The Great Theory of Beauty and
Its Decline

I. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT

What is called beautiful in modern English, the Greeks termed kalon and the Romans pulchrum. The Latin word remained in use throughout ancient and medieval times, disappearing during the Renaissance, however, when it was supplanted by a new word bellum. This new term had a rather singular derivation: from bonum via the diminutive bonellum, which was abbreviated to bellum. At the outset the word was restricted in its application to women and children; later it came to designate beauty of all kinds, completely eliminating the earlier pulchrum. No modern language has adopted a derivative of pulchrum, though many have taken over the word bellum in some form or other: the Italians and the Spanish, bello; the French, beau; the English, beautiful. Other European languages possess equivalents of indigenous derivation: German schön; Russian, krassivyj; Polish, piękny.

Ancient and modern languages alike have at least two words of the same provenance to serve as noun and adjective: kallos and kalón, pulchritudo and pulcher, beauty and beautiful, bellezza and bello. There is need, in fact, for two nouns: one to signify the abstract quality of beauty, and one to refer to a particular beautiful thing. The Greeks met this requirement by using the adjective as a noun—to kalón, and reserving kallos for abstract purposes. The Romans made similar use of the adjective pulchrum. German das Schöne and French le beau represent the same phenomenon.

Briefly, the semantic history of the word beauty is as follows: The Greek concept of beauty was broader than ours, extending not only to beautiful things, shapes, colors, and sounds but also to beautiful thoughts and customs. In the Hippias Major, Plato cites as examples of beauty beautiful characters and beautiful laws. What in the Symposium he refers to as the idea of beauty, he might equally well have called the idea of the good; for it was not visible and audible beauty that he was concerned with there.

Nonetheless, as early as the fifth century B.C., the Sophists of Athens had narrowed the original conception and defined beauty as “that which is pleasant to sight or hearing.” This limitation was a natural one for sensualists to impose. The virtue of the definition was that it made the concept of beauty better defined by distinguishing it from that of good. Its long-range effect unfortunately was to produce ambiguity, since the old, broader concept did not disappear.

The definition put forward later by the Stoics—“that which has fit proportion and
alluring color" was as narrow as that of the Sophists. Plotinus, on the other hand, in writing of beautiful sciences and beautiful virtues, was using the word in the same sense as Plato. And this duality of meaning has persisted to the present, with the difference that whereas in ancient times the broader concept was more commonly intended, the narrower one is predominant today.

If the Greeks managed without the narrower conception of beauty, this was doubtless because they had other words available to them: symmetria for visible beauty and harmonia for audible. The first of these expressions would be for the sculptor or architect, the second for the musician. With the passage of time the Greeks came to use beauty in the narrower sense, so that the word forced symmetry and harmony into the background. And thus it remained in later centuries: symmetry and harmony were seldom used (though Copernicus, for one, does employ them).

Medieval and modern thinkers took over the conceptual and terminological apparatus of the ancients and, at the same time, added supplements according to their own lights. Albert the Great, for example, spoke of beauty not only in corporibus but also in essentialibus, and in spiritualibus. The men of the Renaissance, on the other hand, were inclined to narrow the concept to fit the needs of the visual arts only: "Beauty," declared Ficino, "pertains rather to the sight than to the hearing." Since then, use of all variants of the concept of beauty has been made at various times and by turns, as convenience has dictated.

From this historical sketch, it can be seen that theories of beauty have made use of three different conceptions.

A. Beauty in the broadest sense. This was the original Greek concept of beauty, which included moral beauty and thus included ethics as well as aesthetics. A similar notion can be found in the medieval dictum, pulchrum et perfectum idem est.

B. Beauty in the purely aesthetic sense. This notion of beauty extended only to that which evokes aesthetic experience; but it did embrace everything in this category, mental products no less than colors and sounds. It was this sense of the word which was in time to become the basic conception of beauty in European culture.

C. Beauty in the aesthetic sense, but restricted to things apprehended by the sight. In this sense of the word, only shape and color could be beautiful. The Stoics partially adopted this concept of beauty. Its use in modern times has been limited on the whole to popular speech.

This multiple ambiguity of the word impedes communication, however, less than does the enormous range of diverse things which have been designated as beautiful.

Of the three conceptions mentioned, B is the most important in present-day aesthetics; and this is the conception discussed in the present article.

The first problem which arises is whether we can define conception B, and if so, how? Some of the greatest thinkers of different periods have made the attempt: "that which being good is also pleasant" (Aristotle); "that which pleases when it is perceived" (Thomas Aquinas); that which pleases neither through impression, nor concepts, but with subjective necessity in an immediate, universal, and disinterested way (Kant).

Many other definitions have been proposed over the years. Perhaps the most exhaustive treatment of the topic is that furnished by Ogden and Richards, who list sixteen different ways in which the word beautiful is used. Their list, however, contains mostly former items which can only be called theories (if that) and not definitions.

The difference between definition and theory is clearly illustrated by two propositions of Aquinas. "That which pleases when it is perceived" is a definition of beauty; "beauty consists in lustre and fit proportion" is a theory. The first purports to tell us how to recognize beauty, the second how to explain it.

Dictionaries offer us various synonyms for beauty and its derivatives: for example, fine, lovely, charming, pretty, handsome, graceful, attractive, fair, good-looking; in French: grâce, agrément, charme, éclat, excellence, magnificence, merveille, richesse.
It will be readily observed that these are not real synonyms but merely words cognate in meaning. It would seem in fact that beauty (conception B) does not possess any synonyms.

II. THE GREAT THEORY

The general theory of beauty formulated in ancient times declared that beauty consists in the proportions of the parts, more precisely in the proportions and arrangement of the parts, or, still more precisely, in the size, equality, and number of the parts and their interrelationships. This can be illustrated with reference to architecture: thus, it would be said, the beauty of a portico stems from the size, number, and arrangement of the columns. And similarly with music, except that there the relations are temporal not spatial.

This theory persisted for centuries in both a broader (qualitative) and a narrower (quantitative) version. The narrower version maintained that the relationship of parts which produced beauty could be numerically expressed. A still narrower version asserted that beauty is to be found only in objects whose parts stand in relation to one another as small numbers: one-one, one-two, two-three, etc.

This theory might not unreasonably be called the Great Theory of European aesthetics. There have been few theories in any branch of European culture which have endured so long or commanded such widespread recognition, and few which cover the diverse phenomena of beauty quite so comprehensively.

The Great Theory was initiated by the Pythagoreans, but only in its narrower version. It was based on observation of the harmony of sounds: strings produce harmonious sounds if their lengths are in an interrelationship of simple numbers. This idea quickly appeared in analogous form in the visual arts. The words *harmonia* and *symmetria* were closely connected with the theory's application to the domains of hearing and sight respectively. Whether it passed from the first domain to the second, or developed independently in the latter is not certain; what is certain is that in the classical period of Greece, it was dominant in both.

The only detailed exposition we have—Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture*—is of rather late date. In this work, Vitruvius develops the idea that beauty is achieved in a building when all its parts have the appropriate proportions of height to breadth and breadth to length, and in general fulfill all the demands of symmetry. Vitruvius maintained that the same was true in sculpture and painting, as well as in nature which "has created the human body in such a way that the skull from the chin to the upper brow and hairline makes up one tenth of the entire length of the body." In his view it was possible to present the just proportions of both buildings and human bodies in numerical terms.

From early times, Greek artists claimed to have discovered the perfect proportions. Their claim was accepted, as linguistic facts demonstrate: in music, certain melodies became known as *nomoi*, laws or norms; in the visual arts, certain proportions won universal acceptance and became known as *kanon*.

That same conception prevailed among philosophers. "The Pythagoreans," as a later writer remarks, "found the properties and relations of harmony in numbers." They maintained that "order and proportion are beautiful and fitting," and that "thanks to numbers, everything looks beautiful." This conception was taken over by Plato, who declared that "the maintenance of measure and proportion is always beautiful" and that "the absence of measure is ugly." Aristotle adhered to the same view, asserting that "beauty consists in magnitude and ordered arrangement" and that the main forms of beauty are "order, proportion, and definiteness" (*horismenon*). The Stoics thought likewise: "The beauty of the body resides in the proportion of the limbs in relation to one another and to the whole." And they took an analogous view of beauty of the soul, seeing it, too, as consisting in a proportion of the parts. The proportion theory of beauty was both universal and durable. The Pythagoreans and
Plato in the fifth century B.C., Aristotle in the fourth century, the Stoics in the third, and Vitruvius in our own era—all accepted it.

Only in the decline of the classical age was this theory subjected to critical scrutiny—and then but partially. Plotinus acknowledged that beauty consisted in the proportion and arrangement of the parts, but held that this was not all it consisted in. Were this so, he argued, only complex things could be beautiful; but light, gold, and the stars are all beautiful, though not complex. Moreover, the beauty of proportions stems not so much from the proportions as from the soul which expresses itself through them, which “illuminates” them. The Great Theory ceased to rule unchallenged; Plotinus’ arguments became an integral part of medieval aesthetics, thanks largely to the influence of the fifth-century Christian adherent of Plotinus, the Pseudo-Dionysius. In his treatise, Divine Names, he advanced a lapidary formula for this dualistic aesthetic theory: beauty, he said, consists in “proportion and brilliance.”

This formula was taken over by the leading schoolmen of the thirteenth century. Appealing to the authority of the Pseudo-Dionysius, Ulrich of Strasbourg wrote that beauty is consonantia cum claritate. Involving the same authority, Aquinas wrote that ad rationem pulchri sive decori concurrit et claritas et debita proportio. And later, too, during the Renaissance, we find the Florentine Academy, headed by Ficino, espousing Plotinus’ doctrine and adding the notion of “brilliance” to that of proportion in the definition of beauty.

The line of thinking of Plotinus and Ficino did not reject the Great Theory, however, but merely supplemented and thus limited it. And during the same period—from the third to the fifteenth centuries, there were many more who adhered to it absolutely. The man who did most to pass the theory down from ancient to modern times was Boethius. Following classical theory, he declared beauty to be commensuratio partium and nothing more. To this definition, St. Augustine added his influential support. His most classic text on the subject read as follows: “Only beauty pleases; and in beauty, shapes; in shapes, proportions; and in proportions, numbers.”

It was he, too, who coined the venerable formulation for beauty: measure, shape, and order (modus, species et ordo as well as aequalitas numerosa or numerositas).

Augustine’s opinion and his formulations for beauty endured for a millennium. The great thirteenth-century treatise known as Summa Alexandri followed his theory that a thing is beautiful when it has measure, shape, and order. Writing specifically about music, Hugh of St. Victor declared that it is the consonance of many elements that have been brought to unity. The treatise Musica Enchiriadis contained the assertion that “everything is pleasant in rhythms and rhythmic movement stems exclusively from number.” The opinion vouchsafed by Robert Grosseteste was that “all beauty consists in the identity of proportions.” The phrase pulchritudo est apta partium coniunctio might serve as a motto for the thinking of medievalists on aesthetics.

Renaissance aesthetics too held that beauty was armonia occultamente risultante della composizione di piu membri. Renaissance philosophers were natural philosophers rather than aestheticians, but from the fifteenth century treatises on art and, from the sixteenth, poetics considered general aesthetic problems. Both appealed to the authority of the ancients, artists in general to Vitruvius, and writers on poetics to Aristotle. Insofar as they felt themselves to be opposing medieval thinkers, they were mistaken; the general theory of beauty during the Renaissance remained what it had been during the Middle Ages, based on the same classical conception.

At the very dawn of the Renaissance, in 1435, we find the architect and writer, L. B. Alberti, defining beauty as harmony and good proportion, “the consonance and mutual integration of the parts.” Alberti used various Latin and Italian words to describe what he meant—concinnitas, consensus, conspiratio partium, consonantia, concordanza—but all to the same effect: beauty depends on the harmonious arrangement of the parts. The Great Theory won widespread acceptance during this period,
largely due to Alberti and the great sculptor Ghiberti, who had actually preceded Alberti with his declaration that *la proporzionalità solamente fa pulchritudine.* Two centuries later, in the declining years of the Renaissance, with Mannerist and idealist theories dominant, Lomazzo could still write that "if something pleases, it is because it has order and proportion." The view spread beyond Italy to Germany, where at the beginning of the sixteenth century, we find Dürer writing that "without fit proportion, no figure can be perfect."

The Great Theory proved, indeed, more lasting than the Renaissance. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Poussin expressed the view that "the idea of beauty descends into matter if it has order, measure and form." We find the same in the theory of architecture: at the height of the period of Baroque and Academism, the great French architect Blondel could still describe beauty as *concert harmonique* (1675), and maintain that harmony "is the source, the beginning and cause" of the satisfaction which art affords.

One encounters the same thinking in the theory of music: Music, declared Vincenzo Galilei (in 1581), is a matter of *raggioni e regole.* And at least some philosophers thought along these same lines. Leibniz wrote that "music charms us, though its beauty consists merely in a correspondence of numbers," and that "the pleasure which our sight experiences in contemplating proportion is of the same nature, as too is that occasioned us through our other senses." It was not till the eighteenth century that the Great Theory was finally ousted by the combined pressure of empirical philosophy and romantic trends in art.

Simplifying somewhat, we could say that it had thus held sway from the fifth century B.C. until the seventeenth century A.D. inclusive. In the course of those twenty-two centuries, however, it had been supplemented by certain additional theses and subjected to certain reservations; in addition, certain essentially different theories had been proposed alongside it. (I will discuss all these below.)

The decline of the theory came in the eighteenth century when beauty began to be approached differently. Other solutions were proposed in the nineteenth century, but they proved of short duration. And in our own century we have been witnesses to a crisis not merely in the theory of beauty but in the very concept itself.

### III. Supplementary Theses

The Great Theory was usually enunciated in conjunction with a number of other propositions concerning the rational and quantitative nature of beauty, its metaphysical basis, its objectivity, and its high value.

**A.** The first of those theses—that we apprehend true beauty through our minds, not our senses—combined with the Great Theory very naturally. One brief quotation from Vincenzo Galilei's *Dialogo della musica* (1581) should suffice to illustrate the point: "The sense listens like a servant, whilst the reason guides and rules" (*la ragione guida e padrone*).

**B.** The thesis that beauty is numerical in character was repeatedly linked with the Great Theory or was implicit in its formulations. It belonged to that part of the Pythagorean tradition which was still alive in the Middle Ages. Robert Grosseteste wrote: "The composition and harmony in all composite things derives only from the five proportions to be found between the four numbers: one, two, three and four." The tradition survived into the Renaissance period as well. In his *De Sculptura* Gauricus exclaimed: "What geometer must he have been, I ask, who constructed man!"

**C.** The Metaphysical Thesis. From its Pythagorean beginnings on, the Great Theory saw in numbers and proportions a deep law of nature, a principle of existence. According to Theon of Smyrna, the Pythagoreans believed they had found in music the principle underlying the entire structure of the world. Heraclitus held that nature is a symphony, and that art was but an imitation of it. Plato opposed the modification of any natural forms for artistic purposes. For the Stoics, the beauty of the world was a fundamental article of belief; the world "is perfect in all its proportions and parts."

In Plato’s case, the metaphysical basis of the Great Theory took an idealist form.
And from this time on, there were two metaphysics of beauty, one seeing pure beauty as existing in the cosmos, in the sensible world, and the other the Platonic metaphysics of ideas (the \textit{locus classicus} which is to be found in the \textit{Symposium} 210–211). The latter gave rise in turn to two distinct variants: Plato himself contrasted the perfect beauty of ideas with imperfect, sensual beauty, whereas Plotinus regarded the beauty of ideas as the "archetype" of sensual beauty.

The metaphysical conception of perfect beauty was often \textit{theological}, especially in the Christian tradition. "God is the cause of everything that is beautiful," declared Clement of Alexandria. Another Church Father Athanasius wrote: "Creation, like the words of a book, points to the Creator." The world is beautiful because it is the work of God. Later, in medieval writings, from being a quality of divine works, beauty was to become an attribute of God Himself. For the Carolingian scholar Alcuin, God was eternal beauty (\textit{aeterna pulchritudo}). At the climactic period of scholasticism, we encounter the following assertion of Ulrich of Strasbourg: "God is not only perfectly beautiful and the highest degree of beauty, he is also the efficient, exemplary and final cause of all created beauty" (though it is true that his contemporary Robert Grosseteste explained that when beauty is predicated about God, what is meant is that he is the \textit{cause} of all created beauty).

There is no beauty in the world apart from God, affirmed the twelfth-century Victorines. Everything in the world was beautiful because all had been ordained by God. Theological metaphysics did not disappear from the theory of beauty at the Renaissance: "Your face, Lord, is absolute beauty," wrote Nicholas of Cusa, "to which all forms of beauty owe their being." Michelangelo wrote: "I love the beautiful human form because it is a reflection of God." Palladio recommended the shape of a circle for architectural purposes on the ground that it "lends itself better than any other to the sensual realization of unity, infinity, uniformity and God's justice." Their conceptions of beauty (very much in accord with the Great Theory) were linked with and grounded in religion. But the Great Theory could and did manifest itself also without theological or metaphysical bases.

D. The Objectivist Thesis. The founders of the Great Theory, the Pythagoreans, Plato, and Aristotle all held beauty as an objective feature of beautiful things; certain proportions and arrangements are beautiful in themselves and not because they happen to appeal to the viewer or hearer. Relativism was excluded: since the proportions of the parts determined whether something was beautiful or not, it could not be beautiful in one respect and not another. And indeed Philolaus the Pythagorean declared that the harmonious "nature of number" manifests itself in divine and human things because it is a "principle of being." "That which is beautiful," wrote Plato, "is not beautiful because of something else, but of itself and for ever." "That thing is beautiful," said Aristotle, "which is desirable in itself." This conviction was maintained intact in Christian aesthetics. "I ask," wrote St. Augustine, "whether things are beautiful because they please, or please because they are beautiful. And here I shall doubtless receive the reply that they please because they are beautiful." Thomas Aquinas repeated these sentiments almost word for word: "Something is not beautiful because we love it, but rather do we love it, because it is beautiful." Other schoolmen held similar opinions: beautiful things are \textit{essentia et quidditas}. And the same idea can be found expressed in the Renaissance: Alberti wrote that if something is beautiful, it is so of itself, \textit{quasi come di se stesso proprio}.

E. Linked with the Great Theory was the idea that beauty is a great benefit. All the ages were agreed about this. Plato wrote that "if life is worth living, it is so in order that man may behold beauty"; and he placed beauty together with truth and the good in his triad of the most important human values. Similar evaluations were made in modern times. In 1431, Lorenzo Valla wrote: "He who does not praise beauty is blind either of soul or of body. If he has eyes, he deserves to lose them, for he does..."
not feel that he has them." Castiglione, arbiter of Renaissance taste, called beauty “holy.”

The ecclesiastical tradition contained, it is true, another attitude towards beauty. “Beauty is vain,” we read in Proverbs 31:30. “In use,” warned Clement of Alexander, “beautiful things are harmful.” But, on the other hand, it was St. Augustine who wrote: “What things can we love, if not the beautiful.” The reservations related to corporeal beauty. But the admiration for pulchritudo interior and spiritualis spread to exterior and corporalis, and the assessment Christianity and the Middle Ages gave to beauty was ultimately a positive one.

One might have expected that from European thought two other theses would evolve along with the classical theory to the effect that beauty is the key category in aesthetics and the quality defining art. Yet this did not happen. Such theses could not be developed until aesthetics had emerged as a discipline and the concept of beaux arts been evolved. And this came only in the eighteenth century. Thus, it was only then that men began to see beauty as being the purpose of the arts, that thing which linked them together and defined them. Beauty had previously been seen as a quality of nature rather than of art.

IV. RESERVATIONS

The universality and durability of the Great Theory were not such as to spare it from all criticism, doubts, and deviations.

A. Doubts appeared first as to the objectivity of beauty. An anonymous Sophist text known as the Dialecexis made the assertion that everything is beautiful and everything ugly. Epicharm, a litterateur close to Sophist circles, put forward the argument that the most beautiful thing in the world for a dog is a dog, for an ox another ox. Subjectivist ideas of a similar kind were to crop up again in later centuries.

B. According to Xenophon, Socrates advanced the idea that beauty may consist not in proportion, but in the correspondence between the object and its purpose and nature. According to this notion of beauty, even a rubbish bin might be beautiful, if designed appropriately for its purpose. A gold shield, by contrast, would not be beautiful, for the material would be inappropriate and render it too heavy to be used. This reasoning led to relativism.

More widespread was the middle view that beauty is of two kinds: the beauty of proportion and the beauty of correspondence. Socrates made such a distinction: there are proportions which are beautiful in themselves and others which are beautiful for something else. This view had supporters also among Stoics: as Laertius Diogenes witnesses, beauty could be either that which was perfectly proportioned, or that which was perfectly fitted to its purposes; either pulchrum in the strict sense or decorum.

Thus the classical period gave rise to both the proportion and the correspondence theory of beauty. It also initiated other pairs of alternatives: beauty may be either ideal or sensual; spiritual or corporeal; it may be objective symmetry or partly subjective eurhythmy. These variants of beauty in time became of central importance and ultimately brought about the foundering of the Great Theory.

C. In the fourth century, Basil the Great proposed that beauty consists of relationship, not (as the Great Theory maintained) between the parts of the object but rather between the object and the human sight. This did not, it is true, make a relativist concept of beauty; but it did create a relational one. Thus beauty became a relation between object and subject. This strand was taken up by the schoolmen in the thirteenth century, and Thomas Aquinas's famous definition pulchra sunt quae visa placent incorporates reference to subjective elements, to sight and to the element of pleasing.

D. Even when writers in modern times adopted the Great Theory its purview was unconsciously limited. To begin with, there was the cult of subtlety and grace. Subtlety was the ideal of the Mannerists, who for the most part saw it as one of the forms of beauty. Cardano, however, opposed it to beauty (1550). He agreed with the classics.
that beauty is simple, clear, and straightforward, and subtlety intricate. But he who succeeds in unraveling it, he held, would find subtlety no less satisfying than beauty. In later representatives of this same tendency of thought like Gracian and Tesauro, subtlety simply supplanted beauty and arrogated its name and position for itself. According to this new view, only subtlety was truly beautiful: there existed a finesse plus belle que la beauté. And this higher beauty did not consist in any perfect harmony of parts. Gracian even went as far as to assert that harmony stems from disharmony. This was breaking with classical theory with a vengeance.

The sixteenth century also produced a group of writers and artists who sang the praises of grace (grazia). Grace, like subtlety, seemed not to be a matter of proportion and number. For aestheticians absorbed by this new value, two possible courses stood open: either to accept that beauty and grace are independent values or to reduce the former to being an aspect of grace. The first of these would be a limitation on the Great Theory; the second would involve its rejection. For it, beauty is a matter of grace; proportion and number are irrelevant.

Around the year 1500, Cardinal Bembo had proposed another solution: “Beauty,” he wrote, “is grace born of proportion, correspondence and harmony.” But this interpretation, reducing beauty to grace and vice versa (in effect), was exceptional. For many Late Renaissance and Mannerist writers, beauty-grace had its roots in a kind of freedom, even carelessness, in sprezzatura, to use Castiglione’s expression. This was not in accord with the Great Theory.

E. There was a tendency also toward a more irrationalist assessment of beauty. Doubts began to be expressed of the conceptual character of beauty and of the possibility of defining it. Petrarch had once happened to remark that beauty was non so ché, “I know not what.” In the sixteenth century, many more writers were to take up this motif. Beauty delights, declared Lodovico Dolce, but added that é quel non so ché.

Petrarch’s phrase became an established part of aesthetic vocabulary in the seventeenth century, acquiring standard forms in both Latin and French: nescio quid and je ne sais quoi. Bouhours attributed the phrase especially to the Italians. But we find it in Leibniz as well: aesthetic judgments, he said, are clairs but at the same time confus; one can express them only with the aid of examples, et au reste il faut dire que c’est un je ne sais quoi.”

F. All these changes had the cumulative effect of preparing the way for the relativization and, indeed, subjectivization of the notion of beauty. In a period when artists had in general more to say than philosophers about aesthetics, this was the one major contribution which philosophers made. The new trend was heralded by Giordano Bruno, who wrote: “Nothing is absolutely beautiful; if a thing is beautiful, it is so in relation to something else.” But he expressed this idea in a minor work, and there is no evidence that it exerted any influence.

A generation later, one encounters a similar idea in a letter of Descartes: beauty, he wrote, signifies nothing more than the relation of our judgment to an object. He then proceeded to describe that relation very much along the lines of Pavlov’s conditioned reflex. But again the idea was restricted to the small circle of his correspondents, since Descartes felt that the problem was not one that lent itself to discussion in scientific treatises.

Yet his opinion was shared by many of the leading philosophers of the seventeenth century: Pascal wrote that what was to be regarded as beautiful was determined by fashion; Spinoza, that if we were built differently, we would find ugly things beautiful and vice versa; and Hobbes, that what we regard as beautiful depends on our upbringing, experience, memory, and imagination. For a long time, these ideas did not penetrate artistic and literary circles. But at last, in 1673 and again in 1683, we find the great French architect Claude Perrault expressing his conviction that beauty is basically a matter of associations. For two thousand years, Perrault argued, certain proportions were considered objectively and absolutely beautiful, but we like them simply because we are used to them.
V. OTHER THEORIES

Other theories of beauty did appear alongside the Great Theory, but for two thousand years none of them pretended to replace it, only to supplement it. There were several such:

A. Beauty consists of unity in diversity. This was the idea closest to the Great Theory and might easily be mistaken for a variant of it. Unity, however, does not necessarily imply any particular arrangement or proportions. Unity and diversity were fundamental motifs in Greek thinking generally, but not in aesthetics. Their application to this area was the work of early medieval philosophers. Johannes Scotus Erigena, for example, averred that the beauty of the world consists in a harmony, which is made up *ex diversis generibus variisque formis* that are brought together in "ineffable unity." For centuries thereafter this conception of beauty periodically appeared, but did not become common until the nineteenth century, when, however, it somewhat degenerated into a kind of slogan.

B. Beauty consists in perfection. *Perfectio* was one of the favorite notions of the Middle Ages, not only in relation to beauty but also in relation to truth and the good. St. Thomas made particular use of it in connection with art: *Imago dicitur pulchra si perfecte representat rem.* Renaissance theorists argued similarly. Viperano's treatise on poetics (1579) contained the following sentence: "With Plato I call that poem beautiful which is perfect and complete in its construction; its beauty and its perfection are identical (*pulchrum et perfectum idem est*)." This theory was easily absorbed into the Great Theory: whatever had fit arrangement and clear proportions was assumed to be perfect. It was not till the eighteenth century that the theory of perfection acquired an independent life of its own.

C. Beauty consists in the adequacy of things to their purpose. Anything that is *aptum* and *decorum*, appropriate and becoming, is beautiful. This idea was maintained as a supplement to the main theory; only in the seventeenth century when the classicists under the name *biensance* took it up did it become an independent idea.

D. Beauty is the manifestation of ideas of the archetype, of the eternal model, the highest perfection, the absolute: this was the view taken by Plotinus, the Pseudo-Dionysius, Albert the Great. From time to time it was accorded considerable recognition. It did not appear as a substitute for the Great Theory, however, but rather as its supplement, its explanatory tailpiece.

E. Beauty is the expression of the psyche, of the internal form, as Plotinus called it. According to this theory, only spirit is truly beautiful; and material things are beautiful only insofar as they are imbued with spirit. The term *expression* did not in fact establish itself until the seventeenth century. The painter Le Brun probably was the first to publish a book on the subject; but he used the word somewhat differently to mean expressiveness in the appearance of the human figure or things. The idea of beauty as the expression of emotions came only in the eighteenth century.

F. Beauty lies in moderation. This idea received its classical formulation from Dürer: *Zu viel und zu wenig verderben alle Ding.* A century and a half later the French art theorist Du Fresnoy declared, even more emphatically, that beauty "lies in the middle between two extremes." He took this idea from Aristotle, who used it in relation to moral good, not beauty; its use in the aesthetic sense was an innovation of the seventeenth century. The notion of beauty as moderation was not an independent conception but, rather, a particular formulation of the Great Theory.

G. Beauty consists in metaphor. According to this theory, all beauty stemmed from metaphor, from *parlar figurato*; there were, it was argued, as many kinds of art as there were kinds of metaphor. This notion which appeared in the seventeenth century, was the work of literary Mannerism and, in particular, of Emanuele Tesauro. It was an original idea and one which might perhaps have vied with the Great Theory more effectively than any other.
sand years, reservations concerning it were not uncommon, nevertheless. Attacked was either the central tenet that beauty consists in proportion and harmonious arrangement, or such associated doctrines as those of the objectivity, rationality, or numerical character of beauty, its metaphysical bases, or its position at the top of the hierarchy of values. Most of these reservations were first made in ancient times; by the eighteenth century, they had become frequent and trenchant enough to create a crisis.

Why did this come about? Basically because tastes had changed. Baroque and later Romantic art and literature had made their appearance and won followers. Both diverged markedly from classical art. But classical art had formed the basis for the Great Theory which sank into irrelevancy because it was difficult to reconcile with current trends. Shortcomings that had not been noticed before began to appear.

A. The roots of the crisis are to be sought both in philosophy and in art, in the empiricism of the philosophers and the romanticism of the artists of the time. The same trend developed in several countries, but it was particularly concentrated in England (among psychologists and philosophically oriented journalists) and Germany (among philosophers and Pre-Romantic writers). English writers, headed by Addison, were inclined to believe that they had been the first to overthrow the old conception of beauty, thereby achieving something completely new. In this they were mistaken, for they actually had predecessors. The new in what they were doing can be reduced to three essential points. First, criticisms stemming from philosophers were being taken up by journalists like Addison and thus reached a wider audience more effectively. Second, philosophers were now overcoming a distaste for reflecting on subjective phenomena. And third, psychological enquiries into man's reaction to beauty were now being conducted more or less continuously. Eighteenth-century England produced noted works in this field in each generation: Addison in 1712, Hutcheson in 1725, Hume in 1739, Burke in 1756, Gerard in 1759, Home in 1762, Alison in 1790, Smith in 1796, and Payne Knight in 1785.

Beauty, these writers said, does not consist in any particular proportion or arrangement of the parts, as everyday experience demonstrates. The Romantics went even further, maintaining that beauty actually consists in the absence of regularity, in vitality, picturesqueness, and abundance, and in the expression of the emotions, which have little to do with proportion. Attitudes to beauty were not so much changed as reversed; the Great Theory now seemed at odds with art and experience alike.

B. These eighteenth-century critics can be divided into two groups. The first group adopted the position that beauty is something so elusive as to render theorizing about it pointless. The Petrarchian non so ché, particularly in its French version je ne sais quoi, was now on the lips of many, including philosophers like Leibniz and Montesquieu.

The second, later group of critics, more numerous and influential than the first, especially in England, attacked the objectivist concept of beauty which had been basic for centuries to all thinking on the subject. Beauty, they held, is simply a subjective impression. "The word Beauty is taken for the idea raised in us," wrote Hutcheson. And again: "Beauty properly denotes the perception of some mind." Similarly Hume: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves. It exists in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty." And Home: "Beauty in its very conception refers to a percipient." Proportions have to be measured, whereas beauty is something we feel directly and spontaneously without calculations.

C. Earlier, more moderate critics like Hutcheson (and before him, Perrault) had claimed only that not all beauty is objective, that there exists both intrinsic (original) beauty and relative (comparative) beauty, or (as Crousaz had put it) natural and conventional beauty. But from about mid-century on the prevailing attitude became increasingly radical: all beauty, it was now urged, is subjective, relative, and a matter of convention. Anything can be felt as beautiful, argued Alison: "Beauty of forms arises altogether from the associations we connect with them." Payne Knight wrote of the
beauty of proportions that it "depends entirely upon the association of ideas." Things felt to be beautiful are not mutually alike; it would be vain to look for any feature common to them all. Every object can be either beautiful or ugly according to one's associations, and these vary from individual to individual. There cannot therefore be any general theory of beauty; at the most one can conceive of a general theory about how beauty is experienced. Hitherto the central task had been to ascertain what properties in the object determine beauty; now it became a search for certain properties in the mind of the subject. And whereas classical theory had attributed the ability to discern beauty to the reason (if not simply to the sight or the hearing), eighteenth-century writers attributed it to the imagination (Addison), to taste (Gerard), or, alternatively, postulated a special and distinct "sense of beauty." And the new concepts—imagination, taste, and sense of beauty—were hostile to the rationalism of the Great Theory.

VII. OTHER EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THEORIES

A. The drawing of distinctions has always been useful to patch up and preserve concepts; and so it was with the concept of beauty. The process of conceptual fragmentation had been begun by the ancients: Socrates had distinguished beauty in itself from beauty for a purpose; Plato, the beauty of real things from that of abstract lines; the Stoics, physical and spiritual beauty; Cicero, dignitas and venustas.

In subsequent centuries, many other distinctions were drawn; several examples are: Isidore of Seville's distinction between beauty of the soul (decus) and of the body (decor); Robert Grosseteste's distinction between beauty in numero and beauty in grazia; Vitelo's (and Alhazen's) distinction between beauty ex comprehensio simplici and beauty founded on familiarity (consuetudo fecit pulchritudinem); the Renaissance distinction between bellezza and grazia; the Mannerist distinction between beauty properly so-called and subtlety; or the Baroque distinction (of Bouhours) between sublimity and polish (agrément).

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, the pace of development began to quicken: Perrault's beauté arbitraire and beauté convaincante; André's essential and natural beauty and le grand and le précieux; Crousaz's distinction between beauty which we respect as such and beauty which affords us pleasure; and the distinction proposed by the classicist Testelin between beauty of utility, beauty of convenience, and beauty of rarity and novelty. Among distinctions made in the eighteenth century, mention might perhaps be made of Sulzer's analysis into graceful (ahnmutig), splendid (prächtig), and fiery (feuerig) beauty, or Schiller's celebrated proposal to divide beauty into the naive and the sentimental.

Goethe once compiled a lengthy (though not purporting to be complete) list of varieties of beauty and allied virtues. Among the differentiations of beauty proposed during the eighteenth century, two were of basic importance. The first was Hutcheson's distinction between primary and relative beauty. The second was also English in origin but received its classic formulation from Kant: free beauty (freie Schönheit, pulchritudo vaga) and dependent beauty (anhängende Schönheit, pulchritudo adhaerens); dependent beauty presupposes some concept of what the object should be, whereas free beauty does not.

These distinctions sought to differentiate the concept of beauty, others to point to cognate but distinct properties. And indeed in the eighteenth century, two other values began to rival beauty: the picturesque and the sublime. This latter concept had not been discovered by the eighteenth century (cf. the ancient treatise On The Sublime by the Pseudo-Longinus); but only then did it begin to occupy a central position in aesthetic thinking. For some, Home for instance, it was only a variety of beauty. But for the majority, beginning with Addison and including Burke and Kant, the sublime was a separate and distinct virtue. Some eighteenth-century aestheticians were even inclined to place it above beauty. This was another heavy blow for the tra-
ditional concept of beauty: in the opinion of some historians, in fact, the final blow.81

B. It was common then for eighteenth-century aestheticians to abandon any general theory of beauty and accept only some psychological explanation of aesthetic experience. However, the Great Theory could still muster some supporters. Philosophers and men of letters had on the whole turned against it; but among artists and, in particular, artists-theoreticians (of whom there were many at the time), it remained influential.82 Les règles de l'art sont fondées sur la raison, wrote the architectural theorist Lepautre. On doit asservir les ordres d'architecture aux lois de la raison, wrote another, Frézier. Toute invention... dont on ne saurait rendre une raison, declared Laugier, eût-elle les plus grands approbateurs, est une invention mauvaise et qu'il faut prêscrite. And on another occasion: Il convient au succès de l'architecture de n'y rien souffrir qui ne soit fondé en principe. Similar sentiments were being expressed in other countries. In Germany, a polemic was being waged between two famous architects of the time, Krubsatius and Poppelman. Krubsatius formulated his most damaging criticism of his adversary's buildings in one eloquent word: unbegrundet (ungrounded, unjustified).

This approach was not limited to artists. Sulzer the encyclopedist of the arts defined beauty in traditional style as ordo et mensura. And the revival of interest in classicism and the classical period had the effect of strengthening the cult of reason, measure, and proportion among both artists and theoreticians.

C. Other Theories of Beauty

1. The notion of beauty as perfection had supporters in Germany.83 Christian Wolff defined it in these terms, following a suggestion of Leibniz; and one of Wolff's students, Baumgarten, pursued this same idea. Wolff devised a lapidary formulation for his idea: beauty, he said, is perfection of sensual cognition (perfectio cognitionis sensitivae). This linking of beauty with perfection continued until the end of the century, and not just in Wolff's school. The philosopher Mendelssohn characterized beauty as "the unclear picture of perfection" (undeutliches Bild der Vollkommenheit); the painter Mengs called it "the visible idea of perfection" (sichtbare Idee der Vollkommenheit); whilst the scholar Sulzer wrote that "only feeble heads could fail to notice that in nature everything aims towards perfection (auf Vollkommenheit... abzielt)." In Kant's Kritik der Urteilskraft, §15, on the other hand, we find the heading: "Judgment of taste is quite independent of perfection." To nineteenth-century aestheticians, the notion of perfection already seemed antiquated.

2. The expression theory of beauty gained strength with the approach of Romanticism.84 Condillac wrote that l'idée qui prédomine est celle de l'expression. Later the doctrine spread to England as well. In 1790 Alison attributed the beauty of sounds and colors as well as poetic words to their expression of feelings. "The beauty of sounds arises from the qualities of which they are expressive." And: "No colors in fact are beautiful but such as are expressive to us of pleasing or interesting qualities." Poetry has the highest place among the arts precisely because it "can express every quality." Hence the conclusion that "The beautiful and the sublime... are finally to be ascribed to their expression of mind."

3. The idealistic conception of beauty still had an important spokesman. Winckelmann described beauty as spirit that has been as if distilled from matter. Idealische Schönheit or "the ideal" is a shape though not the shape of any existing object. It manifests itself in nature only partially (stückenweise), but on the other hand, is realized in art, specifically in the art of the ancients.

VIII. AFTER THE CRISIS

After the crisis of the Age of Enlightenment, something rather surprising happened: general theories of beauty again began to flourish.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the old theory, now in new guise, that beauty is a manifestation of the idea exerted the greatest attraction, thanks to Hegel in particular, who wrote: Beauty is the absolute idea in its adequate appearance.85 From Germany the theory radiated to other
countries. Pour qu’un objet soit beau, said Cousin, it doit exprimer une idée.

The Great Theory also reappeared. It was current in Germany especially, where early in the nineteenth century Herbart developed a system of aesthetics based on the concept of form, a system which was subsequently developed by his disciples Zimmermann and (with special reference to music) Hanslick. The novelty of this system was largely in terminology, i.e., it used the word form where the Great Theory had used proportion. It was an influential theory, but its authority, like that of Hegel, began to diminish about mid-century.

At this point there was a rather singular development: interest in the concept of beauty fell off, while interest in aesthetics increased. But now attention was directed not toward beauty but toward art and aesthetic experience. There were more aesthetic theories now than at any time previously; but they were no longer theories about the nature of beauty. Concentrating on aesthetic experience, these theories were variously based on empathy (Vischer, and later, Lipps), conscious illusion (K. Lange), enhanced functioning of the mind (Guyau, Gross), feigned emotions (von Hartmann), and expression (Croce). The hedonistic theory of beauty also reappeared in radical form. The aesthetic theory of contemplation based on Schopenhauer’s writings was also developed; this theory had been effectively recognized for centuries without ever having been formulated or elaborated. Aesthetic theories proliferated, but they were theories of beauty only by indirect implication.

IX. RENEWED DECLINE

The eighteenth century had initiated the attack on the concept of beauty as such. D. Stewart had emphasized the ambiguity and looseness of the concept; Gerard had argued that beauty has no particular referents, but that it is used about a variety of things that happen to be pleasing; Payne Knight had described it as amounting to no more than a way of expressing approbation.

The great event in eighteenth-century aesthetics had been Kant’s affirmation that all judgments about beauty are individual judgments. Whether something is beautiful is decided in relation to each object separately, and not inferred from general propositions. It does not involve any syllogism of the type: quality Q determines whether an object is beautiful; object O has quality Q; therefore object O is beautiful. It does not do so, because there are no true premises of the type “quality Q determines whether an object is beautiful.” All general propositions concerning beauty are merely inductive generalizations based on individual statements.

While the nineteenth century made little use of these criticisms and continued to look for a general theory for beauty, it was left to the twentieth century to draw the conclusions suggested by the criticisms of the eighteenth. And this was done—both by artists and by theorists. Beauty, it was now asserted, is such a faulty concept as to be an inadequate basis for any theory. It is not the most important objective of art. It is more important that a work of art should agitate people than that it should delight them with its beauty; and this shock effect can be achieved by other means than beauty, including even ugliness. “Nowadays we like ugliness as well as we like beauty,” wrote Apollinaire. Doubts began to be expressed about the justification of linking art with beauty as had been universally done since the Renaissance. In the opinion of Herbert Read, the identification of art and beauty is at the root of all difficulties in the appreciation of art. Art is not necessarily beautiful; and this cannot be said too often.

The notion that beauty had been overvalued was given vigorous expression in Somerset Maugham’s Cakes and Ale (§ XI):

I do not know if others are like me, but I am conscious that I cannot contemplate beauty long. For me no poet made a falser statement than Keats when he wrote the first line of his Endymion. When the thing of beauty has given me the magic of its sensation my mind quickly wanders; I listen with incredulity to the persons who tell me that they can look with rapture for hours at a view or a picture. Beauty is an ecstasy; it is as simple as hunger. There is really nothing to be said about it. It is like the perfume of a rose: you can smell it and this is all; that is why the criticism of art, except in so far as it is unconcerned with beauty and therefore with art, is tire-
some. All the critics can tell you with regard to Titian's *Entombment of Christ*, perhaps of the pictures in the world that which has most pure beauty, is to go and look at it. What else he has to say is history, or biography, or what not. But people add other qualities to beauty—sublimity, tenderness, love—because beauty does not contain them. Beauty is perfect, and perfection (such as nature) holds our attention but for a little while... No one has ever been able to explain why the Doric temple of Paestum is more beautiful than a glass of cold beer except by bringing in considerations that have nothing to do with beauty. Beauty is a blind alley. It is a mountain peak which once reached leads nowhere. That is why in the end we find more to entrance us in El Greco than in Titian, in the incomplete achievement of Shakespeare than in the consummate success of Racine.... Beauty is what satisfies the aesthetic instinct: beauty is a bit of a bore.

This passage contains two propositions: one concerning the phenomenon of beauty and the other concerning the concept. The first states that the phenomenon is not as attractive as it has been traditionally held to be. The second states that beauty is something indefinable, which can be neither analyzed nor explained. Neither proposition is, of course, peculiar to Maugham. Many twentieth-century artists have espoused the first of them, and many theorists the second.

Aestheticians, often without being aware of their intellectual genealogy, took up the ideas of Stewart, Gerard, and Payne Knight and reformulated them. One version maintained that the concept of beauty is simple and unsusceptible of further elaboration; another, that it is ambiguous and fluid, meaning anything that anyone wishes, and accordingly unsuitable for scientific use. No correct theory of beauty is possible, much less one so wide-ranging as the Great Theory. The word and concept beauty have been retained in colloquial speech, however; they are used in practice rather than in theory.89 One of the central concepts in the history of European culture and philosophy has thus been reduced to the status of a mere colloquialism. The concept of beauty has existed in the history of European aesthetics not much longer than the Great Theory.

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2 Plato, *Convivium* 210E–211D.
6 Philostratus, Jr., *Imagines*, proem; Laertios Diogenes, VIII 47; Stobaeus Ecl. I.21.7d and IV.1.40.
7 N. Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium celestium* 1543.
8 Albertus Magnus, *Summa theol.*, q. 26 membr. 1a2.
11 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Iq.5a.4 ad 1.
12 I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilkraft* (1790), §5–22.
16 Vitruvius, *De archit.* III.1.
18 Plato, *Philebus* 64 E.
20 Stobaeus, Ecl. II.62.15.
21 Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.7.22.
22 Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* IV.7.
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11-a 11-ae q. 145.a 2.

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