

## ARTICLES

### *Abstract*

Equality among men rests in the human traits of emotion and imagination. It is through the development of these traits that insight into the feelings of others is gained. The arts educate the imagination, providing an increased awareness of the nature of human equality and empathy for one's fellows. Such an education seems particularly important at a time when computer technology points to other priorities.

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### **The Education of the Imagination: Understanding Human Equality Through Art**

Every day, all around us, we find incontrovertible evidence that humans are not equal to each other: not in physique, intelligence, talents, nor socio-economic status. Only the naive assume that a deficiency in one category is compensated for by superiority in another. Yet, in spite of evidence and argument to the contrary (J.R. Lucas,<sup>1</sup> for example, in a number of articles, protests against the depersonalizing sameness implied by equality), we persist in the belief that humans are equal in some very basic way quite apart from the handicaps some of us have been dealt in terms of wealth and mental or physical talents. Thus, although our education systems deal with the practical problems of the disadvantaged, underlying their quest for equality of opportunity lies a tacit realization that as humans we all deserve such opportunities because we actually *are* equal - not in particular endowments inherited through genes or social environment, but in a more fundamental way. I shall argue that basic human equality is found in the attributes of emotion and imagination, and further, that these qualities contribute to knowledge and understanding of one's fellow men. I begin with a consideration of what Bernard A.O. Williams<sup>2</sup> calls "the human point of view". Williams has searched for men's equality in terms of their common humanity, their moral capacities, and the way inequality of circumstances can affect equality of persons. He uses the phrase "the human point of view" to convey the notion that a man may be worthy of respect quite apart from his intellectual or physical powers, or his technical title. For, technically speaking, he says, a man may be a "failed inventor" but from a human point of view, he is "a man who wanted to be a successful inventor." Once the role of emotion and imagination in knowledge is admitted, it seems quite possible to conclude that man cannot fully understand his fellows (as equals) without recourse to the arts, which provide us with a range of empathetic knowledge not otherwise accessible. "Art is the surest affidavit that feeling, despite its absolute privacy, repeats itself in each individual life".<sup>3</sup> Thus, through the appreciation of arts we are able, on the one hand, to share the felt life on earth that distinguishes us as human beings and, on the other, have some sense of human equality.

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## I. The Human Point of View

When we see each other from the human point of view, what exactly do we see? What precisely do all men possess that makes them equally human? Obviously, as Williams has pointed out, to see ourselves as Children of God, or as part of Kant's Kingdom of Ends is not helpful, although it is quite possible that the first of these at least, springs from the same root as the human point of view, for both suggest distinguishing characteristics of humans that are held in contrast to other forms of life.

Historically, philosophers have analyzed what it means to be human in terms of mind and body, appetites and reason, pleasure and pain, implying that we understand ourselves better by an awareness of the many facets of our being. But surely to see someone from a *human point of view* means something more specific than (as well as different from) an awareness of ways of categorizing various human behaviors and their causes.

*Point of view* is a metaphorical expression that compares a mental notion (that of considering a situation or idea) with a physical activity (observing an object or objects while standing in a particular place, an activity of the eye and body). If one stands on point A and looks at a particular phenomenon, it appears to him in a certain way; if one observes the same phenomenon from point B, its appearance will be altered: certain aspects will be more obvious; others will be hidden. To have a point of view is, therefore, to 'look at' something in such a way that certain aspects are emphasized or made more apparent.

### (a) States of Mind

What then is the *human* point of view? Human as opposed to what? If we look at an individual as a human being, which aspects are emphasized? Williams suggests that a human viewpoint is the opposite of a technical viewpoint, and a technical viewpoint, he clearly explains, is a vantage point from which one observes another human being in such a way that his professional or technical title, such as 'miner' or 'agricultural laborer' or 'junior executive' is paramount in judging his worth. Williams is not talking about the relative merits of a miner or executive. He is talking about judging the merit of an individual man according to his label only. This approach, he says, fails to consider that a man may hold that title "willingly, unwillingly, through lack of alternatives, with pride, etc.". Consider these adverbs and adverbial phrases. They would seem to indicate the state of mind<sup>4</sup> of the person to whom they are attached. It is easy to picture the "willing" worker: his step jaunty, always eager to please, perhaps whistling as he performs the tasks associated with his title, whether it be that of miner or junior executive. Visualize then a title held unwillingly: the sullen face, the dragging footsteps; or the title held with pride: erect posture, a dignity in bearing or speech. All these are outward signs of an inner state of mind: happiness, resentment, pride, and many others come to mind.

The phrase "through lack of alternatives" is less easy to associate with any state of mind. But notice the picture one sees in imagination of a person who holds a title, say of an agricultural laborer, through lack of alternatives. Surely he is not apt to appear proud or cheerful. Do we not see him as possessing a kind of resignation instead, as in the poem, *The Man With The Hoe* by Edwin Markham,

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages in his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world.  
Who made his dead to rapture and despair,  
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes?

Seeing a person as the victim of circumstances is also seeing him as possessing a certain state of mind: resigned, numbed, hopeless, or, as the next line of the Markham poem reads, "Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox". Thus the human point of view would seem to be closely related to an awareness of the varying states of mind that accompany our technical titles. No link has been established, however, with the concept of equality.

### (b) Imagination and Pity

Human fallibility, along with morality, is the quality seen by classical philosophers as distinguishing humans from divine beings. That we are all liable to error must be regarded as fact; in this sense we are equal. We can, in imagination,<sup>5</sup> place ourselves in another's position, and when we do so, we are more tolerant of his imperfections, knowing that we ourselves are capable of indiscretions, insensitivities, or plain mental lapses. A commonplace activity, this is close to the method of *Verstehen* often used by anthropologists and sociologists to re-experience past customs, or to re-inact in thought past situations. Part of being human, then, is being able to share in imagination the sufferings of others.

But until some time past the Renaissance, philosophers seem to have given little thought to man's capacity for pity. This is somewhat strange, inasmuch as Christian doctrine stresses this aspect of humanity as opposed to the Old Testament's emphasis on justice. Rousseau was one of the first to deal directly with the subject. "We never pity another's woes unless we know we may suffer in like manner ourselves,"<sup>6</sup> he said, and it seems obvious that if men are equal in being mortal and fallible, such knowledge must make them equal in possessing at least a rudimentary pity.

Of course, pity soon leads to sentimentality, and a pitying state of mind may be revelled in for its own sake. Victorian dogooders seemed to have a penchant for this perversion of humanism, as much of their popular literature and music suggests. Nietzsche was not far wrong: "In indulging and pitying lay ever my greatest danger; Especially did I find those who call themselves 'the good' the most poisonous flies - Pity maketh stifling air for all free souls."<sup>7</sup> More satisfactory is the notion of empathy. Through imagination I can feel what another feels because I am myself prone to the same weaknesses and because I know myself to be mortal. In fact I can empathize with another because I am capable of, and have probably experienced, all the same states of mind, though the causes may differ. This becomes clearer when imagination is discussed in section two. Nevertheless, the human point of view begins to emerge as a way of understanding the emotional condition of others through imagination. Surely all men are equal, not only in being liable to error, but also in their potential for empathy.

### (c) Desires

Humanism is a term most closely linked to the Renaissance. Here the "appetites" of Plato, which had become in Christian theology something to be subdued in favor of a preferred asceticism, appear again as interesting and worthy in themselves — in fact, a means to achieve the greatness of man's potentialities.

Man's equality is now seen from another vantage point: men are equal in possessing appetites. Appetites are desires; these desires, Plato thought, might relate to basic bodily functions (such as hunger, or sexual desire) or be less essential (such as a desire for fancy food, or possibly friendship, or beauty). Desire is associated with emotion; a satisfied desire brings pleasure, an unsatisfied desire frustration; a realization that a desire soon may be met brings anticipation or hope. Man's appetites can lead him to great accomplishments and great happiness. An appetite for beauty can lead to the creation of beautiful architecture, or to the removal of unappetizing surroundings. An appetite for friendship can lead to the development of greater sensitivity and understanding of others and hence to improved human relations. The extreme idealism of such a position must be granted, but the point is clear: the qualities (appetites, and therefore resultant emotions) in himself that man saw for centuries as a blemish on his perfectibility, became, in the Renaissance, assets and a means to attain higher levels in this world.

If we are to assume a human point of view in the way the humanists of the Renaissance did, we must cherish human characteristics, marvel at them, investigate them, relish the experience of living ourselves. We will react emotionally to what we see in life and in art, perhaps with admiration, perhaps with disgust, perhaps by imagining what it is like to feel as this old man in a painting does, or that one we see sitting on a park bench. In a word we have concern: we care about our humanity. It would be a mistake to suppose that only admirable qualities are illustrative of the human point of view: we may equally be emotionally aware of avarice, degeneracy or cruelty. That certain human qualities please and other displeas is not really relevant: we view in other human beings a particular state of mind which brings to us the emotional awareness of what it means to be human.

To be emotionally aware is neither to have a simple emotional reaction nor a simple cognizance of emotional states; both are required. In assuming the human point of view, therefore, one not only reacts to an experience emotionally, but is aware of his emotional reaction. By being emotionally aware, rather than merely rationally aware, we know 'what it is like'; we know more fully the wide extremes of emotion within the range of human possibilities, and we know men to be equal in possessing these possibilities.

The human point of view is thus seen to consist of the following:

1. To see another human being as possessing an inner state of mind, not just an exterior label.
2. To react emotionally and with concern to the various states of mind and conditions of other human beings.

These reactions awaken in us an empathetic state of mind, because we identify the experience of others with something that could happen to us, and we thus give close attention to human characteristics of all kinds; age, youth, weakness or strength of character, intelligence, stupidity, sensitivity, happiness, serenity, or excitement are a few. Such characteristics are not merely noted in empirical fashion but with emotional awareness. A certain equality among men may be seen in their possession of emotions and their ability to imagine the feelings of others. It will be through a further study of emotion, imagination and their relation to knowledge and understanding that the link with equality among men can be more clearly established.

## II. Equality

### (a) Emotion and Knowledge

Although classical and early Christian scholars spoke of appetites and desires, there seems to have been only a very gradual shift of emphasis to states of mind, moods, and

emotions. Locke connected desires with pleasure and pain,<sup>8</sup> and Rousseau refined this concept to include imaginative sympathy, whereby we can imagine the pain of another and thus pity him. We put ourselves in the place of another person through the realization that, "the fate of these unhappy people may one day be [our] own, that [our] feet are standing on the edge of the abyss".<sup>9</sup> Still Rousseau distinguished only pleasure, pain, and pity and was content to consider these three as characteristic of human nature. Rousseau and Locke used words like pride, envy, or happiness freely but did not directly relate them to any of their important notions of human nature. Probably it was the age of Romanticism that placed the emphasis in human experience squarely on emotional states. Leonardo, as a man of the Renaissance, gloried in the 'real', the reality of man and of nature. Wordsworth wrote poetry about the natural world, but did not, like the Renaissance artists, emphasize objectivity or accuracy of detail. On the contrary, he claimed that "poetry is the spontaneous outpouring of powerful emotions."<sup>10</sup> We have not been allowed to ignore emotion since.

Emotion, as we understand it today, cannot be separated from knowledge. John Dewey states in *Democracy and Education*:

The urgency, warmth and intimacy of a direct experience — is the difference between a technical description of a picture and seeing it, or between seeing it and being moved by it; between learning mathematical equations about light and being carried away by some glorious illumination of a misty landscape.<sup>11</sup>

His special meaning for the word *experience* entails the emotional involvement of a person in a life experience. Is it possible as a human being not to have such involvement in a given life experience? For Dewey, experience, and thus knowledge, must have this emotional component to be complete. Yet this is certainly not the popular position. It has been common in this age of analysis to try to set aside emotion and consider the other aspects of one's experience in a kind of clinically pure environment. Emotion, in this view, is thought to have a polluting effect on clear vision; to find truth we must purge our experience of its emotional content. Thus the truth of a landscape is its geographical and botanical constitution, or an equation about light rays — it is not a "glorious illumination" or even "misty".

Some of us have been taught to ignore the emotional part of knowledge in the mistaken belief that when we ignore an emotion it is not there. Such an attitude has been cultivated by some educators in the belief that in discouraging the recognition of emotion as a valid, useful part of human experience, and thus of human knowledge, they are encouraging the use of reason and hence objective or 'true' knowledge. But as Israel Scheffler has pointed out,

This opposition of cognition and emotion must nevertheless be challenged for it distorts everything it touches: Mechanizing science, it sentimentalizes art . . . Education . . . the development of mind and attitudes in the young - is split into two grotesque parts - unfeeling knowledge and mindless arousal.<sup>12</sup>

True knowledge of any event requires knowledge of the emotions of the human participants and an emotional reaction of the person to whom the knowledge is conveyed. Thus we do not know much about World War I by reading statistics of deaths sustained by each side and kinds of armaments used. But when we read Rupert Brooke's sonnets *The Soldier* and *The Dead*, we know something of the pride and patriotism of British soldiers, and from Isaac Rosenberg's *Break of Day in the Trenches*, we may legitimately claim to know the horror of war and the bestiality of man.

## (b) Imagination and Equality

I have argued that to adopt a human point of view is to be aware of various states of mind in others due to their total life situation, and to react with a resultant state of mind oneself. I have further claimed that it is impossible *not* to be in some state of mind or mood at any given time, and that knowledge has an emotional component, which however may be ignored, thus enabling one to deny the state of mind of another or oneself.

Any way of interpreting the human point of view seems to lead to the emotions. How does this affect the concept of equality (for it is in considering what he terms the human point of view that Williams seems to see the strongest argument in favor of the equality of man)? Alive, human beings feel pleasure and pain. They are equal in possessing states of mind, moods or emotions. Whereas one can be totally without reason, he cannot be totally without feeling. (There is, is there not, a state of mind characterized by a *feeling* of emotional numbness, as in severe depression?), and in this they certainly seem to be set apart from, say, worms or cabbages. Granted, there must exist a wide range of degrees of emotional sensitivity among human beings, depending on their heredity, social environment, and personal lives. But as well, men are equal in their fallibility, eventual mortality and the empathetic state of mind caused by this knowledge. They can, through their own experience, imaginatively participate in the states of mind of others. It is this latter ability which is significant; that men are equal in essentially human ways is not important in itself: it is each man's capacity to understand the other's humanness that is important.

To experience imaginatively what someone else has experienced first hand, one is not required to have participated in exactly the same event. One does not need to have died to imagine dying. Neither, for example, does one need to have paddled the Coppermine River to imagine the feelings of one who has. One should possibly have paddled *some* river, but not necessarily. Just knowing the thrill of any kind of physical daring, the special panic caused by a constant attack of insects, the contentment of fatigue caused by fresh air and exercise, such experiences as these would be enough.

The equality of the ability to 'feel' is a very minimal equality to be sure; but the fact that we all possess such a rudimentary equality suggests certain behaviors in our social relations. If I am not allowed to walk where others walk, I am hurt; if I am spoken to condescendingly, I will react with anger; if I achieve no success in what I attempt, I will be dejected and frustrated. I expect others to react similarly. Therefore, if I wish to offend someone, I will act in a way that would offend me were I in his position. But if I am emotionally aware, I will question my own state of mind. Am I jealous? vengeful? How will I feel once I have done what I intend to do? There is a maxim in both Eastern and Western traditions called the Golden Rule: it has appeared in the writings of Confucius and Aristotle, as well as in the Bible; in Charles Kingsley's *Water-Babies*, it is rendered as *Do-as-you-would-be-done-by*, not to be confused with its mirror image *Be-done-by-as-you-did*. The latter epitomizes a concept of justice; the former, of emotional awareness, and resultant empathy. The truth value in the Golden Rule lies in a basic understanding of what it means to be human: if a given action pains me, it will likely pain you; if it gives me pleasure, you too will likely be pleased. It is the *ability to imagine* the results of our actions on others that enables us to heed such a maxim.

It is immediately apparent that through the ages many of us have not been able to imaginatively put ourselves in the place of others. Whites used not to think that blacks could suffer physically or emotionally (witness conditions on slave boats); some cultures thought women were incapable of bodily discomfort: the Indian guide Matonabee, advising Samuel Hearne on his Arctic expedition, told him to be sure to take women on any voyage

of exploration as they could carry heavy burdens without tiring, and required no more food than licking their fingers from the pot. Hearne commented that the women he saw indeed did not seem to tire, but he thought that they probably ate when the men were not around.<sup>13</sup>

However, we have seen that it is not necessary to have duplicated the experience of another person to experience in imagination what he does. It is not absolutely imperative to be black or female to imagine what each feels in a given situation. This depends though on the realization that blacks, women and everyone else *have* feelings. And supposing one has little social intercourse with people unlike himself, or is so accustomed to thinking of a particular group as a completely different form of life that he cannot believe such a group feels pleasure, pain, anger, despair in much the same way as he does, what then? There is a recourse, and that is through the arts:

Poet and novelist have an immense advantage over even an expert psychologist in dealing with an emotion. For the former build up a concrete situation and permit it to evoke emotional response. Instead of the description of an emotion in intellectual and symbolic terms, the artist "does the deed that breeds the emotion."<sup>14</sup>

One way the artist "does the deed" is by his careful choice of content. Only such details as contribute to the total emotional effect of the form that he wishes his audience to experience are included. Thus the percipient is able to focus clearly on a particular perspective without the distraction of those irrelevant details that might intrude in real life. That the artist can carefully select the aspects of a situation he wishes to convey leaves art open to the charge of propaganda. But the key, as Northrop Frye persuasively argues, is "the power of choice", a choice of worlds provided to the imagination by great literature; for the imagination of the man who has "so far recognized only one society, the society he has to live in—" he says, "— has been starved and fed on shadows."<sup>15</sup>

But all the arts, Dewey claims, not just the literary arts, provide surrogate experience. We learn what it is like to be a certain kind of person in a certain situation, feeling as that person would feel physically and emotionally. How does this occur? The most plausible explanation is provided by those theories of art which see the work as a single symbol (Langer) or symbol system (Nelson Goodman). Interpreted correctly, these stand for various emotional aspects. When we experience a work of art, we react emotionally, because of its symbolism. It seems reasonable that we do this by connecting feelings we have experienced in life with feelings symbolized in the work of art. We form an image from various remembered experiences, an image that is visual, auditory, and emotional, and this image we superimpose on the information we receive from the work of art: this is what it means to feel in imagination.

It is important to emphasize that it is the work of art that occasions such a process and not mere whim, and it is thus important that we are able to interpret its information: metaphor in literature, for example, line in painting, or tone color in music. If we are aware of our experience and not merely wallowing in sentiment, if we can make further connections as we continue our day-to-day life, we have gained what Iris Murdoch calls "an education in how to picture and understand human situations".<sup>16</sup>

This explanation may not seem to apply to music or abstract art, but a telling example is the common experience of reacting inappropriately to a life situation: in tragedy we may remain stoic, but when listening to, for example Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody*, the full significance of the event may be brought home to us through connecting the emotion of the music with the remembered event. Equally, abstract art conveys certain information that we connect with previously experienced emotion. We may not learn directly about a particular person's emotional response to a life situation, but we learn about an emotion. We may know

something of sadness from life, but from music and abstract art (as from the representational arts), we may explore many other facets of sadness. Such understanding is not merely self-knowledge, for such knowledge can help in the understanding of those who in life have experienced a form of sadness that has not formed part of our own actual lives, but may be grasped by us through art. We are thus more emotionally aware of the feelings of others.

### III. Conclusion

Equality among men rests on their common human characteristics: the prime human qualities that men share equally are the ability to feel emotion in reaction to personal experience, and to imagine the emotions of others. If we do not recognize this in more than an abstract way, we are not apt to treat others with the respect they deserve as equals — equals in feeling pleasure and pain. But the ability to feel others' emotions in imagination may be sensitized by the emotional experience derived from the arts. The arts, therefore, become of prime concern when we talk about equality in education: not the validity of examinations or intelligence tests or whether equal educational opportunity is possible for students of varied backgrounds. It is through the arts that children begin to understand different cultures and attain sympathy for those who are 'different' such as the physically or mentally handicapped. Without such exposure, children are apt to be confined in later life to prejudices of their own society, reinforced by the popular media which by their nature most often cannot provide Frye's choice of worlds.

Emotional understanding must be learned: different arts speak different languages, as do different cultures. Even though there is an immediate appeal once one understands the language, greater depth of understanding requires study. Therefore it is imperative that children be educated in the arts, in emotional understanding, for

Subjection to a work of art is an experience from which no one can escape unscathed. It seeps down into the very core of being, which is why Shakespeare says that we are such stuff as dreams are made of; for he whose life is confined to the actual, to what he experiences in the way of fact, leads a poor life indeed; he comes into contact with only one world among many.<sup>17</sup>

If the Kantian notion that our minds give structure to our world is valid, and if this structure comes about through the experience of the world in a way that involves emotional knowledge, then the person whose world is built only on his actual experience lives with very limited boundaries. He is equal to others as a creature of emotion, but he cannot realize the extent nor the richness of this equality. Only through the exercise of his human capacity for what I have called emotional awareness and empathy, the ability to understand the 'felt life' of others,<sup>18</sup> can such understanding be attained.

An education should provide opportunity for such understanding; this must be the task of the arts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> J.R. Lucas, "Against Equality," *Philosophy*, vol. 40, (1965), pp. 296-307. "Because You Are A Woman," *Philosophy*, vol. 48, (1973), pp. 161-171. "Against Equality Again," *Philosophy*, vol. 52, (1977), pp. 255-280.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard A.O. Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Second Series) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 110-131.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. 1, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, (1967). p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> *State of mind, mood, emotion, and feeling* are used interchangeably in this paper. If there is a distinction, state of mind refers to a broader, more complex, enduring condition. Mood is less enduring, and emotions or feelings are the component parts of states of mind or moods.

<sup>5</sup> *Imagination*. Many attempts have been made to analyse and define imagination. No one seems to deny that men possess such a capacity. Although imagining ourselves in another's position would seem to entail *feeling* as he feels, the explanation in the section called Imagination and Pity must suffice in lieu of a more thorough analysis. In general, imagination is seen as a mental activity through which one can put oneself in another's place.

<sup>6</sup> J.J. Rousseau, *Emile*, in Kingsley Price (ed.), *Education and Philosophical Thought* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1962), p. 357.

<sup>7</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in F. Levy (ed.), *Complete Works* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), pp. 226-227.

<sup>8</sup> *Pleasure and Pain*. When authors such as Rousseau use these terms, it is not clear whether they mean physical or mental pleasure and pain. There is obviously a close connection, as physical discomfort entails mental distress. Since this paper deals primarily with the emotions, the terms refer to the mental aspect.

<sup>9</sup> J.J. Rousseau, p. 357.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by O.K. Bouwsma, "The Expression Theory of Art", in William Elton (ed.), *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1921 edition), pp. 272-273.

<sup>12</sup> Israel Scheffler, "In Praise of Cognitive Emotions," *John Dewey Lecture* (John Dewey Society, 1977), p. 1

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Hearne, *Journey From Prince of Wales' Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* (Edmonton: M.G. Hurtig Ltd., 1971), p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958 edition), p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), p. 63 and 65.

<sup>16</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> J.K. Feibleman, "Art and its Contrary-to-Fact Condition," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. XXXVII (Summer, 1978), p. 482.

<sup>18</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 409.