

## Chapter I

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# The Romantic Farewell to Beauty

### The Airy Premises of a Necessary Catastrophe

As we have just seen, beauty and the twentieth century are the terms of an extreme antithesis that seems to condemn the latter to an unfortunate destiny. No other century has been accused of having deliberately betrayed the canons of beauty, of having lost all faith in it embracing its opposite as an ideal, giving in to ugliness as the most wretched of sinners gives in to the devil. One is tempted to wonder not only if all of this is true, but also how it could have been possible to come to this, and who is to blame for such a big misdeed—to paraphrase the famous aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche announces the death of God by the hand of man.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, one can embark on a long historical journey to wonder whether this is a specifically twentieth-century topic or rather something that was already there, latently, and that the twentieth century simply brought out. So let's take one step back, to the nineteenth: the great century of the philosophy of art: that is to say, the great century in which beauty is no longer natural, and it is not metaphysical either—it is artistic. The story, whose main events I review shortly—is very intricate and has a theoretical aspect I would like to point out immediately, as it lies at the heart of the considerations to follow. The point is this: what if beauty, precisely by becoming artistic, betrayed itself and met ugliness? That's indeed what happens in the nineteenth century under the aegis of artistic *bohème*, which bears in it the most contradictory thing there is: art proposing itself as an autonomous institution.

The starting point here is Kant's aesthetics and, in particular, the alternative between aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment—which is not taken as an alternative by Kant, but rather by his idealist and Romantic

followers. The two types of judgment are not integrated as Kant wishes; upon closer inspection, they are rather sharply opposed. In the long run, this contraposition leads to the teleological judgment overcoming the aesthetic one. After all, the aesthetic judgment is afflicted by the inevitable contradiction inherent in its disinterested character, which ends up failing to account for many of its objects. In fact, as is known, the whole sphere of “adherent beauty”—encompassing almost all things that we define “beautiful,” from works of art to living beings—ends up escaping disinterest and being subjected to an extrinsic finality.

In fact, we could never decide whether a living being—say, a horse—or a building are beautiful if we didn’t have a precise concept in mind to define them. For these reasons, therefore, it is not surprising that the aesthetic judgment (ahistorical and aconceptual) is not what prevails in early Romanticism,<sup>2</sup> overshadowed by a philosophical art of which the Romantics, starting from Fichte, are the main representatives. On the other hand, the teleological judgment takes a secret path that leads further away, through Romanticism and early idealism up to its revival in contemporary art: think, for instance, of Richard Long. The teleological judgment, in fact, is sometimes the ultimate ideal of contemporary art, and we see why and how at the end of the book. What is being proposed, ahead of its time, is a new theory of the form, one that derives from the overcoming of the ancient Platonic distinction between appearance and reality on which art (and in particular, if not exclusively, art as an autonomous institution) had based its foundations. But it is better to speak more about this later, putting the matter aside for now.

As regards the birth of a philosophical art in early Romanticism, it is interesting to recall what Friedrich Schlegel wrote in his *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (*Philosophical Apprenticeship*). Among other things, he noted that Fichte is the true philosopher of art. The same can be said of Kant who, nevertheless, is perhaps (also, or even more) a philologist of nature: “The French are prominent in wit, the philosophy of nature, politics. The British in natural science, history, empiricism, sentimental poetry. Fichte is a far greater art philosopher than Kant, who is a philologist of nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Schlegel here manifestly acknowledges his debt to Fichte, whereas Kant identifies and seems to point at a very different direction. Through Fichte, art follows the path of art rooted in the *Streben*—Schiller’s moral tension. This direction, conjugating art with the instability of the yearning (Goethe stigmatized this view precisely in discussion with Schiller), is opposed by Kant: his teleological judgment seems to indicate a different way, which will be taken up

only in the Romantic age.<sup>4</sup> In this context, Goethe and the Romantics faced each other in a confrontation of unprecedented scope and meaning.

The issue at stake is very clear on both sides: if form were to abandon life, there would be a catastrophe with unforeseeable consequences. For the side of the *Streben*, forms, animated by infinite tension, chase life, which escaped them; for Goethe and what could be defined “Romantic naturalism” from Novalis to Schelling, it is the gaze that was blurred, but things have always been the same way: the living logos has never ceased to exist. This is a conflict between real and ideal, and Goethe has been lucidly aware of it ever since his debate with Schiller, in the background of which echoes Kant’s thought. In his essay “Influence of Recent Philosophy,” Goethe states, in this regard:

Due to his friendship and sympathy for me perhaps more than for his conviction, in his *Aesthetics Letters* Schiller did not treat the good Mother (Nature) with the harshness of language that had made his *Grace and Dignity* unlovable; but because I, being just as stubborn and hard-headed as him, not only exalted the superiority of Greek poetic imagination, and the poetry founded on and derived from it, but deemed this way as the only just and desirable one, he was pushed towards more thoughtful reflections, and precisely this conflict is what originated the essays on *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*. The two ways to imagine and write poetry had to adapt and recognise each other, side by side, with the same rank.

So he lay the first stone of the whole new aesthetics; in fact, the adjectives *Hellenic* and *Romantic*, or any other synonym there may be, can be traced back to the point where, for the first time, there was discussion of the superiority of the real process or of the ideal procedure.<sup>5</sup>

As is well known, the crucial thinker for the poetics of the first Romantics is not so much Schiller—who, for Goethe, is the one who leads the way—but rather Fichte. However, Fichte’s influence is introduced within a singular combination with the Platonic revival of the end of the century, of which Friedrich Schlegel himself is one of the main protagonists.<sup>6</sup> For Schlegel, the point is to connect ideas with life in its elusive and fundamentally ineffable nature, seeing this movement as something that is not simply negative but that should be profited from. Based on this, ideas acquire a dynamic character that leads them to achieve a connection with life itself, finding their deepest nature in

their relation to it—according to an approach that sees Plato himself as a sort of neo-Platonic, in line with his reception at the time. In other words, ideas must be realized in life if they don't want to misunderstand themselves and become mere empty shells, failing their main task—that of shaping things.

In order for this not to happen, it is necessary to enact a sort of morphological revolution, joining the Platonic idea and the Kantian one, taking the idea as the horizon of an infinite yearning for.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, what happens in this context? According to what Schlegel himself states in his *Pariser Vorlesungen*, Plato is the creator of a philosophy, not of a system. Plato's philosophy is not closed off but answers the need of an infinite search. Philosophy can thus be represented as an unsatisfied aspiration, an indefinite maturation of thought that does not and cannot find a definitive structure, if not at the cost of self-betrayal:

It has already been noted that Plato only had a philosophy, but not a system, and that philosophy in general is a search, an aspiration to science, rather than a science in itself, and this applies in particular to Plato's philosophy. He never gave a definitive version of his thought and attempted to artistically represent this eternal becoming, formation and development of his ideas in his dialogues.<sup>8</sup>

This leads to the conception that not only thought but also artworks are in constant becoming, and this happens precisely because the artwork is the model of a form sought in life—a yearning that is itself artistic because it is dramatic, full of tension and expectations. If the latter weren't met, the consequences would be notable. The main one would be the failure of beauty as an ideal of a measure that is not only and not mainly artistic but—in line with the ancient view—cosmic (all of which shows that the success of an artwork does not concern only the artwork itself, nor does it mainly concern the art sphere). “Art lives on its own ideal and on the possibility to embody it; but the ideal of art is not properly artistic.”<sup>9</sup> So, the failure of beauty should be understood in a perspective that is essentially metaphysical, but also historical and metaphysical at the same time, as it bears with it a present that is far from indifferent to the end of its adventure.

Friedrich Schlegel articulates the issue with his brother in a letter dated 28 August 1793, underlining the alternative between system and ideal. He outlines here an infinite progress, the ideal of an *unendliche Perfektibilität*, an endless perfectibility that he would soon take up and refine in dialogue with Condorcet:<sup>10</sup>

I must take into my care two things that you deny, the system and the ideal. I know that the scandalous abuse of senseless and soulless sophists has significantly dirtied these words; but you see only that and choose denial, being unjustly suspicious of the precious eloquent testimonies of our divine nobility. What we call soul in works of art (in poetry I'd rather define it as the heart), what we call spirit and ethical dignity in man, and God in creation—living connection—this is the system with regards to the concepts. There is only one real system—the great hidden eternal nature, or the truth. But if you imagine all human thought as a whole, then it becomes evident that the truth, the accomplished unity, is the inevitable direction of all thought, even though it can *never* be reached. . . . And let me add that the spirit of the system leads only to multilateralism—which may seem paradoxical, but is definitely undeniable.<sup>11</sup>

The idea, the form and life are thus introduced in a constant dialogue at a distance—uninterrupted and risky—between Goethe and the Romantics.<sup>12</sup> This dialogue does not simply involve philosophy but also art, according to a fruitful interchange between the two, of which Romanticism is in many ways the herald, and which spells out precisely in the title—echoing Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*—of Schlegel's *Philosophical Apprenticeship* (*Philosophische Lehrjahre*). Thus poetry, like philosophy, aims at the living individuality. The becoming of the form, which must open up for the living so as not to stiffen and become self-absorbed, is thus exposed to an obvious risk: that of an (almost oxymoronic) idea of an open form that must overcome its boundaries. It is a sort of revolution of the form and its intrinsic meaning. But it is not enough to focus on this level. What is at stake is not just the semantics of the form, but also its scope as a principle of the distinction of beings—both one from the other and from the chaos preceding them—according to the original Hesiodic myth of Aphrodite's birth.

Therefore, what is being announced is the need of a real morphological revolution. This is made evident by the situation of deep imbalance between being and its idea. In this way we get closer to a nihilistic abyss: the forms and the living beings are driven to a risky and fascinating game of mirrors, which transforms both, forcing them to a gruelling confrontation. The form that does not contain, that no longer grasps, looks at reality and perceives it as an endless fragmentation that it wants to resolve. Thought, looking for a renewed

and newly appropriate form, is led, in turn, to an almost obligatory step: to bear upon itself the risk of fragmentation.

To learn about reality in detail in its secret, ineffable nature, thought has to become itself a fragment according to a practice that—as is well known—was widely used by Romantic authors and by Friedrich Schlegel in particular. So, the philosophy that chose fragmentation did so as it had to face the fragmentation of the world itself. Therefore, this thought speaks by a kind of extreme ontological nominalism; it looks at reality up into its infinitesimal traits; and, to promote its own path, it adopts not a conceptual principle but a new morphological ideal, assuming in this context the appearance of one last bastion against the advance of nihilism—that is, of the dynamics and centrifugal instances of modernity, so compelling as to escape any formal control.

Facing fragmentation, paradoxically this thought must not only make an extreme unifying gesture, that of a sudden unification of the *disiecta membra* through projects such as a new Bible, the total work of art, the book of books, etc.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in this way it also carries out an absolutely unusual metaphorical power, bringing together everything with everything, echoing the different elements through contacts and unusual harmonies. On the other hand, the metaphor can be overturned into catachresis, thus recognizing the failure of form in its going back to itself, no longer able to accommodate its content, and thereby destined to wrap itself up in a tautological self-reflection.

This is certainly one of the risks of the Romantic art form that is highlighted by Hegel (who predates the phenomenon by locating the birth of modernity in Christianity),<sup>14</sup> but this also coincides with a dilation of the borders and meaning of the problem of the form according to an orientation that—as we see better in the next chapter—is adopted by Nietzsche. In fact, Nietzsche saw nihilism as essentially a sort of *formal failure*, the logoi falling back on themselves. Indeed, for Nietzsche, nihilism is nothing more than this: the irredeemable autonomization of the logoi from reality, so that they fall back on themselves as pale, inert, and powerless forms, while being develops a wild and conflictual nature under the guise of the will to power.

This almost definitely marks the final disappearance of Goethe's viewpoint and his passionate defense of the continuity of art, idea, and nature. Thus disappears the possibility to refer to models or types as Goethe had done by resorting to the idea of the original plant and that of the intermaxillary bone: those were ideas that unified the spheres of plant and animal nature, thereby also allowing them to differentiate themselves. What happens here is a sort of major catastrophe: it is the end of that poetic and poietic side of

thought, connected with the idea and therefore with the form, on which the Romantic gaze had focused. Thus, what is lost is the intuition that marks thought from its very beginning and without which thought could not even work, or at least communicate.

### Form, Style, Entropy

Returning now to the antithesis set out above between aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment and taking it to its extreme consequences, one would argue that if the aesthetic judgment gives rise to autonomous art, understood as an institution in its own right, the teleological judgment originates the inextricable interweaving between art and nature that seems to be the hidden reason, the fertile remorse, of aesthetics and reflection on art in the twentieth century. Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Schelling seem to initiate the great battle between aesthetic judgment and teleological judgment. As we have seen, victory immediately (at least provisionally) goes to the former.

It's as if there was a slow and—at least in Schlegel—still uncertain growth of a seed sown in the first introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, which brings us to Romanticism through the idea of a “technique of nature.” This can be inferred from Schlegel's already-cited philosophical notebooks, for instance when he states—against the Kantian view on the purely regulative nature of the idea of finality—that the technique of nature is an integral part of the theory of ends, thereby asseverating the continuity of nature and culture. The theory of ends constitutes, in turn, a part of historiography, of the discipline whose object is the human story and its aims. “*Historiography* is divided in the *doctrine of ends* and the *doctrine of culture*. We should not transpose the technicality of nature into mankind—or rather, it also belongs to the *doctrine of ends*.”<sup>15</sup>

But what Schlegel emphasises is the constructive character of Kant's doctrine, showing—for instance—that experience is not a given but something constructed. On this basis one must also understand Schlegel's doctrine of art:

Kant does not start from the fact that *experience* IS, according to a misunderstanding that was also shared by *Niethammer*, *Reinhold*, *Erhard*; but from the unproven—and yet to be demonstrated—proposition that *experience* MUST BE, according to what Beck, Fichte and Schelling have rightly understood. This proposition must absolutely be demonstrated.<sup>16</sup>

The constructed character of experience refers us back to the artificial character of art itself, in contraposition to the Kantian technique of nature. This is a crucial point, one that affects the entire path I wish to address in this book. Just as experience, art also can be said to be related to something constructed. And constructed art—the construction of art—inevitably clashes against beauty. In short, one could also say that the twentieth-century negation of the beautiful—which is, if not the object, at least the origin of all those considerations—is rooted much earlier, in that crucial passage in which aesthetics became philosophy of art. The birth of the philosophy of art, the pair art-historical knowledge—which already somewhat appeared in the abovementioned dialogue between Schiller and Goethe—actually means the disappearance of beauty that, as such (as a witness and a compendium of the intrinsic measure of the cosmos) is not and cannot be artificial or constructed.

When, in the *Aesthetics: Lectures on, Fine Art*, Hegel speaks of the end of art, at least “considered in its highest vocation,” he is essentially acknowledging what I have just explained. If beauty (even artistic) is no longer the compendium of the cosmic law but expresses its own, it condemns itself to fading, to becoming a side phenomenon in the cosmos of culture, bowing to the unstoppable power of the concept. For Hegel all of this is intrinsic to the becoming of the spirit:

Only one sphere and stage of truth is capable of being represented in the element of art. In order to be a genuine content for art, such truth must in virtue of its own specific character be able to go forth into [the sphere of] sense and remain adequate to itself there. This is the case, for example, with the gods of Greece. [. . .] Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art. [. . .] It is not, as might be supposed, merely that the practising artist himself is infected by the loud voice of reflection all around him and by the opinions and judgements on art that have become customary everywhere, so that he is misled into introducing more thoughts into his work; the point is that our whole spiritual culture is of such a kind that he himself stands within the world of reflection and its relations, and could not by any act of will and decision abstract himself from it; nor could he by special education or removal from the relations of life contrive and organize a special solitude to replace what he has lost.

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us



genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.<sup>17</sup>

At a closer look, beauty goes down with the rise of the philosophy of art, when the attention gets organized around the aesthetic object, which replaces the eighteenth-century aesthetics founded on sentiment.<sup>18</sup> Artistic beauty is always the product of becoming, something made and never simply given to the person who contemplates it. To reformulate this thesis once again, one could say that the autonomy of the beautiful—which Goethe saw as a threat—coincides with its very disappearance. And this is the tragic background against which the philosophy of art was born. This is also the starting point of all the considerations included here.

Besides, the naturalness of beauty is related—and here we come to the classicistic paradigm and its highest model—to a natural balance of forces in which the effort of the construction is not (or should not be) felt. This is precisely what Winckelmann writes about in his very famous description of *Laocoon* in his *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*. This is precisely what Schlegel becomes aware of in his great youthful essay “On the Study of Greek Poetry,” where he senses the loss of the ancient balance.

Let’s start from Winckelmann’s description of *Laocoon* to test our thesis. His text couldn’t be any more exemplary and eloquent (nor could it be any more famous).

The last and most eminent characteristic of the Greek works is a noble simplicity and sedate grandeur in Gesture and Expression. As the bottom of the sea lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface, a great soul lies sedate beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures.

’Tis in the face of *Laocoon* this soul shines with full lustre, amidst the most violent sufferings. Pangs piercing every muscle, every labouring nerve; pangs which we almost feel ourselves, while we consider—not the face, nor the most expressive parts—only the belly contracted by excruciating pains: these however, I say, exert not themselves with violence, either in the face or gesture. He pierces not heaven, like the *Laocoon* of *Virgil*.<sup>19</sup>

Following Peter Szondi,<sup>20</sup> one can overturn this image and, reversing the depth-surface order proposed by Winckelmann, one can see passions as a

potentially turbulent element that manages to redeem itself from its deep disquiet by turning to the surface in search of the levity of the form. Well, in this way the classical model represented by *Laocoon* also eliminates energy losses; it generates the highly improbable balance that we call “order,” a useful compendium of forces in the form. It is as if there were a system of forces and counterforces that manage to balance each other at a key point that balances and compensates the opposing tensions. That’s how this tempering of forces in the form described by Winckelmann might well be summed up by the words of Rudolph Arnheim reported below, unrelated to any specific examples:

Now equilibrium is the very opposite of disorder. A system is in equilibrium when the forces constituting it are arranged in such a way as to compensate each other, like the two weights pulling at the arms of a pair of scales. Equilibrium makes for standstill—no further action can occur, except by outside influence.<sup>21</sup>

It is not hard to glimpse in those presuppositions a sort of entropic direction of art going hand in hand with its formal dissolution. The elements of the form now tend to break free from the constraints imprisoning them, mingling with each other and making it collapse. The energies that structure the work of art also tend to escape from it, and they do so in order to identify themselves ecstatically with that life, which they should subsequently reshape through a perfect transposition. One consequence is the emergence of the ugly as a characteristic element of modern art, which derives precisely from this escape, from the dispersion of the elements conglomerated in the formal structure and catalyzed by the latter, which provided them with a keystone.

In the transition to this new formal structure, in this time of crisis and disorder, the ugly appears. The advent of ugliness is the outcome of the transformation of aesthetics into energy: the dispersion of the elements structuring the form frees the energies that organized them. Ugliness is therefore also brutal, deriving from the imbalance of the forces giving rise to formal structure, which thus violently break away from it. This justifies the morbid interest of aesthetic modernity in figures such as Frankenstein and Moosbrugger! The ugly comes from the dissolved balance of the energies in form. In contrast—as is exemplarily illustrated by Winckelmann’s passage mentioned above—form is a time of stabilization of energy conflicts, which proposes itself as definitive, at least as it cannot be altered by endogenous causes but only through outside interventions.

Herein, in the perfect unchangeable internal balance, lies the perfection of classic art, which also makes it intangible. The loss of form does not represent only a failure; it also coincides with an increase in available energy, thus crediting a dynamic propensity that is peculiar to the first German Romanticism and based on which the concept of chaos acquires a significant meaning in modern art.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the way was paved to a new, conflictual, model of beauty and to the avant-garde: that is, the consciously antagonistic formal dynamic used, for example, by futurism but also by artists such as Kandinsky. It must be said that the first signs of this journey—as the reader probably remembers—appeared long before, already in the first major work by Friedrich Schlegel, which manifests (under the sign of the triumph of the ugly) an aesthetic model marked by conflicts and lacerations that questions Winckelmann's, nearly constituting its oppositional *pendant*. The formal structure has opened up—for Schlegel—freeing the forces that compose it in a disorderly and craving manner. These forces thus arrange themselves in a confrontational way that is reflected in the ugly. This, as the reader surely recalls, is the wasteland of aesthetic modernity, crossed by turbulent energies whose struggle never reaches the tranquillity of a solid formal structure.

What truly happened? Knowing this is useful to understand how much of the Romantic legacy has survived till the twentieth century, contributing to its aesthetic consciousness. Through Schlegel's dramatic passages the principle of the artwork has fallen.<sup>23</sup> The principle of the author and authorship—linked to it by conceptual symmetry—has fallen with it. However, the relation between the two cannot immediately appear evident; on the contrary, Romanticism was often accused by its great opponents (especially Goethe and Hegel) of excessively emphasizing subjectivity. The crisis of the subject and the crisis of the object—as imprecise as the terminology may be—also go hand in hand, as shown not only by Romanticism but also by modernity.

The crisis of the former goes together with that of the latter. We are dealing with a pair of terms or a hendiadys that—like Goethe's *Urpflanze*—creates further, almost infinite ones: breakout of subjectivity and language, possibility to communicate, and universality of the subject, style and sublime,<sup>24</sup> decorum and expression, all full of meaning for the future. We are witnessing the emergence of a double movement that, on the one hand, refers to formal rigor and, on the other, relates to the ideal of an artwork that lies beyond its objective reality. Thus is produced what could be defined as a fall out of the form, with the neurotic and almost reactive counterweight of the communicative

and ideologically unambiguous objectivity of the style (up until stylistic terrorism, the obtuse and almost caricature-like neo-classicism of dictatorships, especially national socialism). In the latter case the stylistic order prefigures and affirms the real one.<sup>25</sup>

As Hans Belting noted, this does not happen insofar as the ideal of the artwork goes beyond the artwork itself, realizing—I would add—what Romantic Platonism has always suggested. It is also true that the artwork opens up in two directions: both towards its ideal and towards an ambiguous infinity, which is not only the beyond to which the work tends but also its very origin. These are not only artworks alluding to something beyond figuration according to the varied tradition of the sublime, from Caspar David Friedrich to Marcel Duchamp, Ives Klein, or Barnett Newman. Indeed, we can probably also reconstruct a tradition going back to a sort of prebreak, which happens not after its configuration but at the origin of form: think of authors such as Philipp Otto Runge<sup>26</sup> or—to come to the twentieth century—of movements such as action painting, which I address in the last chapter.

I come back to these considerations, but for now I wish to return to German Romanticism to grasp the main traits of the whole journey. It is easy to see that the limits and structure of the artwork suffer a deep crisis. But to understand this crisis even better, one should resort to one of the central tenets of modern hermeneutics. I am referring to a classic theme of the theory of the interpretation of a literary text; not surprisingly, that's what leads us up until the limits of chaos understood as the beginning of understanding. I am referring to the idea—articulated in different ways by Friedrich Schlegel and then by Schleiermacher—that an author should be understood by her audience better than she understands herself.

When Friedrich Schlegel and then Schleiermacher formulated a proposal of this kind, they foresaw the need for a genetic process by which the personality (at the least the conscious one) of the author must recede in front of a deeper and earlier demand. For Schleiermacher this demand is met in a psychological identification in the authorial *iter*;<sup>27</sup> and for Schlegel it is a sort of chaotic area preceding any psychological requirement. Chaos becomes the principle of being and creation, as can be inferred from this passage from “On Incomprehensibility”: “Verily, it would fare badly with you if, as you demand, the world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn't this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility or chaos?”<sup>28</sup>

## Decorum and Expression

The antithesis taking shape here leads towards the dissolution of the form and subjectivity as correlated principles of the articulation of the artwork. To delve into the issue, it is perhaps appropriate to implement a pictorial distinction dating back to the sixteenth-century treatises: that between design and color. Such distinction echoed significantly in the Romantic context, thanks to an essay by August Wilhelm Schlegel, "Die Gemälde," originally published in *Athenäum* in 1799: in it, painting emancipates itself from other plastic arts (architecture and sculpture) as an eminently modern art. This is a significant detachment, because it sets the objective, plastic, sculptural aspect of painting against the subjective, expressive, properly pictorial one, which is rooted in perspective and color.<sup>29</sup> To translate this contraposition in terms useful for the purposes of this book, one must say that in many ways the journey of aesthetic modernity leads to the divorce between the two aspects that give the title to this paragraph: expression, connected to subjectivity, and decorum in its stylistic and monumental appearance. The contraposition of the two terms also leads to a decay of both: taken to its limits, the expressiveness of the subject is lost in the ineffability stigmatized by Hegel, while an absolute monumentality loses sight of the life that should nurture it as an artistic event.

Now, the balance of these two aspects and its subsequent crisis actually hints at a broader balance, which also seems to have been undermined. The encounter between the stylistic-monumental aspect with the subjective-expressive one is the compendium of opposing forces, ones that in the Romantic culture go by different names: ancient and modern, Greek and Christian. For many of the protagonists of the so-called age of Goethe,<sup>30</sup> the Renaissance unified those themes; but the subsequent history separated them again, thus rendering the ancient model an exclusively stylistic one, classicism, while the modern became a subjective hyperbole that can alternately, but also indifferently, produce both hypertrophy—the limitless power of the subject—and ineffable mysticism.

In many ways—if I may provisionally use an expression so broad and generic—the fate of modern art is sealed by this oscillation between opposites, between the emergence of the individual and monumentality, and by the nihilistic crisis that comes from their impossible union. The subject and the world become each other's alternative without being able to interrupt their relationship.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this relation continues with an insistence that is

neurotic but also, in hindsight, fertile. In this way the two terms of this difficult relationship—which are no longer able to establish some stable contact but which repeatedly seek it—produce the dissipative trend described above. Because the form does not take on a conclusive and accomplished appearance, it still leaves free part of the energies that tend to organize it; and these become, paradoxically but also fruitfully, cause for further dispersion. The latter increases the metamorphic transformation process in the frustrating but paradoxically also productive search of another form, again inevitably inadequate in relation to what it has to display and contain.

So—to take a step from Romanticism to the avant-garde—this is the configuration of forms with conflicting traits. Precisely because they are open forms, anticlassical ones, they turn, despite themselves, into their opposite: they cease being proud representatives of the autonomy of art and become deliberately voted to its decline, to an infinite emptiness, which should finally rejoin the life from which they have claimed to have freed themselves.<sup>32</sup> The dialectic between form and life, brilliantly initiated by Schlegel in his early Platonic studies—in other words, the effort that leads to their impossible union and that must be properly understood as energetic (both dissipating and creating energy)—produces a persistent oscillation from pole to pole.

The form is forced to deal with the details of existence, experiencing life as objective dispersion, which revolutionizes it, disrupting its composition and its balances. It is forced to take a plastic attitude opposed to reality in its unrestrainable aspect, albeit risking breaking against the latter. The form should attract life, saving it from the disenchantment of time and of the end, providing it with the chrism of eternity, but instead ends up collapsing on life itself, no longer able to be distinguished from it. This is the tragedy of the formal dynamic, which would like to attract the living and instead is sucked into it following a parabola that has its climax far beyond German Romanticism—that is, as mentioned, in Andy Warhol. Indeed when Warhol ironically suggests that our collective identity is Coca-Cola, he is sanctioning the end of a story that—to mention only its modern side—has lasted for nearly two centuries.

Warhol is discussed in the last chapter. For now let's follow the form in its neurotic developments. Art longs to return to life and seeks again a classicity that (at least for now) is impossible.