



Mask and Veil: Why Beauty Matters

Karsten Harries

To cite this article: Karsten Harries (2003) Mask and Veil: Why Beauty Matters, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:2, 59-72

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299301632>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 18



View related articles [↗](#)

Mask and Veil

Why Beauty Matters

Karsten Harries

Karsten Harries is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Philosophy, Yale University. He has published and lectured widely on Nietzsche, Heidegger, early modern philosophy, and the philosophy of art and architecture. His books include *Infinity of Perspective* (2001), *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997) and *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art and Technology* (1994, edited with Christopher Jamme).

1

Watching news programs post 9/11, I was struck by the contrast between images from New York and Afghanistan, Jerusalem and Jenin, Tel Aviv and Bethlehem, and the predictably styled, carefully made up appearance of the good-looking, confident, earnest women who so often presided over these images, framed them, so to speak, with their well-honed style of engaging and enraging the guests on their programs, a style that, seemingly under constant time pressure, seems designed to forestall anything like a thoughtful discussion that might make the viewer think, instead of finding some sort of comfort in clichés repeated over and over.

Images of brainy and beautiful women on our television led me to consider: do we not encounter similar icons of beauty and brains in countless advertisements? And not only there: do we not all meet with just such women every day, in offices, on streets, in airports, on posters and advertisements: icons of beauty and brains, often short of time, often sexy in a carefully controlled way, and often just a bit steely.

Perhaps such conjunction of beauty and brains invites celebration as a sign that an age that not long ago

gendered both beauty and brains, leaving beauty to women, the beautiful sex, and brains to men, has come, or at least is coming to an end. Is it not a sign that today we find ourselves on the threshold of a fuller humanity, less burdened by chauvinisms of all sorts? Just as surrealists once found in the androgyne a symbol of a more complete humanity, does the conjunction of beauty and brains not provide us with just such a symbol?

Unfortunately the world events tracked by these news programs made it a bit difficult to take seriously the thought that we were in fact standing on the threshold of an age that would bring us all a fuller humanity. Rather I fear a world to come that would find it ever more difficult to recognize the humanity of the other, a world ever more ready to consider human beings mere material to be used and abused, discarded and destroyed when national or economic interests required it. How easy it has become to consume images of suffering so horrifying that pity and outrage should make us scream, how easy to package them, dress them up in ways that give them as much or as little weight as scenes in some action film.

As I watched one of those beautiful, beautifully made up, steely television anchors cut off another unwelcome response in mid-sentence, it made me think of a remark made by Nietzsche in answer to the question: "What is the beauty of a building today?" "The same as the beautiful face of a woman lacking spirit: something mask-like." The latter also suggests an answer to the more general question: "What is beauty to us today?" Something mask-like, placed over a violated humanity, over a violated earth.

Nietzsche invites us to think of the beauty of "a woman lacking spirit": that might refer to what we call a doll, which the OED defines as "a pretty, but unintelligent or empty person, especially when dressed up; a pretty, but silly or frivolous woman. A doll's face, one conventionally pretty, but without life or expression." That definition is preceded in the OED by "Doll. An image of a human being (commonly a child or a lady) used as a plaything." I thought of the pretty face I had just seen on the television screen: conventionally pretty, its prettiness enhanced by artifice, by make-up and dress, but certainly the person I saw was not unintelligent, quite the opposite: clearly a person with brains. A doll with brains perhaps? Watching the pretty, but no doubt brainy women that appear on the TV news shows prompted a question for me "is it possible to possess beauty and perhaps brains and yet lack spirit?" What is the connection between beauty and spirit?

2

Let me return to Nietzsche's remark. In the 125 years that have passed since the publication of *Human, all too Human*, where we find this observation about the beauty we moderns find in architecture, it has lost none of its relevance. That goes for what it

has to say about the mask-like beauty of women without spirit; that also goes for what it has to say about the beauty of our buildings. I shall consider both in turn. But what I am finally concerned with here is neither the mask-like beauty of women without spirit, nor the mask-like beauty of many of today's buildings, but rather the way both presuppose a disturbing transformation of an older understanding of beauty as the veil of spirit. Today's mask-like beauty, be it of a building, of a woman, or of a painting, threatens to rob beauty of the aura it once possessed. I shall attempt to show how much we would have lost, should beauty for us really have lost that aura. What we would have lost is humanity. And when we hear today that beauty is coming back, after some decades when artists and art critics seemed to have little use for beauty, when 'beauty' had almost become a word that called the seriousness of those concerned with it into question, we should ask ourselves, just what beauty is coming back and whether this particular come-back of beauty is indeed something we should applaud.

3

The remark I cited offers us a simile. Nietzsche invites us to look at the beauty of modern architecture through the lens of what he assumes we are more familiar with: the beauty of a woman without spirit. This presupposes that, when it is a question of the beauty of a human being, we know how to distinguish two kinds of beauty: a beauty that is experienced as the ever elusive manifestation of spirit in matter from another more formal, artificial or made-up mask-like beauty. Crucial here is the different way in which beauty relates to what is beautiful.

The first beauty invites the metaphor of the veil. A veil is an often thin piece of cloth that conceals even as it calls attention to what lies beyond or beneath, be it a face or a body, be it something that is considered sacred: the sanctuary. A veil shelters what is taken to matter more, even as it calls attention to it, precisely by concealing it. Such a veil does not want to be appreciated for its own sake, but as a boundary: between the sacred and the profane, the inner and the outer, spirit and matter. The veil serves the veiled which, even as it remains hidden, yet reveals itself through the veil, reveals itself especially in the veil's motions. A veil that does not move loses much of its revelatory power.

A mask, on the other hand, is usually rigid and conceals the wearer of the mask, may even let us forget that wearer by calling attention to itself. Much more than veils, masks are often aesthetic objects in their own right that we appreciate for what they are. Think of carnival masks or the masks of primitive tribes. Such a mask retains its beauty even when, no longer worn, it is placed in some museum.

What matters to me here is the different way in which we experience the beauty of a veil, on one hand, the beauty of a mask,

on the other. In the first case beauty serves and depends on what remains veiled. It lets us think of what lies beyond or beneath the veil. Such beauty, we can say, has depth. In the second case beauty stands in only an external relationship to the bearer of such beauty. Beauty has become precisely a mask. Or perhaps decoration that no longer stands in an essential relationship to what it decorates but has become an aesthetic object to be appreciated in its own right. What matters is the visual appearance. Such beauty is skin deep.

There is beauty, Nietzsche suggests, that is experienced as the veil of spirit. Spirit here names what animates matter, be it a face or the entire body. But spirit communicates itself to us first of all not so much in certain stable forms, as it betrays itself in fleeting expressions, gestures, in the movement of a hand, a tossed head, a passing glance. I use the veil then as a figure of a beauty that is appreciated as an expression of spirit, a beauty that is an incarnation of spirit in matter. But only as such incarnations do persons demand our respect. We get here a hint of what is lost when beauty comes to be experienced as a mere mask: lost is our experience of the person behind that mask. The person threatens to become a mere doll, a simulacrum.

But what sort of an experience is this, the experience of a person as a person? How does it differ from the experience of a doll or a mask? The answer seems easy: do we not experience persons all the time? To be sure, often, perhaps even most of the time, the person remains hidden behind a certain role: like a certain kind of beauty, such roles become masks that hide the person beneath. We meet the lawyer, the doctor, the student, the policeman, the anchorwoman, but not the person. Nietzsche suggests, and in this he is supported by the way we use the word 'doll' to refer to a pretty woman, that beauty, too, can become a mask that hides the person, if in fact there is a real person beneath the mask. It has indeed been claimed that is in the very nature of beauty to allow us to forget or, if not that, at least to mask reality. I shall have to return to this point.

Nietzsche knows that we moderns find it difficult to make sense of an understanding of beauty as the veil of spirit. One reason is that we have difficulty with the word 'spirit.' What does it name? Does our science know anything of 'spirit'? The word 'brains' does not pose the same problem. We know a great deal about the workings of the brain and today we readily quantify intelligence, relying on all sorts of tests. They help us to tell who has brains. But is there room in the world picture we are presented by our science for what is named by words such as 'spirit' or 'freedom'? We are fascinated today with thoughts of artificial intelligence: should it not in principle be possible to create a beautiful robot endowed with a computer brain that would function so much like a human being that it would be impossible to distinguish the simulacrum from the

original? What is at issue here becomes clear when we consider that we owe no respect to machines. If I smashed my computer or threw it out of the window, this would probably be a stupid, but not an immoral act unless I hurt a human being in the process. Human beings demand our respect because we can hold them responsible for their action, because they are free or have the potentiality to become free. Our ability to recognize persons as persons, and that is to say as free, responsible agents, is a presupposition of any ethics. But again: what sort of experience is that?

How can freedom be experienced at all? As I have already suggested, that it can be experienced would seem to be beyond question, so much so that most ethical investigations think they can dispense with the question: what is it to experience a person as opposed to a simulacrum, say a computer-driven robot able to simulate human behavior? But what in principle separates what human artifice can produce, such as a beautiful robot or a mask, from a human being? Does not the search for artificial intelligence call into question such a difference? But to imagine a world in which simulacra of human beings can no longer be distinguished from human beings is to imagine a world in which supposed moral imperatives are considered part of a past that the progress of reason had left behind, even as nostalgia might refuse to admit this. Appropriating what Walter Benjamin had to say, not about human beings, but about works of art in the age of their technical reproducibility, and applying it now to human beings, we can say: what would be lost in the age of the technical reproducibility of human beings is that special aura that surrounds every human being and demands our respect. With this loss human beings would come to be considered just another resource, to be used or abused as some planning authority saw fit. In such a world persons could not possibly be considered expressions of spirit. There would be no spirit left to express.

Instead of speaking with Nietzsche of the mask-like beauty of a woman without spirit, we could therefore also speak of the beauty of some robot. Beauty here becomes an aesthetic addendum to a machine. Our robot would have become rather like a decorated shed: a machine not for living but simulating life, masked to look beautiful. Is such mask-like beauty the simulacrum of true beauty?

Let me repeat the question: what is it to experience a person as a person? Whatever the answer, it has to recognize that to experience a person is to experience freedom incarnated in matter? And can the same not be said of the experience of a successful work of art? But what is freedom? Certainly not some identifiable, visible property or thing. Freedom is not any thing. In this sense it is nothing. And yet, every time we experience another human being as such, we experience the miracle of the incarnation of freedom in matter, a miracle science cannot explain in principle. Persons

as such have no place in the edifice of science. But for that very reason it is important to open windows in that edifice, especially important today when science, in the form of technology, is holding our life-world in an ever tighter embrace, and more and more determining our sense of reality. Beauty, I want to claim can open such windows. We need to open such windows if we are not to suffocate. That is why beauty matters. But I am not speaking here of beauty as such; only of a certain kind of beauty – only of that beauty figured by the veil. Mask-like beauty on the other hand does not so much open windows in the edifice raised by science as it wraps that edifice in an aesthetic blanket.

4

By likening what we moderns understand by the beauty of architecture to the beauty of a woman without spirit, Nietzsche invites us to consider a different kind of beauty, the beauty of a woman with spirit. But just how are we to think the difference between these two kinds of beauty? We have become so accustomed to associating feminine beauty with what is artificial, made-up, and mask-like – think of the word ‘beautician’ and all it stands for – that we may not find it easy to imagine that other beauty. But to that extent, the very distinction between two kinds of beauty invoked by Nietzsche is called into question. And should we not call it into question? What sense does it make to liken beauty to a veil? Has aesthetics not taught us to understand what is beautiful as a self-justifying, absorbing, pleasing presence that should not be made to serve some reality beneath or behind it? Should we not then reject the distinction between these two kinds of beauty in the name of aesthetics?

But just architecture presents a challenge to aesthetics and to its understanding of beauty. Let me return to Nietzsche’s simile. It should be read in context. The section in *Human, all too Human* in which it appears bears the thought-provoking title: “Stone is more stone than it used to be.”¹ This greater stoniness of stone is said to go along with our understanding of the mask-like beauty of our architecture. And not only of the beauty of our architecture, but of beauty in general. But just what is the connection?

First, however, I want to address another question: How are we to understand Nietzsche’s claim that stone was once less stone than it is today? Presumably once there was something in or about stone that veiled its stoniness. But what could this mean? Are not stones pretty much what they always were? Namely stones? Just stones! What has changed?

In *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche appears less concerned with stone than with architecture. Nietzsche claims here that architecture was once experienced in a way that veiled the stoniness of the stone. Our modern understanding of stone is said to have lifted that veil. And Nietzsche leaves us in no doubt concerning what it

was that once veiled stone: the stoniness of stone was once veiled by meaning. The beauty of architecture was experienced as a veil of meaning, just as we may experience the beauty of a person as the veil of spirit.

What Nietzsche here has in mind would seem to be familiar to all of us and to hold not only for the stones of architecture: Perceived meaning often veils the stoniness of stones we encounter in nature. Stones speak to us, signify something beyond themselves, although we may want to add that it is really we who read such meanings into these stones. Meaning here has its origin in the way we look at the stone, the associations we bring to bear on it. The case is different when we look at a printed page! Here matter, not stone now, but ink on paper, is meant to communicate. And when we get caught up in some horrifying story, we may hardly be aware of the matter in our hands, of the paper, the ink blackening our fingers. Our mind is elsewhere, perhaps in some far-away country. Here, too, meaning veils matter. We are not the author of that meaning. But in this case, too, the author of such meaning is a human being. And is it not to human beings that we must look for the origin of all meaning?

And do not buildings, too, have meaning in this sense, meaning that allows us to liken them to texts. When we look for example at a railroad station or a museum, we cannot help but see more than just an assemblage of stones. Buildings speak to us in numerous ways. Here, too, meaning veils the stoniness of stone.

Of what then was Nietzsche thinking when he claims that stone is more stone today than it used to be and links this to the mask-like character of the beauty of the architecture of his day?

What he meant by the latter is easy to understand. The architecture of Nietzsche's day – *Human, all too Human* appeared in 1878 – offers ready illustrations of mask-like beauty and countless modernist critics of the historicizing architecture of the nineteenth century shared Nietzsche's dislike of such architecture. Functional buildings were dressed up aesthetically in a way that struck many as false. This sense that architecture had become a masquerade, concealing our modern reality, provoked modern architects to turn away from such an architecture of decorated sheds.

But is it not precisely the aesthetic approach that ever since Baumgarten and Kant had come to dominate reflection about and the practice of art that demands such an understanding of architecture? Consider Nikolaus Pevsner's seemingly self-evident observation: "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture." What is supposed to distinguish the two is that the latter "is designed with a view to aesthetic appeal." In support of this way of drawing the distinction between building and architecture one could go back all the way to Vitruvius, who demanded that the architect build "with due reference to durability, convenience, and beauty"?

What does the pursuit of beauty demand of the architect? The answer seems obvious: attention to certain visual qualities that help to make the building aesthetically appealing, where one might invoke Kant's understanding of beauty as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction to flesh out the nature of aesthetic appeal. But just such emphasis on aesthetic appeal, Nietzsche claims, lets us forget the original meaning of architecture. "Originally everything on a Greek or Christian building had a meaning, with an eye to a higher order of things: this aura of an inexhaustible significance surrounded the building like a magical veil." Beauty in such architecture remained linked with, but subordinate to a higher meaning: "Beauty entered the system only incidentally, without diminishing in any significant way the fundamental sensation of the uncanny sublime of what the proximity of the divine and magic had consecrated; beauty softened at most the terror – but this terror was everywhere the presupposition."

But Nietzsche also claims that such an understanding of architecture lies behind us. Our modern approach to architecture is governed by an understanding of beauty as absorbing presence, of the aesthetic object as ideally a self-sufficient, perfect whole, a well-wrought urn, – an understanding that finds expression in the slogan 'art for art's sake'. The architect, to be sure, will find it difficult to serve beauty alone. Having to serve the world and its concerns, a work of architecture must be more than just an aesthetic object. Not that the artist in the architect will not aim at buildings that also succeed as aesthetic objects. And the more successful he is in this, the more completely will the aesthetic object mask and finally overwhelm the building.

Consider this building by Frank Gehry, his Frederick R. Weisman Museum in Minneapolis (1991–93). I would not deny this museum's distinctive beauty; but almost self-consciously this architecture invites Nietzsche's metaphor of the mask, a metaphor that invites us to attend to the loose fit between ornament and ornament bearer, between beauty and the building that supports it. Beauty here does not veil the stone, does not charge it with meaning: it only masks it. And whenever such a building drops its mask, whenever the make-up gives way, the material in question presents itself all the more insistently as the ordinary, mute material it is. Mask-like beauty and greater stoniness belong together. And that beauty in architecture here should have become mask-like is but a consequence of an approach to beauty as ideally a self-sufficient presence, of art as ideally for art's sake. Gehry presents himself to us here as at heart a sculptor, forced to compromise the purity of his aesthetic vision.

That beauty in architecture need not be in this sense skin deep, that there need not be such a loose fit between ornament and ornament bearer is one thing the architecture of the past can teach us. Consider this a Romanesque portal. If all too fleetingly, we are

still touched here by what lets the atheist Nietzsche, too, speak of “the proximity of the divine.” To be sure, our modern world, a world shaped by science and technology, no longer would seem to have a place for such divinity. As we have divorced meaning and material, so we have divorced meaning and divinity, making the form-giving human subject the sole source of meaning.

5

“Stone is more stone than it used to be”: this is to say, stone presents itself to us moderns ever more as just that, as stone, more generally as mute material waiting to receive its meaning from the human subject, e.g. the builder or form-giving artist. And when that form gives way, as it does when a building falls into disrepair, becomes a ruin, the materiality of the material, the mute stoniness of stone will present itself once again as an opaque presence.

Once matter and meaning were thought to be more intimately linked: stones were thought to speak to human beings even before they were used as material. In the Middle Ages, for example, understanding the natural language of stones was thought to be an important part of knowing how to read the book of nature. Medieval lapidaries thus were not so much scientific studies of different stones and their properties as allegorical dictionaries, guides to the spiritual meaning of the world and human existence. To us, to be sure, such lapidaries are little more than relics of a past that would seem to lie so thoroughly behind us that we cannot expect from it pointers for the future; we no longer understand nature as a veiled communication, its beauty as the veil of the divine. If rose and dove, pearl and gold presented themselves as meaningful signs to the medieval Christian, we are separated from such a view not just by the fact that we no longer find ourselves part of a community united by this faith or a comparable faith, but more importantly by our understanding of matter as in itself devoid of meaning, by our understanding of reality, our world picture. Meaning belongs with spirit, rather than with matter! “Stone is indeed more stone than it used to be.”

To be sure, the medievals would also have granted that meaning belongs with spirit. Such an understanding of meaning is indeed presupposed by their understanding of nature as a book with God as its author. But spirit here meant first of all the divine, not the human spirit. The meaning of materials was linked to what transcended all human artifice. This was a meaning of which human beings were most definitely not the author. It was experienced as a gift.

But does the experience of meaning not demand this sense of receiving a gift? If meaning had its foundation in human will and know-how, nihilism could be cured just by a determined effort on our part. But meaning cannot be willed, cannot be made or invented; it must be received, discovered. This is why we would be disturbed by the thought that some beauty we took to be

natural, say a rose or a nightingale, turned out to be the product of human artifice. But just what is it that would make such a discovery disturbing? A loss of beauty? Might such a simulacrum not be very beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than the original? But all of a sudden the aura that was part of its original appeal would vanish. In a related vein one of the tales of Hoffman explores the unmasking of a beautiful woman as just a mechanical doll. What is lost here is once again not beauty, but the aura that lets us experience beauty as the veil of spirit. And that aura is key here. And I want to claim that something of the sort holds even for the work of art, which in one sense is so obviously an artifact. What I want to suggest, agreeing with Benjamin, is that what once gave and still gives great art its special aura is indeed its originality, its irreproducibility, where I understand production as a rule governed process that as such can be repeated. I want to suggest that to feel at home in the world, and that is part of finding life meaningful, we must encounter spirit that is not just an expression or reflection of our own spirit. Love presupposes such an encounter and ever since the Greeks beauty has been defined as the object of love. As the Greeks also knew, that entailed an understanding of beauty as the veil of spirit. Such beauty cannot be found in cyberspace. The computer holds no answer to the problem of meaning.

6

The computer, I just asserted, holds no answer to the problem of meaning. This brings me back to my earlier, related claims that persons have no place in the edifice of science, that just this makes it important to open windows in that edifice, and that beauty can open such windows. I realize that these assertions have been left undeveloped and demand explanation. Let me sketch here at least the beginning of such an explanation.

Science aims at a perspicuous representation of the world that ideally would include everything that deserves to be called real. In his *Tractatus Wittgenstein* offers us this example:

(6.341) Newtonian mechanics ... brings the description of the universe to a unified form. Let us imagine a white surface with irregular black spots. We now say: Whatever kind of picture these make I can always get as near as I like to its description, if I cover the surface with a sufficiently fine square network and now say of every square that it is white or black. In this way I shall have brought the description of the surface to a unified form. This form is arbitrary, because I could have applied with equal success a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh. It can happen that the description would have been simpler with the aid of a triangular mesh; that is to say, we might have described the surface more accurately with a triangular, and coarser, than with the finer square mesh, or vice versa, and so on. To the different networks correspond different systems of describing the world. Mechanics determine a

form of description by saying: All propositions in the description of the world must be obtained in a given way from a number of given propositions – the mechanical axioms. It thus provides the bricks for the building of the edifice of science, and says: Whatever building thou wouldst erect, thou shalt construct it in some manner with these bricks and these alone.

Reality is here pictured as a page bearing irregular black spots. Science covers this picture with a network and proceeds to represent the original picture by filling in the proper areas, where we should keep in mind what is sacrificed here for ease of representation: the irregularity of the black spots which stand here for what disinterested, unprejudiced observation determines to be the case. By its very project science so understood tends to elide reality, tends to mistake reality for what it can represent. And it is therefore not surprising that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein himself should elide that rift between reality and its scientific representation to which his own picture calls our attention when he identifies the world with the facts in logical space (1.13), instead of being content with the more modest formulation: the scientific world-picture represents nature in logical space (cf.2.11).

Wittgenstein's scientist is a builder who uses for his building-blocks thoughts or propositions. The world he describes is therefore, unlike a picture I might show you, invisible. And is such invisibility not demanded by our understanding of reality as it is? Colors, indeed all secondary qualities, characterize appearances, not the reality that appears. To ask what color is an electron is to ask the wrong sort of question. Instead of a pictorialization of reality, we can now speak of its objectification.

That such objectification has to transform that reality in which we find ourselves first of all and most of the time is evident: our first access to reality is always bound to particular perspectives, mediated by our bodies, colored by our concerns and interests. But as soon as we understand a perspective as such, in thought at least, we are already beyond the limits it would impose. Such reflection on perspective and point of view leads inevitably to the idea of a subject that, free of all perspectives, understands things as they really are. And it leads with equal necessity to the thought that the reality that gives itself to our eyes, and more generally to our senses, is the mere appearance of an objective reality no eye can see, no sense can sense, that only a rational thinking can attempt to reconstruct.

The pursuit of truth demands objectivity. And objectivity demands that we not allow our understanding to be clouded by our inevitably personal desires and interests. It wants just the facts. With good reason Wittgenstein could therefore say: "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value" (6.41). It would be just another fact that, like all facts, could be other than it happens

to be. If there is something that deserves to be called a value, it will not be found in the world of science. To find it we have to step outside that world. And the same goes for freedom. That means that persons as persons are not part of the scientific world picture. They are ruled out by the form of representation that governs it. This is why Nietzsche can say, stone is more stone than it used to be. Matter has become just a mute given that just happens to be that way.

But is this not to say that whatever makes life meaningful must be sought outside the reality known to science? And does art not promise us just such an outside? Baumgarten, the founder of aesthetics, defined beauty as perceived perfection, that is to say as a whole that presents itself to us as being just as it should be. Nothing here seems accidental, nothing gratuitous. But in the reality known to science accident rules. This is why an art pursuing beauty so understood must turn its back on reality, will compensate us for its poverty with beautiful fictions in which everything presents itself to us as being just as it should be. Does not art offer us a refuge from a mute reality? And to the extent that the artist is dragged back into reality, as the architect inevitably is, he will at least cover it with a beautiful mask. That, according to Nietzsche is how we moderns understand the beauty of buildings: in the image of a woman without spirit. But the simile implies of course a critique of the modern understanding.

7

Nietzsche's simile recalls a remark made by Louis Sullivan, an admirer of Nietzsche. Buildings, Sullivan insisted,

... should possess an individuality as marked as that which exists among men, making them distinctly separable from each other, however strong the racial or family resemblance may be.

Everyone knows and feels how strongly individual is each man's voice, but few pause to consider that a voice, though of another kind, speaks from every existing building.

Here, too, buildings are likened to persons. To recognize another as a human being, to look into his or her face, is to experience a unique individual, something original, that cannot be reproduced. And if Sullivan is right, we experience buildings in similar fashion, not so much as matter ordered by spirit, but as themselves incarnations of spirit. Only as such incarnations do buildings speak to us. Sullivan considers ornament the most intense expression of the "same emotional impulse" that finds its most profound expression in the composition of its masses and lends them a voice.² But it is in its ornament we experience most readily the spirit of the whole.³ The distinction between externally applied decoration and organic

ornament figures here my distinction between beauty as mask and beauty as veil.

Both the successful work of architecture and the individual, are experienced by us as manifestations of spirit and that means also of freedom. It is not surprising therefore that Sullivan should have taken his dream of a truly organic ornament to be very much the dream of an American:

America is the only land in the whole earth wherein a dream like this may be realized; for here alone tradition is without shackles, and the soul of man is free to grow, to mature, to seek its own.

But for this we must turn again to Nature, and hearkening to her melodious voice, learn as children learn, the accent of its rhythmic cadences. We must view the sunrise with ambition, the twilight wistfully.

The freedom that gives voice to successful architecture is said here to be a freedom responsive to the voice of nature. According to Sullivan our ability to hear and respond to that voice is a presupposition of giving a voice to our architecture.

But what is talk of such a voice to us moderns? Does nature really speak to us? Sullivan's appeal to the voice of nature recalls the medieval understanding of the book of nature. But given the way our understanding of nature is ruled by science and technology, must we not consider such talk as itself no more than decoration, a rhetorical flourish, designed to make us feel at home in what is at bottom indifferent to our needs? A mask in other words? And is this not also what all attempts to elevate a supposedly living organic ornament above dead decoration today amount to? Are all such attempts not born of a nostalgic longing to be allowed to experience the world once more as our home, nostalgia denied to us by the shape of our modern world, a world all too eager to cover its own poverty with beautiful masks?

Sullivan himself, to be sure, did not think that the architecture he had in mind should be relegated to the past, but insisted that its challenge still awaited us, opening "a vista to the future."⁴ He was convinced that it could help us build a bridge beyond modernity. But if we are to pass over that bridge, if we are not to dismiss what Sullivan has to say about the melodious voice of nature as a rhetorical flourish born of nostalgia, we have to recognize that even today nature speaks to us, through veils to be sure – veils of beauty. And first of all and most loudly it still speaks to us through the veil of human beauty. Beauty still has the power to open windows in the house our own reason has built for us moderns, a house that, without such windows, threatens to become a prison, denying us the air, the open space we need to meet, not simulacra or dolls, but persons as persons, to live, suffer, and to rejoice with them.

This paper was originally presented at the Chicago Humanities Festival XIII, November 2002, which had the theme 'Brains and Beauty'.

Notes

1. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* I, 218; CM 2, 178.
2. Ibid.
3. As Hermann Broch put this point, "To consider ornament a mere accessory is not to have understood the inner logic of a building. 'Architectural style' is logic, a logic that permeates the entire building, from its ground-plan to the outline it traces against the sky, and within that logic ornament is only the last, differential expression for the unified and unifying fundamental thought of the whole." See Broch, 'Der Zerfall der Werte', *Erkennen und Handeln. Essays* vol. 2, Zurich: Rhein, 1955, p. 9.
4. Sullivan, p. 188.