

## Chapter One

### In the Beginning There Was Beauty

In our tradition we have always assumed that the religious impulse was the origin of culture, that the fire Prometheus brought to humans was first and foremost spiritual. As our commitment to the religious world waned over the millennia, we have posited alternative descriptions of that Promethean fire, but we have always construed them as derivative of the religion with which we began. Thus, writers like Matthew Arnold argue that poetry will eventually come to take the place of religion in our culture, and his assumption that the aesthetic derives from the theological is consistent with the way we have thought about the world. If we imagine the great poems at the beginning of Western civilization as compendia of religious, historical, philosophical, and poetic truths, we have thought that the poetic, the historical, and the philosophical are designed to serve the religious rather than the other way around. As we have grown suspicious of origins over the past century, we have indeed called into question the centrality of the religious impulse, but we have not yet sufficiently asked ourselves what our tradition would be like if we imagined its origin as an aesthetic rather than a theological one. What if we were wrong in assuming that in the beginning there were gods, or a God? What if in the beginning there was only the aesthetic play of the world, and we chose somehow to derive gods from that play rather than something else? What would change in our conceptions of things if we were seriously to ask these questions?

Perhaps the most striking change we would encounter would be the dehumanization and depersonalization of the

world. Both the theological and the aesthetic provide descriptions of what is, and both of them articulate a sense of pattern, but the theological always has human interest written into it from the beginning. After all, a god has specific dealings with humans that explain why life is the way it is. This is so even in the Greek tradition, where the gods are far less concerned with humans than in the Judeo-Christian line. Zeus does not devote his time to working out plans for humans or laying down laws for them; whatever attention he pays to them is subsidiary, only one among many interests. In this sense the Greek gods are considerably less personal and human than the Judeo-Christian God, however human they appear to be in their thoughts and actions. They aren't quite indifferent to the disposition of human affairs, but they restrict themselves to thinking of particular individuals and clans and dispense their favors accordingly. Quite clearly, the great majority of humans can look to these gods for very little, certainly not for an acknowledgment of their importance.

The Judeo-Christian God is far more personalized and takes an active interest in human affairs; indeed, this seems to be His primary purpose. He monitors the behavior of the people and acts in accordance with the world that they establish. We are told that He has an interest in every individual and is aware of all of them, though this is more true of the Christian than the Jewish God. In this tradition, humans are in turn *given* the world; it is theirs to do with as they please, and the rest of the living creatures are at their disposal. There is no getting around the fact that the other animals and plants are to serve humans just as humans are to serve their God. In this way, everything that exists becomes centralized around the needs and wants of humans, so their concerns are written into everything, and their conception of the world is in turn designed to personalize the place so thoroughly that domestication is the only real value.

If we begin with an aesthetic world, however, this kind of personalization and humanization of the world is no longer necessary. If the ecstatic states out of which the religious impulse comes are oriented toward establishing a totally hu-

manized world full of meaning, the ecstatic states of the purely aesthetic play of things have no such orientation. They give humans over to what is, but they don't dispose of it in human ways. They reveal patterns and shape and provide some sense of the dynamics of the universe, but they do not offer a *narrative* to go along with the scene into which the human has been placed. In this sense, the aesthetic opens humans up to the nonhuman in the world, and to the nonhuman in themselves; it situates them within the impersonal flows that determine the course of all living matter without judging those flows in terms of their equity or purpose, for they can be said to have no purpose within the aesthetic. The flows flow, and we are part of their flow, but there is nothing to be said beyond that. They do not flow *for* us, they don't lead *to* us; we are simply part of them, like it or not.

Now it is the human perception of these flows within ecstatic states—that mode of being we have characterized as the sublime—that generates the feelings that lead to the religious configuration of the world, for the powerful feelings of the aesthetic—both the joy and the rather fearful, overwhelming awe—can quickly split into the human need for a different kind of pattern, one that centralizes these powerful forces in anthropomorphic terms. If human need has drawn out of the aesthetic the consequent religious mode of interpretation, however, this doesn't legitimize the religious at all, but rather undercuts it. For the aesthetic mode is so entirely indifferent to the disposition of human lives and fates that there is no conceivable way to engender a system of meaning from it that would so personalize the world as to make every individual a valuable constituent of it. This is a fraudulent move driven by the force of a desire for protection from the cold indifference of the world; it can never follow from the original aesthetic context. It could be argued that the human world really begins *only* when the aesthetic has become the theological, but I would insist that, on the contrary, the human is always already present in the aesthetic mode out of which the theological comes, for we can assume that other creatures do not experience what we characterize as beauty in the way that we do. They do not seem to experi-

ence wonder, even if they are capable of delighting in the world, and wonder therefore would be the mark of the human, wonder and awe. From these two conjoined impulses we have derived our religions and our systems of laws, at least in the initial stages of our cultures, and we have gone on to assume that the aesthetic is really subordinate rather than primary.

Once we begin to see that the theological is an anthropomorphic projection of the desire for protection, for meaning, onto the aesthetic impulse out of which the human developed, we have to revise our ways of thinking about our status, and about the status of our disciplines of knowledge. Indeed, to begin with the aesthetic is simply to state what has been insisted upon since Nietzsche: that our knowledge is essentially ungrounded, that the play of things is so constituted as to be fundamentally indifferent to the human desire for certitude. But I want to insist again that we need to conceive of the aesthetic as that out of which the theological grows rather than as that with which we are left once we have lost faith in our religious modes of valuation. Arnold clearly thought he was praising poetry when he said that it would take the place of religion, but I would argue that he was in fact unintentionally *ruining* poetry by characterizing it as the supplement of the religious, first because this placed religious burdens on the aesthetic that it could never bear, second because it forced poetry into a mode of meaning that is alien to it. The aesthetic does provide humans with a sense of value, out of which in turn the particular values of our individual lives are constituted, but it does not offer guidelines for living or prescriptions and systems of value that are universally—or even seemingly universally—applicable.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the gravest problem we face as a species comes from the potential confusion that results from this moment of understanding when the aesthetic is seen to take precedence over the theological, even if such an origin is only an hypostatized one. For we are so used to attaching the aesthetic to the theological that once the religious impulse is stripped of its significance, the aesthetic itself too easily gets lost. We know, for example, that Arnold was wrong—poetry

did not come to take the place of religion—and we might ask ourselves why it failed to do so. Part of the answer would seem to be that humans are so accustomed to finding everything of value connected to something that has a specific meaning to it that the aesthetic—which is fundamentally meaningless, at least as traditionally conceived—disappears when no meanings are to be found in it. It becomes the leftover that isn't even noticed. Put another way, we can say that the relentless course of the past hundred years has pushed us ever farther down the road toward conceding that the world is fundamentally an aesthetic domain, but the more definitively that realization emerges, the more the aesthetic slips into the background.

The sciences have been rigorously dehumanizing the world for some time now—at least in some senses—and have long devoted themselves to a conception of the world as a place that is indifferent to humans. The egalitarian push of democratic systems has increasingly led us to strip the false values from our way of looking at things in the social world and has thus in its own way demonstrated the general indifference of social systems to the individual as a particular interest. The consequences of our modes of production have increasingly forced us to recognize the hypothetical ecology of our planet, which in turn leads us to the conclusion that the earth is indifferent to our presence on it, and that indeed we can no longer afford to be indifferent to it. All of these shifts, I would argue, ought to lead us to the conclusion that the world is fundamentally an aesthetic entity, but instead they have led too often to the abandonment of the aesthetic altogether. The reason for this seems to be the human mania for personal meaning that drove the religious impulse to deny its aesthetic core in the first place.

The aesthetic has not been seen as the essential aspect of our world because it requires us to accept two interrelated theses, and we have so far only been willing to accede to one of them. We have grown to the point where we can concede that the world is *not* something over which we have dominion, in part because our own detritus has forced us to admit this. But we have so far been unwilling to follow through on

this fact and recognize that as a consequence we must accept the world's indifference to our presence within it. It could even be said that we have failed to address the problems inherent in our way of life because we still tacitly assume that the earth—like the God who swore after the last major flood that He would never destroy everything again—*does* take our interests and our presence into account. We simply can't seem to get past the notion that it is totally indifferent to us, and until we arrive at that point, we cannot discern the ways in which the aesthetic is that which is left once we strip from the world the meanings we have imposed upon it out of the force of our desire.

If we begin with the aesthetic rather than the theological, we find pattern, flows, a rhythm to things, and we can do so precisely to the extent that we are willing to give ourselves up to those flows and experience our movement within them. The cost is that we must concede that the world has absolutely no personal interest in us and no particular interest in humanity either. This thought has been so staggering to us that we have literally been stuck at the edge of a kind of nihilism for a century, almost incapable of moving on to something else. Such knowledge, Camus will tell us, makes the world absurd, though it can be affirmed in its absurdity. Such truths, Sartre tells us, leave us as the fundamental makers of ourselves and confer upon us the heroic task of creating the world in our own image. These kinds of responses to the aesthetic world have clearly lost the aesthetic impulse from the outset, for their obsession remains with meaning and not with pattern. If the world is absurd, it is so only because it fails to subscribe to our narrow conceptions of significance and purpose. If we are the fundamental makers, then presumably we have really only taken over God's role and have at last truly arrived at the kind of dominion over things that we first arrogated to ourselves in Genesis. Camus and Sartre may be doing what they can to imagine a hearty response to the world's indifference, but they cannot escape from the abyss of nihilism simply because of their insistence on the same old kind of meaning that their work demonstrates the absence of. In refusing to

give up the old metaphors of meaning and creation and making, they have left themselves stuck within a theological pattern that dooms their work to failure simply because, like Arnold's, it measures effects in terms of a supplementary reading of the theological impulse. And while it may have been understandable enough for the existentialists to be so caught, given the historical circumstances of their writings, the disconcerting fact is that all these decades later we are still lamenting the absence of the theological rather than praising the re-emergence of the aesthetic.



One of the refreshing aspects of the aesthetic view of the world that is so difficult to grasp is that in many respects it ought to be a relief to humans to see that the world is indifferent to them. Instead of being affronted by this fact, we ought to recognize it as something that frees us from the terrible obligations that came with being central, with being the particular reason for the world's existence. Other obligations follow in turn, but they are of a different sort, and if they require more self-discipline on our part, they demand less in the way of human capacity than the personal obligations that come from being the center of the universe. As the justification for the universe, we could never begin to live with our burdens; as one participant in it among others, we have only to learn how to work within its flows. Within the theological model we developed, virtually everything had a meaning attached to it—and hence a series of larger purposes and obligations—and this tended to make life more of a burden than it had to be. Within the aesthetic model, we can begin to distinguish those things that are meaningful parts of the flows through which our lives articulate themselves from those more or less gratuitous things that simply occur as a result of being who and where we are at any given moment in time. There is no need to reduce everything to a grid of possibilities and requirements. Some things just are and require no further justification.



The chief virtue of the aesthetic mode, however, at least when it comes to the consequences of its impersonality, is that for the most part we actually *prefer* its indifference, though we have accustomed ourselves to thinking otherwise. It is *pleasing* that the world is an impersonal, essentially indifferent place, however much we may have doubts about its lack of interest in us, and we simply have to reacquaint ourselves with this fact by reminding ourselves why we are always drawn to the aesthetic in the first place. Beauty draws us out of ourselves, provides us with the pleasure of being at home in the midst of whatever is aesthetically perceived. One can characterize this pleasure in negative terms, as someone like T. S. Eliot tended to do, explaining how the desire to escape from personality and emotion is that which prompts one to seek out aesthetic situations in the first place; or one can argue that the aesthetic is an essentially positive phenomenon that has its power over us because it gives us back the rhythms that are a part of our own being that are all too easily forgotten and lost in the social world. Regardless of the way one characterizes the experience, the same fact lies at the root: the world's indifference to our plight, to our everyday concerns and worries, to our crises and our shame, is that which makes possible the joy we experience through aesthetic perception. The indifference of the world, after all, is that which allows us temporarily to become indifferent about ourselves, and that is the precondition for an awareness that involves one in the larger flows of which one is a part.

The indifference at the center of the aesthetic cannot provide those things that religion offered to us, a meaning and a structure that made sense of our woes and justified our cause in every circumstance, but it is possible that it can erode our interest in such structures even as it provides the pleasure that displays the world to us as it is. More importantly, the question at this point is simply whether or not it makes better sense to see the religious as that which emerges from the aesthetic or vice versa, and given the powerful feelings at the center of religion—given its connection to the ecstatic—there can be little doubt that religion is simply an aesthetic



discipline that has grafted the need for meaning and purpose onto the perception of beauty in the world. Because we failed to note that the aesthetic does provide structure, pattern and rhythm—which have truths of their own, even if they do not offer consoling fictions—we assumed once we declared God to be dead that beauty too had died, or at least those elements we valued, and we have since built our conception of the world on an aesthetic view all too similar to Eliot's: in the absence of religious consolations, beauty has become an essentially negative mode of being, a nugatory state that provides at best a momentary kind of relief from the anxieties we experience as a result of being alive. And Eliot's return to religion also suggests the total vapidity of this conception. We may not all feel the need to embrace a theological vision in the face of a failed aesthetic, but we have more or less come to create a world in which there is little to differentiate the aesthetic modes of those who merely seek oblivion from those whose interest in beauty is based upon the knowledge with which it provides them. Here is where the real nihilism lies, not in the assertion of the priority of the aesthetic. Here we find the abandonment of interest in the world upon which all aesthetic experience is based, a self-absorption so intense that the indifference of the world is incapable of drawing one out of one's own states of being.

Nihilism, then, is a product of self-pity, not of the indifference of the world to the human need for meaning and purpose; it comes about, as Wallace Stevens suggested more than forty years ago in "Esthétique du Mal," because our pain, the ordinary pain the comes from living, makes us indifferent to the sky, to the external world that provides some of the woe of life but also its pleasures and consolations.<sup>2</sup> Nihilism is the childlike assertion that these consolations won't do, that we require more in order to grant our assent to the world. It is therefore not overcome by a retreat to the sacred structures that our culture abandoned some time ago, for that is little more than a different way of refusing to accept the world on its own terms. We have to learn how to embrace the nonhuman without becoming inhuman; we have to see how we can become *more* human *only* by

embracing the *nonhuman* and its indifference toward us. And if we can do that, we will also recognize that the aesthetic mode of existence is the primary mode, that way of construing the world through which we originally worked, and that mode to which we shall have to return if we are going to find ways of dealing with the structures we ourselves have built.

Another way of phrasing the problem we face in the late twentieth century is to say that we are by now fully aware that the social powers that exert themselves in the world succeed to the extent that they attach themselves to the aesthetic. To be sure, this was always true, as suggested above: religion could not have had the power over people that it had if it did not derive its major force from the aesthetic. It loses its power over time as its aesthetic gestures are less and less convincing, less and less attached to the social world that emerges over the centuries. As secular powers gain more and more control over the *socius*, they seek more and more to usurp the force of the aesthetic, and they succeed to the extent that they do. Even repressive regimes in our time have to justify their behavior in aesthetic ways by providing convincing descriptions of social patterns that will justify their actions, though they are less under the sway of the aesthetic than democratic systems that depend more straightforwardly for their right to govern on the assent of large numbers of people. The most obvious example of the political usurpation of the aesthetic is found in the charismatic demagogue whose magic words convince the multitudes of the rightness of his plans for their future, but from the symbols through which political systems establish an emotive force that can approach the religious to the everyday arrangement of the socioeconomic apparatus through which people order their lives, social power depends upon the aesthetic for its sense of rightness.

The trend toward a greater and greater dependence on the aesthetic within the political comes about at a time when the political is also taking over the religious sense of mission previously dispensed by God, and because we are more aware of the ways political systems establish patterns of meaning and value, we have lost sight of their fundamental

dependence on aesthetic forces that don't inherently belong to them. The most obvious cases where these forces manifest themselves have to do with the zealotry of crowds, whether they be those Islamic fundamentalists in Iran who chant for the death of the Great Satan or those in countries like the United States who have given their lives over to a cause. Ironically, in failing to acknowledge the effects of the aesthetic, the liberal parties in the West have done more to undermine their own position than any conservative group could do, though this has yet to be fully realized. The liberals were the ones who committed themselves thoroughly to the post-structuralist rhetoric that declared all positions ideological. They did so in order to argue for the need to have their own special interests addressed, but they failed to see how that in turn gave the more fundamentalist groups an equally valid claim to attention, one that was heightened because they could claim that only their eternal verities could save the society from relativism or total nihilism. In a totally ideological world, the will to power is all, and the liberals were willing to argue this point as long as they felt their own power to be in the ascendent. Now that there are some serious points of backlash, in local areas and in far away regions like Iran as well, they may have to confront the implications of their own arguments a bit more squarely than they have up to now.

The political left in the West has been able to ideologize everything by declaring the aesthetic to be a bourgeois ruse, but this ignores the fact that beauty can be found in all human life and all social strata. In assuming that the aesthetic is only a disguised ideology, such critics thereby deny that beauty has anything other than political effects in people's lives. It is true that certain *ways of conceiving* of the function of beauty in human life specifically reflect the socioeconomic context through which they are articulated, just as it is true that all conceptions of human existence, be they political or aesthetic or religious, bear the stamp of their time. But to deny the aesthetic altogether, to declare it nothing more than another kind of ideology, is to lose sight of that upon which all societies depend. And given this, it is not enough simply

to be for the right cause, however admirable and just it may be. If the goal is the legitimate one of seeking to overcome some form of oppression or discrimination, it may in itself be admirable. But such goals cannot seriously be conceived over the long term through a scheme in which the will to power is all. If humans do nothing more during their lives than seek to exert power over others for their own benefit, then it is impossible to imagine a society in which discrimination comes to an end. One can do no more than hope for a world in which the dispossessed can take control and become the new masters.

The argument for the ideologization of the world comes about so easily because the aesthetic attaches itself to all disciplines without really being readily identifiable in itself. Because it lacks the structures upon which the West has based itself—because, that is, it is *irrational* and thereby defies reason, however sensible its own forms are in their own way—it appears not to exist at all and slips through the nets that would capture it. And because we have developed societies that make different kinds of appeals to the world, the questions we ask ourselves also turn away from the aesthetic. This is not simply because our self-absorption keeps us from recognizing a mode of life that is indifferent to us, though that is a good part of the problem. It is also because the very legitimate questions upon which all societies are based cannot be answered in a straightforward way for everyone on the basis of the aesthetic. The beautiful simply cannot provide the kinds of truths and structures upon which all social discourse depends, though all meaningful discourse derives from the aesthetic. And there is no reason why humans shouldn't demand meanings and a sense of purpose to their lives. The existentialists may have gone the wrong road when they began affirming an absurd universe and declared that we should create ourselves out of nothing, but they were right to be addressing these questions, however quaint they may seem in a world that is driven by the endless play of linguistic signs. Social systems must provide structure, meaning, and value, and their goal should be nothing else. The question is how they go about doing so, and dispensing

with the aesthetic will inevitably fail to create the kind of community that those who argue so assiduously for an ideological world hope to bring about.



The problem of how to develop a social system out of the aesthetic should in theory be simple enough once one concedes the value in doing so, but the obstacles are not simply those that come from the seeming ineluctability of the forms of beauty. They also have to do with the questions that Socrates sought to bury, and we can perhaps best get a glimpse of these problems by looking at one of the most famous stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." Robin, the young man whose coming of age the story recounts, is the typical innocent who must learn about his potential for good and evil, though he himself believes he has simply come to the town to make his way in the world with the help of his kinsman Major Molineux. As a stranger in town, his resources are sorely tested from the beginning, largely because he was eager and foolish enough to arrive at a late hour without having any directions to his kinsman's house. The most striking thing about Robin's reactions, though, is how violent they are, how quickly he turns to thoughts of revenge the moment something goes wrong. The expressions of violence begin innocuously enough, in humorous fashion—"The man is old, or verily, I might be tempted to turn back and smite him on the nose"<sup>3</sup>—but the wish to strike out is very real, and it comes from the embarrassment Robin feels in the face of the town's reaction to him: "Ah, Robin, Robin! even the barber's boys laugh at you for choosing such a guide!" Robin feels negated by the ridicule to which he is exposed and therefore tries to redress his wounds by imagining revenge.

Of course it is not very long before the level of Robin's violence escalates in the face of further indignities. He goes from embarrassment to greater abjection, having to face the kind of situation from which he was protected in the past by his insular home life: "Hunger also pleaded loudly with him,

and Robin began to balance the propriety of demanding, violently, and with lifted cudgel, the necessary guidance from the first solitary passenger whom he should meet" (36). Only his need for guidance and his desire for food keep him from threatening people with his cudgel, yet he fails to see that the guidance he requires cannot be had at the mere intrusion of a blunt instrument, that it is precisely his desire to make use of that instrument that must be guided. Nevertheless, his instincts get the better of him, and it is not long before he deliberately provokes someone: "The man was proceeding with the speed of earnest business, but Robin planted himself full before him, holding the oak cudgel with both hands across his body as a bar to further passage"(39).

These real and symbolic assertions of Robin's approaching manhood are designed to allow him to find his way in the world, but he doesn't realize that he is being forced to address his own internal desires through his confrontation with others, particularly through his contact with the man with the variegated countenance, who obviously symbolizes the adult state that Robin aspires to yet shrinks from:

Robin gazed with dismay and astonishment on the unprecedented physiognomy of the speaker. The forehead with its double prominence, the broad hooked nose, the shaggy eyebrows, and fiery eyes were those which he had noticed at the inn, but the man's complexion had undergone a singular, or, more properly, a twofold change. One side of the face blazed an intense red, while the other was black as midnight, the division line being in the broad bridge of the nose; and a mouth which seemed to extend from ear to ear was black or red, in contrast to the color of the cheek. The effect was as if two individual devils, a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness, had united themselves to form this infernal visage. The stranger grinned in Robin's face, muffled his parti-colored features, and was out of sight in a moment. (39)

Robin's own demons make their very graphic appearance to him through this man's visage, but like the man with the



painted face, this grin shocks him with its horror and is "out of sight in a moment," for this is hardly what Robin wants to see. *He* is a good person and doesn't contain a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness; *he* does not possess an infernal visage any more than he can discern infernal regions within himself, even if they are there. He may react with anger and the desire for violence at the slightest provocation, but to him that has nothing at all to do with the fiends represented in this figure.

When Robin is finally forced into a situation where his own behavior can no longer be ignored, when he has no other choice but to see at least momentarily that his guide was right, that a human may "have several voices . . . as well as two complexions" (44), he still cannot bring himself to admit what his own eyes and ears have shown him. Instead of seeing himself for what he is, he practices the sublime art of denial and repression. As his kinsman approaches in the midst of the feverish crowd that has tarred and feathered him, "The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street—every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there" (47). Caught up in the fever of the crowd, whose desire for the humiliation of the father figure is as strong for its own reasons as Robin's is, Robin unintentionally outlaughs those whose desires created the scene of Molineux's—and Robin's—humiliation. And when he recovers from his feverish outburst, his first response is to ask for the way to the ferry; he clearly wants to go back to where he was before he achieved self-knowledge and seeks to cover up his shame by saying that he is weary of town life (48). He has participated in Socrates' sacred mysteries, has been forever changed by them, but he remains uncertain whether or not, like Socrates, he wants to bury this knowledge forever or try to keep it in the forefront of his awareness.

Although Hawthorne ends the story before we find out whether Robin decides to remain in town, and hence accept his maturity with grace and insight rather than repression, the tone of the story would suggest that we are to expect



Robin to assume his fully adult position in the world. And although Hawthorne himself is clearly aware of the dangerous fuels he is playing with in this story, he too, like the mob who tars and feathers Molineux, chooses to point out the carnival atmosphere that surrounds these mysteries and mixes their violence with celebration: "The cloud spirits peeped from their silvery islands, as the congregated mirth went roaring up the sky! The Man in the Moon heard the far bellow. 'Oho,' quoth he, 'the old earth is frolicsome tonight!'" (48). The raging fires of the people may manifest themselves in colorful garb and mirthful laughter, but the joy of the crowd is mixed with the more potent forces of the cudgel Robin has so yearned to employ, and the mixture of emotions involved is as complex and variegated as the man's countenance: "On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery around some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man's heart. On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind." The "frenzied merriment," the ecstatic joy that sweeps the crowd out of its everyday state into the impersonal mass of the mob that can drive itself to deeds that none would accomplish in his or her ordinary disposition, is based on the triumph over an externally perceived evil that fully justifies both the merriment and the complete humiliation of the man who had previously symbolized the necessary order of the town.

The story itself, set just before the onset of the Revolutionary War, suggests that the United States, like Robin, is about to undergo its own maturation processes, is ready to assume the role of an adult in the world, but, as with Robin, it remains to be seen whether that role has even now been taken up, for it would depend on an acknowledgment of the variety of faces and voices inherent in every culture, an awareness of the fact that human motivations—and particularly that strong mixture of violence and merriment that dominates the story—are not always what they seem. Again, it is precisely to keep away from this kind of knowledge that Socrates prefers to bury the awareness of abjection

and shame, for he believes that no social state can withstand this knowledge, that the knowledge itself breeds the contagion of the mob that continually undermines the socius. It is the fever that devours the state and can therefore never be acknowledged. Hawthorne takes a more sanguine view, one that suggests both the inevitability of our awareness of these phenomena and our ability to assume them with grace and dignity, even if the people in the story didn't do so. After all, the comic stance of the story mingles with the very real threat posed by the individual and collective demons within it to mitigate the forces of condemnation that would guarantee a repetition of this mode of abjection in the future.

Hawthorne is in this sense strangely tolerant of his characters at the same time that he distinguishes his view from Socrates', for their behavior is justified by their desire for freedom, the wish to govern themselves. If they are to become adults who manage their own social affairs, then they must put off the yoke of British rule, but they must also put on the knowledge of their own fully human potential for good and evil. The trade-off is assumed to be both inevitable and natural: one achieves freedom to dispose of one's life at the cost of the awareness of the potential violence and evil that are constant threats to one's freedom and the freedom of others. Hawthorne thus doesn't doubt here that the average human is capable of moving through this change of state and coming out of it with the wisdom that Robin and Socrates would prefer to bury.

What remains unclear in all this is why a commitment to the aesthetic, that which allows, if you will, a comic stance toward these infernal regions of human nature, inevitably forces one to face the variegated countenance of the aesthetic state. Why is the aesthetic predicated on an awareness of the joy and the shame that Robin experiences in the same moment as his laugh rises higher than any other in the crowd? In a way, this is a nonsensical question, for the only answer would be that the aesthetic is a composite state that embraces joy and wonder as much as violence, the abject, and shame. But the issue here is one of *awareness*. Socrates, after all, invoked the rites of the mystery to try to bury knowledge of

the other side of the aesthetic, but even a mystery has written into it certain kinds of knowledge about its activities, just as most sacrificial rituals have built into them the symbolic knowledge of the blood sport of life, the sacrificing of a life in order to protect one's own, the symbolic exchange of one kind of violence for another. All sacrifice in this sense is a demonic assertion of power over the forces of death that surround one, a godlike demonstration of one's ability to trick the universe through a substitute murder, and one of the primary uses of the aesthetic takes place within this context of ritual, whether it be Socrates' desire to sacrifice a huge and unprocurable victim, Robin's desire to negate his kinsman in order to assume his own position in the world, or the rite of Holy Communion in the Christian Church. Some of these rites are sanctified, some are considered the devil's work, but seen from a distance they are all composed of the same kind of mysterious knowledge and ignorance. A mystery doesn't fully bury the infernal regions at all; it merely inscribes onto them a symbolic reminder of origin and intent.

Why, though, must there be some kind of awareness of these phenomena in spite of the very real desire for complete ignorance of them, and how does this contribute to the way the aesthetic is shaped by the political systems through which it chiefly manifests itself in our world today? If, like Robin, we should prefer to avert our eyes from Molineux's humiliation once we have had a chance to reflect upon what the contagion of the crowd had brought us to, why do we also seem to need such feverish states in order to sustain ourselves? One of the main problems with our current discourse is that it cannot answer these questions, cannot even approach them, perhaps out of a willed ignorance of them. We are still driven by images of utopian futures in which we shall no longer have to worry about the surges of the infernal regions that disrupt the smooth surfaces of people's lives, but such beliefs are no more than attempts to abjure the knowledge we possess, reflections of our desire to return with Robin to our presocial state in the forest.

Even more, we are still looking for *victims*, for those sym-

bolic figures who will keep our full knowledge of the aesthetic contained. Victims serve the dual aesthetic role of obliterating and perpetuating the shame that prompts us to deny what we are. In externalizing what we disapprove of within ourselves and projecting it upon others, we seem to avoid the need to deal with it, but the very process of victimization leads to the awareness that we have indeed *victimized* someone, that is, unfairly treated another in order to avoid the full costs of accepting who we are. That shame is buried in turn, only to rise again at some future date to victimize someone else. If we have our mysteries to keep from seeing straight on that which we know to be within ourselves, they are mysterious only to the extent that this awareness—and its very real threat to our sense of self—is always hovering at the *edge* of the rite. If we victimize someone, that is because we feel victimized ourselves. A sacrifice is always a doubling of motivation, a symbolic and literal means of sustenance that commemorates a moment of recognition: we see ourselves for what we are. We love the brutality of the rite and are shamed by it at the same time. We applaud ourselves for our blood lust even as we are negated by the act that was supposed to uplift us. And because the emotions always oscillate from one side to the other, we can never get away from that which the rite is supposed to allow us to escape. The purpose of all sacrificial rites, then, becomes the need to perpetuate sacrificial rites.

Hawthorne's story and his greater tolerance of the vagaries of his characters suggest that we have learned something since Socrates' day, that we have found an alternative to the mysterious rites that Socrates preferred that better deals with the full richness of the aesthetic. We have increasingly learned that the concentrated effects of the mystery are different in quality from the play of difference through which the aesthetic can articulate itself in a more open social system. The problem is that it seems all too easy to say that an open social system allows for a play of difference that doesn't necessarily manifest itself in the violence of sacrificial rites. In some senses this seems to be true, at least in an intuitive way, as Freud's invention of the hydraulic machine

of repression would suggest. It makes sense to think that knowledge of ourselves cannot really be buried, that it comes back with greater force the more we seek to keep it down. Likewise, therefore, it makes sense to assume that the pressures that grow out of the ordinary interaction of human beings are more likely to disperse themselves in benign ways if they are not repressed by an authoritarian regime. The return of the repressed is one of the clichés of our time, and it is hard to argue with its logic.

Socrates, we could say, produced the first public act of repression, contradictory though that is, and yet his very public declaration of the need for repression demonstrated its own impossibility. If Socrates really meant what he said, if he believed that one could indeed bury the knowledge of the violent truths of Ouranos and Kronos, then he should have done so without talking about it. He should have said that Hesiod lied and left it at that, *even if he believed otherwise*. To leave open the possibility that Hesiod told the truth, and to imagine remedies for this knowledge via the sacrificial mystery, is to be caught within the very contradiction that he seeks to escape: the declaration of repression that doesn't satisfactorily repress because it is declared. It may be that Socrates was simply conceding the obvious, that such things can never be wholly repressed for very long. It may be that he unknowingly demonstrated his ignorance of these matters by talking publicly about the need to bury this knowledge when it was quite clearly open for view in his discussion. And it may be that he simply had to preserve his reputation as wise man by acknowledging at least the possibility that the poet told the truth and then considering the consequences if he did. Regardless of the potential motivation, though, Socrates confers much greater power on the repressed by the degree to which he wants to repress it. He is not content simply to bury it. Instead, it must be buried in a mystery, and the mystery must be built around a huge and unprocurable victim, making it the greatest mystery of all. An ordinary sacrifice simply won't do; as with Christ, it has to be the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, for what is being sacrificed is the knowledge of the human desire to sacrifice, to