is largely to his work that we owe the extensive adoption of the term by contemporary aestheticians, even though not all of us, of course, accept everything that Dewey said about aesthetic experience. Most of us, indeed, have—I think fortunately—refused to follow some of the more cryptic passages in Art as Experience where Dewey proposes to identify the work of art with an experience. It has become usual to talk about the experience, or an experience, of a work of art as something distinct from the work that is the object of, and in, the experience. In any case, it has been very widely accepted that there is such a thing as aesthetic experience, describable in its own terms and distinguishable, at least by the practiced introspecter, from other sorts of experience.

It may be that scholarly status-seeking, or academic social-climbing, has had some part in promoting the term aesthetic experience. The spread—and to my mind, the beneficent spread—of progressive education, with its early-Dewyan involvement with “interactions” and “transactions” and “doings and undergoing,” had numerous consequences. On one education level it popularized expressions like “experiencing pictures” and “the musical experience.” On a more elevated level, some aestheticians may have felt that other university departments were to have their things, like “the religious experience” and “political man,” then we ought to stake out a comparable segment of life as our own concern. Even if we found it no easy task to teach people how to tell when they were having an aesthetic experience, we were confident that to be in this glorious state is not the same as feeling tipsy or merely comfortable.

Our confidence, after all, was sustained by some phenomenological evidence. It seemed obvious that musical, literary, dramatic, plastic, and other such experiences, do have something rather special about them. And though they are not exact substitutes for each other, they seem to go together: the experience of listening to a song has more in common with the experience of looking at a piece of sculpture than it does, say, with that of walking in a picket line or that of driving down the Schuylkill Expressway. So perhaps it was a bit non sequiturish for W. E. Kennick to say, in his famous iconoclastic essay: “To put it dogmatically, there is no such thing as the Aesthetic Experience; different sorts of experiences are properly referred to as aesthetic.”

I grant the differences: however, they leave open the question what there is about the different experiences that makes it “proper” to call them aesthetic.

Moreover, the concept of aesthetic experience provides a convenient and—to me—persuasive analysis of artistic goodness. Here lies, I think, its greatest philosophical significance. Those of us who are committed to a naturalistic metaphysical position, whatever our differences may be, will seek the ground of artistic goodness, as of all other forms of goodness, in the import of things for human welfare. Not that to be good is simply to have effects on human beings, but that to be good is to have the potentiality for such effects, assuming that the effects are desirable. And since works of art are typically destitute of any power to affect other objects, in the way a fork-lift truck or a stick of dynamite can, they must be classed among the consumer goods, rather than the production goods, of this world. Setting aside transcendent beauties or ineffable intuitions, the only ground that seems to be left for attributing goodness to works of art is the sort of experience they have it in them to provide. This is the use to be made of them. If artistic goodness is that sort of goodness that an object possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic experience
(which is here assumed to be desirable), then there can be no artistic goodness unless there can be aesthetic experiences.

I cannot, of course, deny that we could frame other naturalistic definitions of "artistic goodness" that dispense with the term aesthetic experience in favor, say, of aesthetic satisfaction. These alternatives, which are several, have been partly, though by no means fully, explored. The difficulty common to those I know of—not perhaps an insuperable difficulty—is that of distinguishing between the relevant kind of satisfaction and other kinds. To know "What Makes a Situation Aesthetic," in J. O. Urmson's well-known words, we must first know what makes a satisfaction aesthetic, and that seems to depend entirely on the kind of properties that you take satisfaction in. But an experience is larger than a satisfaction, and more independently describable. Perhaps, then, we can distinguish an aesthetic experience from a non-aesthetic one in terms of its own internal properties, and thus decide whether or not an experience is aesthetic without having first to know whether or not the object of (and in) the experience has the properties that permit aesthetic experiences.

Despite the good uses it can undoubtedly be put to, if it will do the job, the notion of aesthetic experience is surely a queer one. There is first the difficulty in talking intelligibly about experiences as such. Dewey applies the most extravagant predicates to experiences, some of them metaphorically far-out (for example, "slack and discursive" and "having no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers"). Some of these may be taken metonymically as applied to the objects of the experience. Some cannot. An experience can have a certain duration; so much is clear. But what else can correctly be said about it? This is one puzzle. But even if we are allowed to apply some predicates to experiences, it may also be questioned whether they will be rich enough and exact enough to afford a reasonably clear distinction between aesthetic experiences and other kinds. That is the second puzzle.

And now another aesthetic iconoclast has come upon this scene to challenge the entire concept. In his provocative essay of a few years ago—which still remains unanswered—George Dickie has directed his attack against "the causal conception of aesthetic experience" in general, and certain typical forms of it in particular. His critique is both sharp and forceful, and his arguments should move us all—either to give an adequate defense of aesthetic experience or to learn to do without it. It is this challenge that I take up now.

II

What does it mean to say that someone is having an aesthetic experience? Strangely enough, in all the literature on aesthetic experience, I cannot find a direct and concise answer to this question. In fact, when I make the attempt, I realize that it is by no means easy to give a satisfactory answer. What is worse, I have the uneasy feeling that my own answer has latent flaws, the ruthless examination of which might lead to just the consequence which this whole essay is aimed to ward off: namely, the abandonment of the concept of aesthetic experience. But we shall see.

I propose to say that a person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated.

The structure of aesthetic experience, then, might be sketched in the following way. As someone listens to a piece of music, say, or watches a motion picture, he attends to various features of a phenomenally objective field: to sounds, pictures, etc. At the same time, he is aware of various phenomenally subjective events: his expectations are aroused and he feels satisfactions when they are fulfilled, or he has sympathy-like or anger-like emotions toward the events that occur in the film. We can describe the phenomenally objec-
tive qualities and forms: these are the properties of the work of art that appear in the experience. We can describe the phenomenally subjective feelings and emotions: they may be said to be "evoked by" or to be "responses to" the work of art, and in this special sense these affects can be said to be caused by the objective features. The experience, as such, consists of both objective and affective elements, and, indeed, of all the elements of awareness that occur in the perceiver during the time of exposure to the work of art, except those elements that are unconnected with that work of art (e.g., traffic noises or sudden thoughts of unpaid bills).

Now, it is agreed that some interesting things can be said about the work of art as experienced: that it may be more or less unified—i.e., that it may be more or less coherent, and more or less complete in itself. The difficulty is in my second assumption: that we can also apply these terms (and similar ones) to the experience as such. If that second application makes sense—if it is intelligible to speak of experience as having coherence and completeness, and not merely of works of art as having these properties—then it becomes possible to hold (as I have held) that the unity of an aesthetic experience is due to, is determined by, the unity of the work of art that it is the experience of. This would be a synthetic, empirical statement. But it is just this statement that Dickie rejects, because, according to him, the term unified cannot intelligibly be applied to experiences.

This philosophical mistake is described by Dickie as a simple, though serious, confusion. The word experience is a very convenient catch-all term which we use on many occasions when we do not require to describe what went on very definitely. But Dickie suggests that it must always be able to be cashed in:

"It was a great experience" simply means "It (the game) was thrilling" or "It (the play) was exciting or moving," and so forth. "It was an experience that I shall never forget" simply means "I shall always remember the game (painting, play, or what ever)" and so on.

And so

The harmless expression "the experience of unity," which is used as a general way of referring to the seeing of the unified design, the hearing of the sound pattern, and so on, is somehow inverted and becomes "the unity of experience."  

"Somehow" is not really the right word here; Dickie, in fact, attributes this error in Dewey to the lingering malign influence of German idealism, which made expressions like "the unity of experience" seem to mean something. As his examples show, Dickie thinks that statements about aesthetic experiences, to make sense, must be regarded as shorthand expressions either for (1) the work of art as perceived (the music was unified) or for (2) the affects evoked by the work (one was thrilled or moved). From this he concludes that no terms (including the crucial critical terms that interest us here) apply intelligibly and irreducibly to experiences as such. Let us, for convenience, call this Dickie's Experience Thesis, i.e., the thesis that the terms unified, coherent, and complete do not apply to aesthetic experiences as such. If it is correct, then we cannot, of course, use any of these concepts as criteria to distinguish aesthetic experiences from other sorts of experience.

Dickie also holds that we cannot intelligibly apply the terms unified, coherent, and complete to the phenomenally subjective features of the experience as such. Let us call this Dickie's Affect Thesis. Dickie, of course, does not deny that such affects occur in our encounters with works of art: we are, he says, thrilled and moved. But he does not think it makes sense to talk about the unity of sequences of such affects.

The relation between the two theses seems to me to be this: given a certain natural assumption, the Experience Thesis entails the Affect Thesis. Thus, suppose the Affect Thesis is false, and there are sequences of affects that are unified. Then it is possible for someone to perceive a unified piece of music and at the same time feel a unified sequence of affects. But if each of these sequences (of sounds and of
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affects) could be unified, they could also be so related as to be united with each other (this is my assumption), and in that case the experience as a whole would be unified. Hence the Experience Thesis would be false.

But though the falsity of the Affect Thesis implies the falsity of the Experience Thesis (if we make that one assumption), the *truth* of the Affect Thesis does not imply the *truth* of the Experience Thesis. For even if Dickie is right in thinking that it does not make sense to speak of sequences of affects as “unified,” it may still make sense to speak of *experiences* (made up of both affects and phenomenally objective qualities) as “unified.” And whether it does make sense is just what we wish to know.

III

Let us first consider Dickie’s treatment of the concept of *coherence*. My position, briefly, is (1) that (for example) a musical composition, as heard, may be a highly coherent phenomenal object and (2) that the experience that involves close continued attention to the music may also be highly coherent, when the affective elements of the experience are under the control, so to speak, of the perceptual elements. A coherent experience is something more than an “experience of coherence”—though what makes an (aesthetic) experience coherent is that it is, in part, an experience of something coherent. In describing coherence of experience (relying, obviously, on John Dewey), I wrote that

One thing leads to another; continuity of development, without gaps or dead spaces, a sense of overall providential pattern of guidance, an orderly cumulation of energy toward a climax, are present to an unusual degree.\(^6\)

**Dickie’s comment is this:**

Note that everything referred to here is a perceptual characteristic (what Beardsley calls “the phenomenally objective presentation in experience”) and not an effect of the perceived characteristics. Thus no ground is furnished for concluding that experiences can be unified in the sense of being coherent.\(^7\)

On the contrary, it seems to me that some of these expressions apply not only to phenomenally objective fields. A feeling, for example, may vary in intensity over a certain stretch of time, and it may change by gentle degrees or abruptly; or it may be interrupted by quite opposed or irrelevant feelings; it may fluctuate in a random way, at the mercy of shifts in the phenomenally objective field, or it may begin as one feeling among many and slowly spread over the whole field of awareness. It seems to me that the terms continuity and discontinuity apply quite clearly to such sequences, and continuity makes for coherence, in affects as well as in objects.

In order to quiet the suspicion that this way of talking is due to philosophers’ habitual high-handedness with plain language, let me appeal to the authority of a psychologist. In his studies of what he calls “peak-experiences”—among them experiences of works of art—Maslow has discriminated and generalized various characteristics of these experiences. He says, for example:

The person in the peak-experiences feels more integrated (unified, whole, all-of-a-piece) than at other times.

He is now most free of blocks, inhibitions, cautious, fears, doubts, controls, reservations, self-criticisms, brakes…. This is both a subjective and an objective phenomenon, and could be described further in both ways.*

The phenomenology of this matter is no doubt very difficult to be clear about. But if it is true that the person in aesthetic experience feels a high degree of “integration” (which I construe as a kind of coherence), then it would seem that there is in fact an integration of his feelings: they feel closely related to each other, as though they belong with each other and to each other.

I turn now to Dickie’s treatment of the concept of *completeness*. And, again, my position is (1) that a musical composition (for example) can be highly complete, in the sense of finishing what it starts and thus being sufficient unto itself, and (2) that a complete musical composition can help to provide an *experience* that is complete. But the experience of completeness
(of the music) is only part of what constitutes the completeness of the experience (as a whole).

In my earlier treatment, I tried to describe two forms of completeness, or two patterns of experience that (it seemed to me) are highly complete. One of these was a "balance" or "equilibrium" of impulses or tendencies (say, the confrontation of opposed feelings about the same object). Dickie's critical analysis of this line of thought is devastating; he shows that I was thoroughly mistaken about it. The second pattern of experience, however, was the pattern of expectation-and-fulfillment. Again the phenomenology is elusive and subtle. It is agreed that a musical passage, for example, may arouse the expectation that certain other musical events are to follow (this is the kind of experience that is so fully studied by Leonard Meyer in his *Emotion and Meaning in Music*). It is also agreed that the promised events, when at last they occur, may fulfill the expectation and thus end the condition of suspense. This kind of thing is what I cited as a paradigm case of completeness. I said that music has (phenomenally objective) completeness, and the experience as a whole also has completeness. But Dickie objects:

Now when an expectancy is satisfied a process is completed; i.e., over with; but is the process (the expectation and the satisfaction) complete in the sense of being unified?28

When the expected actually occurs, a gestalt has been completed: we have, says Dickie, the experience of a completion. This sense of finality may pervade both the objective and the affective parts of the whole field of awareness. But (he argues) the "experience of completion" is something that occurs at the end of the experience of the music (or of some well-defined part of it); so it cannot provide the further and quite distinct concept of the *completeness of the experience*.

But this is just the nature of an experience, considered as such: that its character is partly given by its end. When the gestalt completes itself, we now think of the whole experience as building to that end; the (musical) significance of much that we have heard is now at least revealed, and the recollection of our earlier expectations and the way the music played with them takes on a new intensity in the light of what is now happening, in the final moments. It is in something like this sense, I think, that the experience as such takes on the character of completeness. And I think this is what Maslow has in mind when he writes:

All peak-experiences may be fruitfully understood as completions-of-the-act in David M. Levy's sense, or as the Gestalt psychologists' closure, or on the paradigm of the Reichian type of complete orgasm, or as total discharge, catharsis, culmination, consummation, emptying, or finishing.11

IV

This defense of aesthetic experience is far from being a whole brief; it mainly replies to certain key points in the indictment. The most fundamental point of all is Dickie's allegation that unity and its family of related terms do not even apply, strictly speaking. If that point can be rebutted, then we face the possibility that unity, while indeed a property of aesthetic experiences, is no more special to them than to any other experiences. This is the view, for example, of Marshall Cohen:

Surely, the experience of riding a crowded subway, or of being badly beaten, has at least as great a degree of unity as (and is more surely pervaded by a single individualizing quality than) the experience of hearing many a sonata or symphonic suite, or of reading many a picturesque novel or chronicle play.12

This is the sort of example that contemporary critics of "aesthetic essences" are likely to toss out, like sausages to wolves chasing a Siberian sleigh, to keep the philosophic reader occupied while the argument rushes headlong on. The business about the "single individualizing quality" alludes, of course, to one of Dewey's more dubious statements about the unity of "an experience." But apart from that, does the experience of riding a crowded subway really have unity; or is it a mass of jarringly diverse and confused impressions, without dramatic structure or formal de-
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development? Even in a “chronicle play” the appearances and disappearances of important characters are far more interrelated than the arrival and departure of subway straphangers. (I must add that I checked this impression only last week while riding on the Broadway–7th Avenue subway.)

These brief remarks are only the beginning of an argument to show that, contrary to Marshall Cohen, our experiences of works of art, and especially our experiences of good works of art, are in fact generally of a high order of unity—of coherence and completeness—compared with most daily experiences. But even if I had time I would hesitate to present such an argument here: the point seems to me somewhat elementary, once we establish the propriety of discussing the question at all.

There is one further question that I think we should look into, however, because it grows so directly out of the line of thought we have been following. I said a while back that perhaps the main philosophic use to be made of the concept of aesthetic experience is in giving a satisfactory analysis of artistic goodness. But there remains the problem of artistic betterness. To attribute artistic goodness to an object is, I claim, to attribute to it the capacity to provide a certain desirable kind of experience. What, then, does it mean to say that one object is artistically better than another?

What we must look for, I suppose, is a dimension along which we can compare aesthetic experiences—call it the dimension of D-ness—so that we can say, justifiably, that it is X’s capacity to provide aesthetic experiences with greater D-ness that gives it greater artistic goodness than Y has. Unless we can identify, and exhibit, such a dimension—whether simple or compound—we cannot claim to have provided a value theory adequate to the requirements of critical judgment.

So far as I can see, there is only one tenable answer: that D-ness is amount of pleasure. Other hedonistic terms may be preferable, at least in certain contexts where misunderstanding lurks: enjoyment, satisfaction, gratification, or delight. But the main thing to note is that the pleasure here involved is aesthetic pleasure, i.e., that kind of pleasure that is found in aesthetic experience. The view I propose, then, is that X is artistically better than Y if X is capable of providing a more pleasurable aesthetic experience than any that Y is capable of providing.

I realize that up to this point my discussion may have suggested a rather dry and solemn view of aesthetic experiences. I have not spoken, for example, of those delightful characteristics of Maslow’s “peak-experiences”: the sense of liberation, the joy of play, elation, fullness of power. Letting the term pleasure cover all such positive affective states, it seems to me plain that aesthetic experience is pleasurable, and indeed, essentially so. If the fabled businessman dragged to the opera by his wife does not enjoy himself, that is a reliable indication that he is not having an aesthetic experience—though, of course, the fact that his wife does enjoy herself does not show she is having one.

My proposed account of artistic betterness, then, presupposes that aesthetic experience is always pleasurable. But this has been denied, for example, by Marshall Cohen:

But, as we may question whether beauty is, indeed, the essential property of art, we may question whether pleasure, which aestheticians have normally supposed to be characteristic of its apprehension, is, truly, an essential feature of aesthetic experience. At this moment, beauty is not in question (fortunately), but pleasure is. Cohen’s climactic example is that “The muzzles of the battleship Potemkin, pointed at the audience, are positively menacing.” This is another one of those sacrificial sausages, though not meaty enough to detain us long. It is not the battleship Potemkin that confronts us when we go to a motion picture theater to see the Eisenstein film, but merely a picture of it. And this picture does not in any way menace us, but instead it offers us the quality of menace—a quality that we deeply enjoy in its dramatic context. If we recall Burke’s or Kant’s or Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime, it
becomes obvious enough that examples like this do not in any way show that aesthetic experience can be unpleasurable.

v

The more unsettling objection to the Hedonistic account of aesthetic experience comes from a very different source: the current avant-garde, including both practical and theoretical wings. The “new aesthetic” of contemporary art escapes (according to these thinkers) the bounds of mere Hedonism. The dimension of D-ness is not to be sought in pleasure, but in blowing the mind. It does not matter what sort of reaction a work of art evokes in us; the important thing is that it evoke some reaction, and as intense a reaction as possible. There is, for example, the psychedelic school of turning us on without drugs—of the current impresarios of total environmental assaults (acid rock, strobe lights, incense, and multi-screen viewing) explains: “We try to vaporize the mind by bombarding the senses.” The more far-out sculptures and dramatic events are praised by avant-garde critics because they are so startling, terrifying, irritating, disgusting, shocking—or even stupefyingly boring. Never mind that boredom is no Maslow-type peak experience: at least it is a feeling. If Walter Kerr or Clive Barnes walks out of the play, or objects to its nonsensicalness, then the play is a success: it has provoked the very objection that was intended; it has wakened the conventional playgoer, if only for a moment, from his spiritual torpor. To turn away is to pay tribute to the “theater of cruelty” or the “living theater” that frees us from “bourgeois repressions”—like wearing clothes. When someone produces a film that makes everyone in the audience sick to his stomach, it may be hailed as supreme cinematic art.

This Reactionist position is, then, that intensity of feeling is the dimension of D-ness, the ground of artistic betterness. It follows that newness is a prime requisite for really good art, since shocks wear off in time; this is why, in fact, avant-garde writers seldom talk about the goodness of works of art but much about novelty and origi-
assure, but even aesthetic experience itself. It seems on the face of it ridiculous to fear that a society, or a large part of it, could lose its understanding and desire for the kind of satisfaction that works of art afford. But there are times when a large part of the population, including its elected and unelected officials, seems to lose its grasp of what free scientific inquiry is all about or what is really at stake in enterprises like universities and churches. Similarly, under present social and economic conditions, we may forget that there is a kind of gratification that is something more than gags or shocks or kicks.

We can hardly be too often reminded (if I may paraphrase a splendid sentence from John Stuart Mill) that there have been serious creative artists between whom and the aesthetic authorities of their times there took place some memorable collisions. An eternal problem of philosophy—how to cope conceptually with change—is perhaps most acute in aesthetics, where the phenomena ultimately to be understood are in a constant, and necessary, flux. We must somehow achieve that most difficult intellectual stance which keeps us open to everything that may have worth or the seeds of worth, yet without relinquishing all distinctions that give order to our thought.

It may be that we are now living through a revolution comparable to the broadening of aesthetic appreciation from beauty to the sublime a few centuries ago. If so, then along with a willingness to extend our concept of art—keeping it an “open concept”—must go a willingness to extend our concept of aesthetic experience, assimilating whatever happens to us when we confront these novel works. Or perhaps we should let the concept of art expand freely—applying it to any sort of object that is made to be given our undivided attention—but at the same time keep our concept of aesthetic experience rather restricted: then we would accept the consequence that some contemporary artists are not concerned to provide aesthetic experience—either because they have a need to share their own boredom, or because they sincerely believe that beauty and significant form are no longer good for modern man. I am inclined, though without rigid conviction, to describe what is happening in this second way—though I do not accept its premises. No doubt other sorts of experience are important besides aesthetic experience. But if we concede the right of the artist to evoke them, we ought, by the same token, to insist that aesthetic experience is important, too—and we ought to do what can be done by such abstract labors as ours to insure that aesthetic experience does not disappear amidst the troubles that now try our civilization.


For further examples see my essay on “Aesthetic Theory and Educational Theory,” forthcoming in Ralph A. Smith, ed., Aesthetic Concepts and Education.


Dickie, p. 131; cf. p. 133.


Dickie, p. 135.

Dickie, p. 104.

Cohen, p. 119.