

*Life and Life-Energy**Roy Lisker**Chapter 6**Psychology of Aesthetic Appreciation*

The psychology of art appreciation is uncomplicated. When a work of art succeeds in its purpose, its contents have been conveyed, via the senses and the imagination, by means of the skillful manipulation of basic psychological states of anticipation, resolution, anxiety, expectation, hope and fear, resolution. The resultant sense of fulfillment is akin to spiritual renewal. Furthermore, those experiences which liberate our life-energies from bondage will invest the objects associated to them with those living qualities they have successfully evoked.

All artistic media develop a basic technical vocabulary to describe such dynamics. One employs it as an objective way of setting up the correspondence between our emotional responses and the devices competent artists employ to arouse them. That this relationship of craft to affect be achieved generally presumes some basic level of artistic education in the audience, what is commonly called 'cultivation'.

Examples: the ways in which the sound of a 'concert A' will alter its timbre, harmonic function and meaning in the unfolding of a symphony may not be understood by someone with little background in music; the use of alliteration in a poem to create a deliberate emphasis may readily be missed by someone not trained to expect it.

Because it unfolds in real time, it is in music that this correlation of craft with affect is most notable. The devices are given names like "anticipation", "suspension", "partial cadence", "deceptive cadence", "full cadence", "dissonance", "resolution", "modulation", and so on. These terms describe both the technical procedure and its psychological impact.

A deceptive cadence in classical music (This is one of the ways of distinguishing 'classical' from 'popular' music: very few composers of popular music use the 'deceptive cadence' correctly ), can have an absolutely devastating effect, akin to astonishment or a major disappointment!

It is through these devices that a voyage of exploration, a true adventure of mind and spirit, is initiated. Operating at a deep, pre-

conscious level, works of art have the power to elevate us to the highest mental, psychological and moral states.

It is only natural that the keen delight associated with such states will be projected onto the things that produce them. The nobility which they evoke in us will be attributed to the artistic vessel: one might refer to it as a "Pygmalion effect". The artwork itself, neither alive nor conscious, can neither have nor lack nobility. Yet by virtue of its effect on our imaginations we believe it to be so. While reading a novel or watching a play we become in turn indignant, amused or compassionate in turn, forgetting that the words are only on the page, or being spoken by actors simulating the persons evoked, but in no sense identical to them.

The “death-bed confession” of the hero is only on-stage. There is no death, no hero, no confession! Yet a strongly cast illusion, using devices attuned to our interior cycles of emotional response, may, for a brief moment, totally dissolve the line separating myth from reality, so that in fact, we sometimes feel that what we’ve seen is *even more real* than daily life. To paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, in our dreams all of us are perfect artists.

Gifted artists excel in the ability to weave these textures of illusion from the most commonplace objects, phenomena or events, investing them with subtlety, sensitivity and living emotion. Through craft in the skillful arrangement effects, the subtle mechanisms of psychological adjustment are directed along pre-ordained paths, giving us the

**confidence to do the work on ourselves that will lead to insight and  
understanding.**

\*\*\*\*\*

*1. Albrecht Dürer: Melencolia*



The following analysis of Albrecht Dürer's masterpiece, *Melencolia*, will attempt to point out the ways in which psychological phenomena can be deliberately manipulated by the artist in the service of artistic goals.

The cluttered visual field provokes an immediate and strong response. All of the objects depicted make some allegorical reference to astrology, to Galenic medicine based on the 4 humors (including melancholy) and to the doctrine of correspondences propounded by Pico della Mirandola and other humanist neo-Platonists of 15th century Italy.

All objects seem starkly alien in their relationship to each another. Most of them are damaged or broken, unfinished, neglected. The great stone dodecahedron, its large prominent face obstructing the view of the



central figure, suggests a sculpture, partially attempted before being abandoned. Out of reach on the unfinished pedestal, the artist's hammer lies idle. Other tools lay strewn about, a plane, nails, saw, auger.

Other tools surround the melancholic figure: A fallen angel?

Minerva perhaps; or a broken-winged Icarus? The sheer weight of the naked stone block depresses us, an overly ambitious conception too grandiose to ever be realized. Its' very prominence in the line of sight of its creator, is a source of continual agitation. We imagine her in a state of prolonged contemplation of its aborted possibilities.

In her right hand the angel absent-mindedly holds the stylus leg of a geographer's compass. It hangs motionless, in suspended animation.

Has she wearied so quickly in tracing the disc of the bleak, storm-strewn

sun, towards which the compass arm and her own hard, squinting eyes inexorably converge?

The space itself (A studio? A garret? A public square?) is overly crowded with artifacts of every shape, function and form. Is it not strange, therefore, that one can find not a trace of food anywhere?

Starvation has reduced the dog curled up beside the polyhedral block and the broken-stringed lute (neo-Platonic symbol of heart-break), to a pitiful state. Could this be because the fallen angel is too distracted to remember that its' pet needs proper nourishment and attention?

Although the field of the engraving draws our attention in many directions, its primary focus is the mind of the oppressed figure. All of its lines converge powerfully to her face, eyes and brain. Curled into a

ball and pressed tightly against her temple, her left hand relieves an omnipresent headache. Every object in the field of the picture competes for her attention, which has been thoroughly fragmented. Each object suggests a thought; the catalogue of objects inventories her reflections.

Through Dürer's skillful rendering we share in all of her scattered meditations: the bleak sun, pale as the vision of a failing eye; the marble ball; the huge polyhedral block; the lute; the various tools; the little cherub (kindred spirit or idle figment of imagination? ); the clanging bell overhead; the 4x4 magic square beneath it .

Exceedingly strange are the presence of the ladder in the center of the field and the manner in which it is drawn. Indeed, its' perspective is *blatantly* false! No master artist would have drawn an object this way

had it not been his deliberate intention to do so: certainly not Durer, whose experiments with perspective put him in the category of the mathematician-painters like Piero della Francesca. As if to confirm this observation, note how the etching is filled with references to mathematics: the magic square, the dodecahedron, the compass.

The "amateur" errors in perspective of the ladder constitute a kind of "sight joke" in the intellectual jungle of *Melencolia*. The jangling dissonance of this misbegotten ladder sends powerful ripples of unease, anguish, even suffering, throughout the entire composition. It literally "throws everything off".

This cannot be an accident, not in an engraving which is universally appraised as one of Dürer's masterworks. One comes to

understand its' purpose through examination of the line of intense concentration, virtually at right angles to the ladder, connecting the upper left hand corner to the wan sun, to the surreal ladder, to the crown of the cherub's head, to the dark eyes of the fallen angel, to the closed fist of the left hand relieving the turmoil of an aching brain.

The art historian Heinrich Wöfflin (*The Art of Albrecht Dürer*; Heinrich Wöfflin; Phaidon Press, 1971) claims that, when one imagines the ladder being removed from the engraving, the agitated atmosphere calms down. Deliberately incorrect perspective produces an Escher-like effect, a sleight of hand to intensify the aura of mental anguish dominating the panoply of images of melancholy. Indeed, if Escher is to

be acknowledged as a genuine artist and not merely a dabbler in sight

gags, he used such devices in the same way!





## II. "Adam's Curse" by William Butler Yeats:

*We sat together at one summer's end,  
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,  
And you and I, and talked of poetry.  
I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.*

*Better go down upon your marrow-bones  
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;  
For to articulate sweet sounds together  
Is to work harder than all these, and yet  
Be thought an idler by the noisy set  
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen  
The martyrs call the world."*

*And thereupon  
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake  
There's many a one shall find out all heartache  
On finding that her voice is sweet and low  
Replied, "To be born woman is to know --  
Although they do not talk of it at school --  
That we must labour to be beautiful."*

*I said, "It's certain there is no fine thing*

*Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.  
 There have been lovers who thought love should be  
 So much compounded of high courtesy  
 That they would sigh and quote with learned looks  
 precedents out of beautiful old books;  
 Yet now it seems an idle trade enough."*

*We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
 We saw the last embers of daylight die,  
 And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
 A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
 Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
 About the stars and broke in days and years.*

*I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
 That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
 To love you in the old high way of love;  
 That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
 As weary-hearted as that hollow moon*

The poem speaks of the transience of all things. As I will argue at the end of this discussion, there are actually 8 levels of metaphors of transience in the poem: Proceeding by line and stanza:

(1) *"We sat together at one summer's end  
 That ...."*

3 "at " sounds in a row may be merely as coincidence or an accident, but given the stature of Yeats, one could also assume that he did it deliberately, and that it serves to emphasize the word "That" in the



second line. This of course is often used in music, when the 3 fold repetition of a theme gives rhetorical emphasis.

(2) The time of year mentioned in the first line, "summers end", moving to fall (Fall) already brings up the association with Adam's Curse. The autumnal equinox is the strongest transition in terms of weather, and signifies better than anything else, the universality of decay

(3) The "close friend" must be younger than the woman being addressed by the poet. After all, she is still beautiful, while the person he's talking too has only a faded beauty. Some interpreters claim that the woman being addressed is Maud Gonne, and the "close friend" her sister. However, such autobiographical references are irrelevant to the interpretation of the poem.

(4) Stanza 2 is a harsh indictment of the modern world, given over to industrialism and exploitation, in which everything is judged by its monetary value. It has many "short" syllables, designed to highlight the lack of continuity or generosity of our own age.

Such as this line:

*....And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones...*

The next line refers, I think, to 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish history:

*...or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;*

The “old paupers” who “broke stones” is a direct reference to the so-called “make-work” projects floated by the British government during the Irish Famine, based on the notion that even people dying of famine had to do some that could be called “work” to merit the emergency food rations they received from the government. This cruel and hopeless farce is well describe in Ceil Woodham-Smith’s classic study “The Great Hunger” . Such proposals, based on the principles of “laissez-faire”, are the kind that would come from the minds of the class of bankers, clergymen and schoolmasters that Yeats derides in the rest of the stanza.

### (5) Stanza 3

The long, deep vowels return in this key stanza, bringing together all the themes of beauty, work (Adam’s Curse) , transience, poetry

(6) The following line throbs like a lovely alto voice:

*“On finding that her voice is sweet and low”*

(7) *“Although they do not talk of it at school”*

Another dig at the ‘school-masters’, of course. A more neutral interpretation is that the quest for knowledge consists of the search for invariant *quantities* in the real world, mass, length, money. Poetry is preoccupied with its features of illusion and transience.

And one can also see a deeper meaning in that, though a woman must labor to be beautiful, even that labor is in vain under the impact of “Time’s waters”, which erase all things created by human effort, as well as all beautiful things that arise spontaneously from nature. This is the full reach of “Adam’s Curse”!

(8) Stanza 4

This speaks of “poetry” and “true love” as they must have existed in an imagined Middle Ages, or the age of the Druids. In that dreamed of world, the poet was not deemed an idler at all, but so esteemed that lovers would

*“Quote with learned looks*

*Precedents out of beautiful old books"*

(9) Stanza 5. This is filled with a kind of rapturous beauty of natural description

(10) *"We sat, grown quiet at the name of love"* Twilight has come, both in their conversation, and in the sky, as they sit watching a gorgeous twilight fall over the land.

(11) *"We saw the last embers of daylight die"* Followed by the great metaphor:

*" And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
About the stars and broke in days and years."*

The imagery suggest crying, and, despite our sophisticated revulsion against sentimentality, we are invited to cry in the next 3 lines, in which we learn the the beauty and glory of the full moon was 'washed by Time's waters" and reduced to a "hollow shell ."

(12) Stanza 6 is the one that most gives credence to the notion that the woman being addressed is Maud Gonne. The speaker lets her know that he has loved her all his life, that he still loves her, but that in growing

old, they have both been “washed by Time’s waters” , and become old, faded, world-weary, indeed just like the hollow moon (listen to the long vowels in that musical combination “hollow moon” ! In fact, compare these two extremely musical lines:

*A moon, worn as if it had been a shell*

.....

*As weary-hearted as that hollow moon )*

**There are 8 sets of related contrasts and probably more:**

- (1) An imagined courtly love of the Middle Ages <—> Modern cheap, tawdry love, as espoused by bankers, etc., and other hypocrites
- (2) The esteem given to the poet in the golden age <—> The contempt for the poet as “idler”
- (3) The full moon <—> The shell of the moon
- (4) The ardent love of Yeats for Maud Gonne as a young man <—> The worn, world-weary attachment of today
- (5) The Summer’s end <—> the Fall’s beginning, with the

double meaning of "Fall" – a device as old as poetry in  
English itself

(6) An imagined earlier Ireland, a rich land <—> a land brought to  
its "marrow bones" by the Irish Famine

(7) The Garden of Eden <—> The Fall of Adam and Eve. The  
"curse" whereby those things given freely must now be earned  
through toil, and constantly washed away by "Time's Waters"

(8) The transition from late afternoon to twilight.

