
Two Essays

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GEORG SIMMEL

Two Essays¹

THE HANDLE

MODERN THEORIES OF ART strongly emphasize that the essential task of painting and sculpture is the depiction of the spatial organization of things. Assenting readily to this, one may then easily fail to recognize that space within a painting is a structure altogether different from the real space we experience. Within actual space an object can be touched, whereas in a painting it can only be looked at; each portion of real space is experienced as part of an infinite expanse, but the space of a picture is experienced as a self-enclosed world; the real object interacts with everything that surges past or hovers around it, but the content of a work of art cuts off these threads, fusing only its own elements into a self-sufficient unity. Hence, the work of art leads its life beyond reality. To be sure, the work of art draws its content from reality, but from visions of reality it builds a sovereign realm. While the canvas and the pigment on it are parts of reality, the work of art constructed out of them exists in an ideal space which can no more come in contact with actual space than tones can touch smells.

This holds for every utensil, for every vase, in so far as it is looked upon as having an aesthetic value. As a piece of metal which is tangible, weighable, and incorporated into both the ways and contexts of the surrounding world, a vase is a segment of reality. At the same time, its artistic form leads an existence completely detached and self-contained, for which the material reality of the metal is merely the vehicle. A vessel, however, unlike a painting or statue, is not intended to be insulated and untouchable but is meant to fulfill a purpose—if only symbolically. For it is held in the hand and drawn into the movement of practical life. Thus the vessel stands in two worlds at one and the same time: whereas reality is completely irrelevant to the “pure” work of art and, as it were, is consumed in it, reality does make claims upon the

¹ Georg Simmel, “Der Henkel” and “Die Ruine,” *Philosophische Kultur* (1911), 2nd ed., Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1919, pp. 116-124 and 125-133. Reproduced by permission of Else Simmel, M.D. Copyright 1958 The Ohio State University Press.

vase as an object that is handled, filled and emptied, proffered, and set down here and there.

This dual nature of the vase is most decisively expressed in its handle. The handle is the part by which it is grasped, lifted, and tilted; in the handle the vase projects visibly into that real world which relates it to everything external, to an environment that does not exist for the work of art as such. But then the body of the vase is certainly not alone in being subjugated to the demands of art; for were this the case, the handles would be reduced to mere grips, unrelated to the aesthetic value of their form, like the hooks and eyes of a picture frame. Rather, the handles connecting the vase with the world outside art also become components of the art form; they must be justified purely as shapes and as constituting a *single* aesthetic vision with the body of the vase, irrespective of the fact that they have a practical purpose. By virtue of this double significance, and because of the clear and characteristic way in which this significance emerges, the handle as a phenomenon becomes one of the most absorbing aesthetic problems.

Our unconscious criterion for the aesthetic effect of the handle seems to be the manner in which its shape harmonizes these two worlds—the world on the outside which, with the handle, makes its claim on the vessel, and the world of art which, heedless of the other, demands the handle for itself. Moreover, not only must it be possible for the handle actually to perform its practical function, but the possibility must also be manifest in its appearance, and emphatically so in the case of apparently soldered handles, as opposed to those apparently shaped in one movement with the body of the vase. The first of these types indicates that the handle is attached by external forces and comes from an external order of things; it brings into prominence the meaning of the handle as something reaching outside the pure art form. This contrast between vase and handle is more sharply accentuated when, as frequently happens, the handle has the shape of a snake, lizard, or dragon. These forms suggest the special significance of the handle: it looks as though the animal had crawled on to the vase from the outside, to be incorporated into the complete form only, as it were, as an afterthought.

The fact that the handle belongs to the quite different realm in which it originated, and which now uses the handle to claim the vase for itself, becomes apparent through its visible aesthetic

unity with the vase. In complete opposition to this, the strongest accent in some vases is on the tendency toward unity. They appear to have been whole forms first, the material extending to the periphery without a break; only afterward was enough material removed so that what remained constituted the handles. We find such modeling done to perfection in certain Chinese bowls, the handles of which are cut out of the cold metal. A similar incorporation of the handles into the aesthetic unity is more organically accented wherever the handle seems to be driven out of the body of the vessel in an uninterrupted transition, and by the same forces that shaped the body itself. For this is like a man's arms which, having grown as part of the same organizational process as his torso, also mediate the relationship of the whole being to the world outside it.

Sometimes shallow bowls are shaped in such a way that, together with their handles, they produce an effect of leaf and stem. Very beautiful examples of such bowls from ancient Central American culture have been preserved—bowls in which the unity of organic growth palpably connects the two parts. The tool, as such, has been characterized as an extension of the hand or of human organs generally. In effect, just as the hand is a tool of the soul, so too the tool is a hand of the soul. Although the fact that it is a tool divorces the hand from the soul, it does not prevent the process of life from flowing through both in intimate unity; their being both apart and together constitutes the unanalyzable secret of life. But life reaches out beyond the immediate circumference of the body and assimilates the "tool" to itself; or better still, a foreign substance *becomes* a tool in that the soul pulls it into its life, into that zone around it which fulfills its impulses. The distinction between being external to the soul and being within it—simultaneously important for the body and of no significance—is, for the things beyond the body, both retained and resolved in a single act by the great motif of the tool in the stream of a life that is unified and transcends itself. The shallow bowl is nothing but an extension or augmentation of the creative hand bearing it. But the bowl is not simply held in the palm of the hand; it is grasped by the handle. Thus, a mediating bridge is formed, a pliable joining of hand with bowl, which, with a palpable continuity, transmits the impulse of the soul into the bowl, into its manipulation. But then, through the reflux of this energy, the

bowl is drawn into the circumference of the life of the soul. This relationship cannot be symbolized more perfectly than by a bowl unfolding from its handle like a leaf from its stem. It is as if man were here utilizing the channels of the natural flow of sap between stem and leaf in order to pour his own impulses into an external object, thereby incorporating it into the order of his own life.

When, in the appearance of the handle, one of its two functions is completely neglected in favor of the other, the impression made strikes a discordant note. This often occurs, for example, when the handles form merely a kind of relief ornament, being fully attached to the body of the vase, leaving no space between vase and handle. Here, the form rules out the purpose of the handle (that with it the vase may be grasped and handled), evoking a painful feeling of ineptness and confinement, similar to that produced by a man who has his arms bound to his body. And in such cases, only rarely can the decorative beauty of its appearance compensate for the fact that the inner tendency of the vase toward unity has negated its relatedness to the outer world.

However, just as the aesthetic form must not become so self-willed as to make impossible perception of the handle's purposiveness (even when, as in the case of the ornamental vase, it is out of the question in practice), a disagreeable picture also results whenever the purposiveness works in so many different directions that the unity of the impression is broken up. There are Greek vases that have three handles: two on the body by which the vase can be grasped with both hands and inclined in one or the other direction, and one at the neck by which it can be tilted to one side only. The decidedly ugly impression of these pieces is not caused by a violation of standards appropriate to either visual form or practical utility. For why shouldn't a vessel be tilted in several directions? The ugliness, it seems to me, can rather be traced to the fact that the movements laid out in this system can take place only one *after* the other, whereas the handles present themselves *simultaneously*. Thus completely confused and contradictory feelings of motion are produced; for although the demands of clarity and of utility do not, so to speak, contradict each other on a primary level, the unity of the vision is broken up indirectly: the handles which are, as it were, potential movements are present simultaneously, whereas any actualizing of these movements in practice must deny this simultaneity.

This imbalance suggests the other aesthetic defect of the handle:

its exaggerated separation from the unified impression of the vase. To understand this flaw requires a digression. The most extreme estrangement of the handle from the vessel as a whole—that is, the strongest indication of its practical purpose—is to be found when the handle is not rigidly connected with the body of the vessel at all but is movable. In the language of materials, this is often accentuated by having the substance of the handle different from that of the vessel. Such a design allows for a variety of combinations in appearance.

In some Greek vases and bowls, the handle, rigidly attached to the body of the vessel and made of the same substance, has the character of a broad band. If the handle of this kind of vase retains its unity of form with the vessel, the result can be a happy one. The material of a band which differs greatly in weight, consistency, and flexibility from that of the body of a vase is here symbolized and, by hinting at these differences, the design sufficiently indicates that the handle belongs to another province of existence. At the same time, because the material is actually the same as that of the vase, the aesthetic coherence of the whole is still maintained. The delicate and unstable balance of the two claims on the handle shifts most unfavorably, however, when the fixed handle is in fact of the same substance as the body of the vase but naturalistically imitates another substance in order to stress its special significance by this different appearance. Particularly among the Japanese, otherwise the greatest masters of the handle, the following abomination can be found: fixed porcelain handles that arch beyond the diameter of the vase and accurately imitate the moveable straw handles of tea pots. How much a foreign world obtrudes itself, by means of the handle, upon the independent significance of the vase becomes particularly obvious when the special purpose of the handle imparts a quite unnatural and masklike surface to the material of the vase. Just as the handle which merges with the body of the vase without any gap exaggerates one-sidedly the fact that it belongs to the vase (at the cost of not manifesting its purpose), so this latter type goes to the opposite extreme: the remoteness of the handle from the remainder of the vase cannot be stressed more ruthlessly than when the handle takes on the substance of that remainder but forces upon it the appearance of an entirely dissimilar hoop which seems merely to have been fastened on from the outside.

The principle of the handle—to mediate between the work of

art and the world while it remains wholly incorporated in the art form—is finally confirmed by the fact that its counterpart, the opening or spout of the vessel, works according to an analogous principle. With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world. Only then is the vessel fully integrated into human teleology, in receiving its current through the handle and in yielding it again through the opening. Precisely because the spout is an opening of the vessel itself, it is easier to connect its form organically with that of the vessel. Accordingly, such unnatural and self-contradictory degenerations as are found in the case of handles occur only rarely. (The very expressions “snout” and “nozzle,” for which the handle offers no parallel, indicate the spout’s organic function as a part of the body.)

The fact that handle and spout correspond to each other visually as the extreme points of the vessel’s diameter and that they must maintain a certain balance reflects the roles they play: while of course they serve as the enclosing boundaries of the vessel, they still connect it with the practical world—one centripetally, the other centrifugally. It is like the relation of man as soul to existence outside him: by means of the sense organs’ sensitivity, the corporeal reaches to the soul; by means of willed innervations, the soul reaches out into the corporeal world. Both activities belong to the soul and to the closed sphere of its consciousness; and although the soul’s sphere is the opposite of the corporeal one, it is, nevertheless, intertwined with it through these two processes.

The handle belongs to the enclosed unity of the vase and at the same time designates the point of entrance for a teleology that is completely external to that form. It is of the most fundamental interest that the purely formal *aesthetic* demands on the handle are fulfilled when these two symbolic meanings of it are brought into harmony or equilibrium. Yet this is not an example of that curious dogma which makes utility a criterion of beauty. For the point at issue is precisely that utility and beauty come to the handle as two unrelated demands—the first from the world, and the second from the total form of the vase. And now, as it were, a beauty of a higher order transcends both of these claims and reveals that their dualism ultimately constitutes a unity that is not further describable. Because of the great span between its two components, the handle becomes a most significant cue to this higher beauty. Till now, art theory has hardly touched on the

kind of beauty which contains beauty in the narrower sense merely as one of its elements. Formal beauty, together with all of the demands of idea and life, is incorporated by what one might call supraesthetic beauty into a new synthetic form. Beauty of this ultimate kind is probably the decisive characteristic of all really great works of art; the fact that we give it recognition divorces our position sharply from any aestheticism.

Besides the approach we have been pursuing, it may perhaps be worth while to apply a second, equally far-reaching, interpretation to so unpretentious a phenomenon: we are speaking of the *breadth* of symbolic relations which is revealed by its very validity for things in themselves insignificant. For we are concerned with nothing less than the great human and ideal synthesis and antithesis: a being belongs wholly to the unity of a sphere which encloses it and which at the same time is claimed by an entirely different order of things. The latter sphere imposes a purpose upon the former, thereby determining its form. Nevertheless, the form in no way loses its proper place in the first context but retains it as if the second didn't exist at all. A remarkable number of spheres in which we find ourselves—political, professional, social, and familial—are enclosed by further spheres, just as the practical environment surrounds the vessel. This relationship is such that the individual, belonging to a more restricted and closed sphere, thereby projects into a larger one. Whenever the more comprehensive sphere must, as it were, manipulate the smaller one and draw it into its own teleology, the individual, too, is manipulated by the more inclusive sphere. Just as the handle must not destroy the unity of the vase's form for the sake of its readiness to perform its practical task, so the art of living demands that the individual maintain his role in his immediate, organically closed sphere while at the same time serving the purposes of the larger unity. With this service he helps to place the smaller sphere into the order of the more inclusive one.

It is the same with our particular provinces of interest. Whenever we pursue knowledge or are subject to ethical demands or create structures that have objective norms, we enter, with the parts or faculties of our selves that are involved, into ideal orders that are propelled by an inner logic, by a developmental impetus that is superpersonal. These orders always seize the totality of our energy by means of such particular faculties and enlist it into

their own service. Everything now depends on our not permitting the integrity of our self-centered being to be destroyed. Every single ability, action, and obligation pertaining to that being must remain tied to the law of its unity while at the same time we belong to that ideal external realm which makes us into points of transition for *its* teleology. Perhaps this duality formulates the richness of the life of men and things; for after all, this wealth consists of the diversity of the ways in which men and things belong to each other, of the fact that they are simultaneously inside and outside one another, and that every involvement and fusion in one direction is also a dissolution, since it is contrasted with an involvement and fusion in another direction. What is most remarkable in the way man understands and constructs the world is that a single element experiences the self-sufficiency of an organic whole, as if no aspect of it were left outside, while at the same time it can be a channel through which an entirely different life flows into the first, a grip by which the totality of one grasps the totality of the other without either of them being torn to pieces.

The handle is perhaps the most superficial symbol of this category; but, precisely because of its superficiality, it reveals the range of the category to the fullest. Thus, that we are granted a plenitude of life both lived and shared is probably a reflection of the destiny of our soul, a soul that has its home in two worlds. For our soul, too, can perfect itself only to the degree to which it belongs, as a necessary component, to the one world and reaches out into the entangled strands and into the meaning of the other—not in spite of, but by means of, the form which membership in the first world imposes on it. It is as if the soul were an arm which one of the worlds—whether the real or the ideal—stretches out, so that it may seize the other and join it to itself, and be grasped by and joined to it.

[*Translated by Rudolph H. Weingartner*]

THE RUIN

ARCHITECTURE IS THE ONLY ART in which the great struggle between the will of the spirit and the necessity of nature issues into real peace: that in which the soul in its upward striving and nature in its gravity are held in balance. In poetry, painting, music, the laws governing the materials must be made dumbly submissive to the artistic conception which, in the perfect work, wholly and invisibly absorbs them. Even in sculpture the tangible piece of marble is not the work of art; what stone or bronze of themselves contribute to the work has its effect only as a means of expressing spirit. Although architecture, too, uses and distributes the weight and carrying power of matter according to a plan conceivable only in the human soul, within this plan the matter works by means of its own nature—carrying the plan out, as it were, with its own forces. This is the most sublime victory of the spirit over nature—a situation like that which obtains when we know how to guide a person so that he realizes our will through his own. His will has not been overpowered; rather, the very tendency of his own nature is made to execute our plan.

This unique balance—between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward—breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature. This shift becomes a cosmic tragedy which, so we feel, makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature's revenge for the spirit's having violated it by making a form in its own image. The whole history of mankind is a gradual rise of the spirit to mastery over the nature which it finds outside, but in a certain sense also within, itself. If in the other arts the spirit bends the forms and events of this nature to its command, in architecture it shapes nature's masses and inherent forces until, as if of their own accord, they yield and the artistic conception is made visible. But the necessities of matter submit to the freedom of the spirit, and its vitality is expressed without residue in nature's merely weighing and carrying forces, only so long as the building remains perfect. The moment its decay destroys the unity of the form, nature and spirit separate

again and reveal their world-pervading original enmity—as if the artistic formation had only been an act of violence committed by the spirit to which the stone unwillingly submitted; as if it now gradually shook off this yoke and returned once more into the independent lawfulness of its own forces.

But this makes the ruin a more meaningful, more significant phenomenon than are the fragments of other destroyed works of art. A painting from which particles of paint have fallen off, a statue with mutilated limbs, an ancient text of poetry from which words or lines are lost—all of these have effect only according to what is still left in them of artistic formation or what the imagination can construe of it from these remnants. Their immediate appearance is no artistic unity; it offers us nothing but a work of art imperfect through the reductions it has undergone. The ruin of a building, however, means that where the work of art is dying, other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown; and that out of what of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity. To be sure, from the standpoint of that purpose which the spirit has embodied in palace and church, castle and hall, aqueduct and memorial column, the form in which they appear when decayed is a meaningless incident. Yet a new meaning seizes on this incident, comprehending it and its spiritual form in a unity which is no longer grounded in human purposiveness but in that depth where human purposiveness and the working of non-conscious natural forces grow from their common root. For this reason a good many Roman ruins, however interesting they may be otherwise, lack the specific fascination of the ruin—to the extent, that is, to which one notices in them the destruction *by man*; for this contradicts the contrast between human work and the effect of *nature* on which rests the significance of the ruin as such.

Such a contradiction is engendered not only by man's positive action but also by his passivity when (and because) he strikes us as an element of mere nature. This characterizes a good many urban ruins, like those, still inhabited, often found in Italy off the main road. In these cases, what strikes us is not, to be sure, that human beings destroy the work of man—this indeed is achieved by nature—but that men *let it decay*. From the standpoint of the idea of man, such indifference is, so to speak, a positive passivity, whereby man makes himself the accomplice of nature and of that one of its inherent tendencies which is dramatically opposed

to his own essential interests. Here the inhabited ruin loses for us that sensuous-suprasensuous balance of the conflicting tendencies of existence which we see in the abandoned one. This balance, indeed, gives it its problematical, unsettling, often unbearable character. Such places, sinking from life, still strike us as settings of a life.

In other words, it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature. The same forces which give a mountain its shape through weathering, erosion, faulting, growth of vegetation, here do their work on old walls. Even the charm of alpine forms—which for the most part, after all, are clumsy, accidental, artistically insipid—rests on the felt counterplay of two cosmic tendencies: volcanic eruptions or gradual stratification have built the mountain upward; rain and snow, weathering and landslides, chemical dissolution and the effect of gradually intruding vegetation have sawed apart and hollowed out the upper ledge, have cast downward parts of what had been raised up, thus giving the contour its form. In this form, we thus feel the vitality of those opposing tendencies—and, instinctively sensing these antitheses in ourselves, we notice, beyond everything merely formal and aesthetic, the significance of the configuration in whose serene unity they have their synthesis.

In the ruin, these antitheses are distributed over even more widely segmented parts of existence. What has led the building upward is human will; what gives it its present appearance is the brute, downward-dragging, corroding, crumbling power of nature. Still, so long as we can speak of a ruin at all and not of a mere heap of stones, this power does not sink the work of man into the formlessness of mere matter. There rises a new form which, from the standpoint of nature, is entirely meaningful, comprehensible, differentiated. Nature has transformed the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served as material for art.

According to its cosmic order, the hierarchy of nature and spirit usually shows nature as the substructure, so to speak, the raw material, or semi-finished product; the spirit, as the definitely formative and crowning element. The ruin reverses this order: what was raised by the spirit becomes the object of the same forces which form the contour of the mountain and the bank of the river. If in this way there emerges an aesthetic significance, it also ramifies into a metaphysical one, in the manner revealed

by patina on metal and wood, ivory and marble. In patina, too, a merely natural process is set off on the surface of a human product and makes for the outgrowth of a skin which completely covers up the original one. That the product becomes more beautiful by chemical and physical means; that what is willed becomes, unintentionally and unenforceably, something obviously new, often more beautiful, and once more self-consistent: this mysterious harmony is the fantastic fascination of patina which cannot be wholly accounted for by analyzing our perception of it.

This is the fascination of the ruin, too; but in addition, the ruin has another one of the same order: the destruction of the spiritual form by the effect of natural forces, that reversal of the typical order, is felt as a return to the "good mother," as Goethe calls nature. Here the saying that all that is human "is taken from earth and to earth shall return" rises above its sad nihilism. Between the not-yet and the no-longer lies an affirmation of the spirit whose path, it is true, now no longer ascends to its peak but, satiated by the peak's riches, descends to its home. This is, as it were, the counterpart of that "fruitful moment" for which those riches which the ruin has in retrospect are still in prospect. That the overwhelming of a work of the human will by the power of nature can have an aesthetic effect at all suggests that nature has a never completely extinguished rightful claim to this work, however much it may be formed by the spirit. In its material, its given state, it has always remained nature, and if now nature becomes once more completely mistress over it, she is merely exercising a right which until now has remained latent but which she never, so to speak, has renounced.

For this reason, the ruin strikes us so often as tragic—but not as sad—because destruction here is not something senselessly coming from the outside but rather the realization of a tendency inherent in the deepest layer of existence of the destroyed. For this reason, too, the aesthetically satisfying impression, which is associated with the tragedy or secret justice of destruction, is so often lacking when we describe a person as a "ruin." For even when we mean by this that the psychic layers we designate as natural in the narrower sense—the drives or inhibitions connected with the body, the inert, the accidental, that which points toward death—have become master over the specifically human, rationally valuable ones, we still do not feel that a latent right is being realized through these tendencies. Rather, such a right does not exist at all. We

believe—rightly or wrongly—that such derogations, inimical to the spirit, do *not* inhere in the nature of man in its deepest sense: they have a right to everything external that is born with him, but not to man himself. Reflections and complexities in other contexts aside, man as a ruin, therefore, is so often more sad than tragic, lacking that metaphysical calm which attaches to the decay of a material work as by virtue of a profound *a priori*.

When we speak of “returning home,” we mean to characterize the peace whose mood surrounds the ruin. And we must characterize something else: our sense that these two world potencies—the striving upward and the sinking downward—are working serenely together, as we envisage in their working a picture of purely natural existence. Expressing this peace for us, the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together with it like tree and stone—whereas a palace, a villa, even a peasant house, even where they fit perfectly into the mood of their landscape, always stem from another order of things and blend with that of nature only as if in afterthought. Very old buildings in open country, and particularly ruins, often show a peculiar similarity of color to the tones of the soil around them. The cause of this must be somehow analogous to that which constitutes the charm of old fabrics, too: however heterogeneous their colors may have been when new, the long common destinies, dryness and moisture, heat and cold, outer wear and inner disintegration, which they have encountered through the centuries produce a unity of tint, a reduction to the same common denominator of color which no new fabric can imitate. In a similar way, the influences of rain and sunshine, the incursion of vegetation, heat, and cold must have assimilated the building abandoned to them to the color tone of the ground which has been abandoned to the same destinies. They have sunk its once conspicuous contrast into the peaceful unity of belonging.

The ruin conveys the impression of peace from yet another perspective. On the one side of that typical conflict stood the purely external form or symbolism of peace: the contour of the mountain as defined by the building up and the breaking down. But in respect to the other pole of existence, peace lives entirely within the human soul—that battlefield between nature, which the soul is itself, and spirit, which the soul is itself. The forces which one can designate only by the spatial simile of upward-striving are at work continuously in our soul, continuously in-

errupted, deflected, overcome by other forces which work in us as what is dull, mean, "merely-natural." The way in which these two variously mingle in extent and manner yields, at every moment, the form of our soul. But neither by the most decisive victory of one of these two parties nor by their compromise does it ever arrive at a definitive state. For not only does the restless rhythm of the soul not tolerate it; but, more important, behind every single event, every single impulse that comes from one or the other of these two directions, there is something which lives on, and there are claims which the decision just made does not put to rest. This gives the antagonism between the two principles something unfinishable, formless, breaking every frame.

The unending demands of both principles impose on the soul an interminability of the moral process, a profound absence of a well-rounded organization palpably at rest. In this lies perhaps the ultimate formal ground of the animosity of aesthetic against ethical natures. Wherever we perceive aesthetically, we demand that the contradictory forces of existence be somehow in equilibrium, that the struggle between above and below have come to a standstill. But this form which yields only a *perception* is rejected by the ethical-psychic process with its unceasing up and down, its constant shifting of boundaries, with the inexhaustibility of the forces playing in it against one another.

By contrast, the profound peace which, like a holy charmed circle, surrounds the ruin, conveys a sense of this constellation: the obscure antagonism which determines the form of all existence—now acting among merely natural forces, now only within psychic life, and now, as in the present case, taking place between nature and matter. This antagonism—although here too it is in disequilibrium—letting one side preponderate as the other sinks into annihilation, nevertheless offers us a quietly abiding image, secure in its form. The aesthetic value of the ruin combines the disharmony, the eternal becoming of the soul struggling against itself, with the formal satisfaction, the firm limitedness of the work of art. For this reason, the metaphysical-aesthetic charm of the ruin disappears when not enough remains of it to let us feel the upward-leading tendency. The stumps of the pillars of the Forum Romanum are simply ugly and nothing else, while a pillar crumbled—say, halfway down—can generate a maximum of charm.

To be sure, we may well be inclined to ascribe this peacefulness to another motif: the character of the ruin as *past*. It is the site of

life from which life has departed—but this is nothing merely negative, added to it only by thought, as it is for the countless things which, once immersed in life and accidentally cast on its bank, are by their very nature capable of being again easily caught by its current. In the case of the ruin, the fact that life with its wealth and its changes once dwelled here constitutes an immediately perceived presence. The ruin creates the present form of a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such.

This also is the charm of antiquities, of which only a narrow-minded logic can assert that an absolutely exact imitation equals them in aesthetic value. No matter if we are deceived in an individual case: with this piece which we are holding in our hand, we command in spirit the entire span of time since its inception; the past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present. Here, as in the case of the ruin, with its extreme intensification and fulfillment of the present form of the past, such profound and comprehensive energies of our soul are brought into play that there is no longer any sharp division between perception and thought. Here psychic wholeness is at work—seizing, in the same way that its object fuses the contrast of present and past into one united form, on the whole span of physical and spiritual vision in the unity of aesthetic enjoyment which, after all, is always rooted in a deeper than merely aesthetic unity.

Thus purpose and accident, nature and spirit, past and present here resolve the tension of their contrasts—or, rather, preserving this tension, they yet lead to a unity of external image and internal effect. It is as though a segment of existence must collapse before it can become unresisting to all currents and powers coming from all corners of reality. Perhaps this is the reason for our general fascination with decay and decadence, a fascination which goes beyond what is merely negative and degrading. The rich and many-sided culture, the unlimited *impressionability*, and the understanding open to everything, which are characteristic of decadent epochs, do signify this coming together of all contradictory strivings. An equalizing justice connects the uninhibited unity of all things that grow apart and against one another with the decay of those men and works of men which now can only yield, but can no longer create and maintain their own forms out of their own strength.

[*Translated by David Kettler*]