IX. THE UNIQUE AND THE UNIVERSAL IN ART
The last chapter ended with the rejection of a univocal concept of meaning and thus advocating the uniqueness of art-symbols. An advocacy of uniqueness may appear to involve some misleading implications such as a denial of any systematic criticism and evaluation of arts. Thus the major task of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the concepts of the unique and universal and an attempt is made to show that they are not mutually exclusive. And further, an advocacy of the uniqueness in art does not necessarily negate the possibility of aesthetic evaluation and art criticism. The aim of the present chapter is not to go into the details of the historical development of the categories of art criticism and aesthetic evaluation. Like the rest of the fields of philosophy, aesthetics also has been overwhelmed by the dichotomy between the relative and the absolute. The absolutists have striven to provide universal norms for aesthetic appreciation and evaluation. While the relativists have attempted to advocate the cause of creative freedom and uniqueness of art works. Thus for the latter there are no a priori norms for aesthetic evaluation. And for the former there can be no exceptions to the judgements of taste. Since it is not the aim of the present chapter to provide a detailed historical account of these two opposed views, the above mentioned introduction may suffice. It
would be useful to begin with an analysis of the various concepts associated with the terms 'unique' and the 'universal'. This would make the present discussion more specific and hence more fruitful than a mere entanglement in a web of indefinite categories. Let us then analyse these terms singularly. Looking at it carefully, uniqueness seems to have a variety of implicit attributes and out of these the following are important for the present inquiry:

a) Unclassifiability;
b) Unanalysability;
c) Indefinability;
d) Individuality; and
e) Novelty.

Now, in order to assess the significance of the above mentioned implied attributes of 'uniqueness', they need to be examined separately with special reference to the phenomena of art. The question, whether any art object can be rightly called 'unique', will be decided in virtue of the art work possessing at least one, some, or all of the above attributes. And for this we must first analyse the exact nature of these properties.

Directing attention upon the first implication of uniqueness in art as unclassifiability, it appears on the contrary that there are many ways in which art works can be classified. For instance, art works can be classified
according to their material media (the classifications in terms of visual arts, temporal arts, and so on). Further, they can be categorized according to the spatio-temporal reference frame, art history is full of such categories like the "Baroque", "Rococo" and "Gothic" etc. Variation in technique is another way in which art works can be classified. Technique of an art work would be the peculiar manner through which art forms are rendered in a certain medium. In art history we often come across terms like "Impressionism", "Pointillism", "Cubism" and so on. Another important way of classifying art works is in terms of their subject matter: "tragedy", "comedy", "landscape painting", "nude-study" and so on.

These various ways of classification of art work, howsoever valuable in themselves, do not exhaust the art object. The art-work transcends all these classifications, for it is not equivalent to them; this perhaps may be the implication of regarding the art object to be unclassifiable. To the notion of unclassifiability are related the other two implications of uniqueness: unanalysability and

\[^1\] A strong thesis for the unanalysability of art has been developed by Peter Carmichael. Pointing to the paradox of analysis he says: "If the analysandum has the same meaning as the analysandum, it is tautologous, or trivial, while if it does not have the same meaning, it is incorrect. Of course it might be tautologous and still show interesting synonymy or diversity, but that means little since this result would almost certainly be something non-artistic. (Hamlet analyzed into psychological types or categories, for example).... In analysis little or nothing of art
indefinability. This reminds one of G.E. Moore's discussion of the indefinability of good.² What Moore holds about 'good' seems to hold about art works. Art works are indefinable if definition implies an analysis of the art object into its constituent parts. To mark the difference, Moore's example of horse may be recalled: a horse can be defined in terms of an analysis of its constituent parts — four legs, heart, head, tail and so on. But can we do the same in case of an art work? Taking the example of Van Gogh's painting, 'Cornfield with Rooks' is it possible to analyse it into its constituent parts — the canvas, thickly laid out paints, a stretch of yellow and blue etc. Or, attempting to analyse this painting vividly, one may talk of the effects of the vast golden cornfields of wheat with winding green patches of colour portraying the pathways; dark blue sky and the overhanging birds spreading their per se — intuition of form, dramatic intuition, lyrical intuition, imaginative transmutation, expression — is shown; and this is, artistically, the heart of the affair. In fact, analysis has little if anything to do with art. Unless it can give the imaginative metamorphosis, or creative act, it can hardly give the work. This can be done, or approximated let us say, but hardly by analysis, which only decomposes." See Peter A. Carmichael, "The Aesthetic Seer", Jour. of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. XXVI (1967), pp. 234-235.

dark wings upon the cornfields. Even the latter attempt which professes to give a detailed analysis of Van Gogh's 'Cornfield with Rooks' does not come to the level of the actual painting. For a painting is, above all things, a perceptual object. Thus no amount of analysis can be a substitute for the painting itself; this is not peculiar about paintings but all art works.

It is in the above mentioned sense that art works are individual creations. Taken literally, it is a truism to say that all works of art are particular creations in a given medium. But apart from this, every art work is an individual creation in a special sense because it embodies a particular concretization of feelings, images through a certain sensuous medium. That is the reason why no art works can be translated. This has already been seen in our analysis of the nature of art-symbols and aesthetic meaning.

However, the individuality of art works is not so simple a problem. It poses very difficult problems with reference to the performing arts like dance, drama and music. In the arts like sculpture, painting and architecture it is easy to point out the art object and in this sense its individuality is not such a complicated problem. But with reference to drama, dance and music one faces an enigma—which exactly is the work of art: the written script of a
drama or its rendering on the stage, or both? Does the musical work change according to its varied rendering? These are some of the questions which intrigue when one thinks about the individuality of art.

Interconnected with individuality is the notion of novelty; the work of art acquires its individuality largely because of the novel arrangement of symbols that it embodies. Thus it creates and concretizes a new dimension of images; embodying and expressing feelings that have been hitherto unheard of or unseen.

Similarly, the term 'Universality' within the domain of art would have two important applications:

a) It may be regarded as the potentiality of an art object to evoke a uniform response and a similarity of meaning. It assumes that a given art object is capable of evoking a uniform response in all perceivers, irrespective of space and time. It is this potential universality of the artistic symbolism that lends its motivational force to artistic creativity. For without the implicit faith in the potential universality of artistic symbolism no art would be created. Art, being an attempt at a sensuous concretization of images, feelings and emotions, acquires its completion only in the collaboration of the spectator. The spectator re-creates the images, feelings and associations from the sensuous symbolism of the art object. This can be possible
only with an assumption that the art work evokes a uniformity of responses. Otherwise no communication is possible. Thus, another assumption would necessarily follow the uniformity of responses, namely the identity of meaning evoked by the art object. This identity of meaning is non-cognitive and arises because of the universality of feeling. Since it is not a conceptual universality, it would be better to call it the universality of feeling. There are no rules given, no definite principles cited, which can determine aesthetic meaning. Thus the universality of artistic communication is achieved not through concepts and their governing principles but feelings.

b) The second application of the term 'universality' which assumes for its operation the first one, concerns itself with aesthetic evaluation and critical judgements on art works. This implies a uniformity of norms for the evaluation of art works. However, the ways in which this uniformity of norms is proved are widely divergent, ranging from the universality of intuition to the universal expression of an Absolute Idea in terms of its various sensuous manifestations. But howsoever divergent these attempts, they all assume that from the uniformity of evocation and meaning of art symbols, there necessarily follows a uniformity of evaluative judgements. And it is inconceivable that if, in perceivers A and B, the art object X evokes a similar response then they will evaluate it differently. To support the universality
of evaluation, a clear-cut distinction is made between an aesthetic response and a mere passing fancy. Relativism in evaluation is accounted for by a lack of proper aesthetic attitude and response towards the art object. Thus, the basic assumption of the universality of aesthetic judgement is that about evaluation there can be no disputes, notwithstanding the relativity of tastes which is so well known. In spite of being non-cognitive, aesthetic judgements are shared by all those who perceive art objects. And this universality is not inductive but a priori in character.

The question now arises: is it then possible to reconcile artistic uniqueness with an objectivity of interpretive and evaluative norms? Here it may be beneficial to recall what has already been said in Chapters VII and VIII. It has been indicated that a single work of art is liable to varied interpretations, at times extremely divergent. This is because the perception of an art work depends upon several conditions including the perceptual set of the perceiver. This poses two problems: if perception depends upon the pre-existing perceptual set, then all perceivers may perceive an art work differently. In this case it is difficult to maintain the identity of the art work which has no fixity of meaning. Secondly, if it is possible to find ways of knowing the various dimensions of meaning of the art work, then can there be a criterion (or criteria) for choosing the relevant interpretations from irrelevant ones?
Let us look into the situation more carefully.

Regarding the first problem it can be said that practical situations do show a commonness between the perceptions of various individuals. If an object is perceived differently by every perceiver then it would be extremely difficult to provide any frame of reference for action and interaction between various individuals. Every individual would be closed in his private universe, having nothing to do with others. However, this may sound as a very naive plea for intersubjectivity of aesthetic interpretation. For the perceptual situations created by art objects are far more complicated, defying the application of pragmatic tests. But there is another level on which interpretive universality can be entertained; this is primarily a theoretical possibility and not an empirical one. This universality emanates from the art object itself; since the art work embodies an intention, like the script of a dead language, art work also has a potential communicability. Though there is a possibility that an art work may be interpreted in two equally coherent and cogent ways, yet at the same time the potential universality or the communicability of a particular interpretation cannot be denied. Given a certain language system (in the sense in which Wittgenstein conceives of it) the logical possibility of its universal communicability holds, if the rules of the game are known and followed. However, there remains a gap between the logical universality
and the empirical one because of two main reasons:

a) The rules of artistic communication are not clearly laid down as the rules of languages like English, Spanish etc. For in art new conventions are formed and new symbols created and this defies any rigid adherence to a certain set of norms.

b) Often the artist himself is unable to formally explain the rules of his 'game' which he has implicitly embodied through his artistic creation.

This is so far the logical universality, the practical problem however remains — when confronted with two or more interpretations of the same art work, it is difficult to lay down norms for the comparative evaluation of the various interpretations. Art critics have often laboured to formulate such criteria, it may be helpful to turn to Hoffman's attempt. He says:

"The criteria for accepting one meaning-appearance rather than another are contextual: (A) logical consistency, i.e., freedom from contradiction, and (B) extensiveness, i.e., degree to which the data in the words are accounted for."  


Cf. Helmut Hungerland's view of 'aesthetic objective', discovering which (he conceives), is the primary aim of interpretation. And regarding the discernment of the relevant aesthetic objective, Hungerland provides the following criterion: "One might tentatively suggest that
These two criteria are very useful in relatively simple situations, but evaluation and preference become more difficult when the alternative interpretations are equally consistent and relevant to the context. Then a third criterion is brought in — the intention of the artist as revealed by the artist himself. This we have already seen, in spite of its usefulness, is not a reliable criterion. For ultimately the decision has still to be made regarding the exact relevance of artist's intention. Thus it further requires another criterion to assess its relevance. And this leaves the problem of artistic interpretation still undecided, for there are no a priori rules to guide it; nor can there be a hope of discovering any such definite rules in future.

Recalling what has been said about aesthetic judgement, an attempt was made in Chapter VII to formulate its criterion. Elaborating the nature of aesthetic judgements, it was concluded that their reasons (to be significant) ought to emanate from the first-order properties of the art object something like a law of parsimony applied to the determining of a relevant aesthetic objective; e.g., an aesthetic objective is most relevant to a given work of art if its components can be seen as coherent with the least amount of effort and a minimum of frustration. And one might also offer a sort of quantitative verification, e.g., an aesthetic objective is most relevant to a given work of art if the majority of its components (ideally all) can be seen as contributing to achieving the objective.

itself. The first-order properties being the properties of the structure and medium of the art objects: the meter of a poem, the linear perspective in a painting and so on. The second-order properties which are parasitical upon the first order properties can be exemplified in terms of rhythm, foreshortening, balance, harmony and so on. This implies a hierarchy of properties stringed into one another. But the various orders of properties do not betray any necessary implicative relation amongst them. This will be seen from the very nature of aesthetic concepts: their gratuitousness. This point has been more elaborately discussed by Hoffman in connection with the art of poetry. Hoffman has analysed the nature of second-order properties like 'monotony' and 'intensity' and examined them with reference to two poems, Kilmer's "Trees" and Blake's "The Tyger". He says:

'What do we mean when we say that "Trees" is monotonous? We mean that the unvarying tone of the poem is wearisome, and that not only do we find it so, but that we should expect any sensitive and critically perceptive reader to find it so... one would justify the verdict of monotony in regard to Kilmer's poem by pointing to certain features of the work, viz., the similarity of rhythm in each stanza;.... One would then formulate a persuasive definition of 'monotonous' in terms of these features: 'This is monotonous' means 'This has the qualities or relations X, Y, Z...*', where 'monotonous' has as well a depreciatory emotive meaning that expresses a speaker's low regard for whatever is being spoken of, and tends to evoke in a hearer disfavour toward the object in point.... Keeping this in mind, let us consider Blake's "The Tyger".... Here, the rhythm is the same in each stanza; in four of the six
stanzas there is no pause save at a line's end; and there is a tendency toward placing greater than usual stress upon already accented syllables. Do these features sound somewhat familiar? They should, because they are the very ones in terms of which we characterized the monotony of "Trees" and formulated the persuasive definition of 'monotony'. If the conjoint presence of these characteristics is a sufficient condition for the concept to apply, we should have to say that Blake's poem is also monotonous. Yet, rather than making it monotonous, they serve to intensify its meaning; the poet's questions become more urgent and impressive than they would otherwise be.\textsuperscript{14}

This long passage illustrates very ingeniously the absence of any necessary relation between the first and second order properties of art works. The similar first order properties of the two poems "The Tyger" and the "Trees" do not give rise to similar second order properties. Thus it shows that even in spite of well-defined and clearly demonstrated first-order properties, no inference can be drawn regarding the second-order properties that they manifest. If this is so, once again we are back to the unique and the individual and no 'U-type',\textsuperscript{5} aesthetic

\textsuperscript{14}Robert Hoffman, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 318-319.


\textsuperscript{5}The phrase 'U-type' owes its origin to E.A. Gellner. Gellner has defined 'U-type' evaluations as "those evaluations to which applies a rule wholly devoid of any personal reference, a rule containing merely predicates (descriptions) and logical terms". E.A. Gellner, "Ethics and Logic",
judgements can be made. All aesthetic judgements would then be contextual. Yet they are not arbitrary like the emotive exclamations of personal likes and dislikes. For it has already been maintained that there is a difference between the two statements: "X is a good painting" and "I like X". A personal approval or disapproval has no necessary connection with an aesthetic judgement. Furthermore, aesthetic judgements do at least implicitly (if not explicitly) refer to norms; these references are indicated through the reasons that are offered in support of such judgements. And, at the same time, these reasons are not beyond the frame-work of space and time; in short, they do not have a universal bearing. From this it evidently follows that if universals in aesthetics are taken to be all pervading a priori principles for judgement and evaluation, then strictly speaking they have no relevance for art.  

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See alongwith this R.M. Hare, 'Universalizability' (Same issue), pp. 295-312.

6 A very interesting study of judgement and evaluation has been made by T.J. Diffy. He has attempted to distinguish between aesthetic appraisals and evaluations. Aesthetics is concerned with the former. Since the latter has a necessary relation with a priori criteria for grading and assessment. For in art, criteria cannot be laid out a priori.

since between the first-order properties of art works and their evaluations no inferences can be drawn, no rigid norms can be built inductively. The term 'universal' can have an application in aesthetics only if it is ripped off its a priori and absolute implications. Universals in terms of certain generic norms can have significance for aesthetic evaluation. However, these generic norms emanate from a detailed analysis (as far as it is possible) of the art object itself. And the reasons of interpretation and evaluation have a strictly paradigmatic value;\(^7\) for a comparison between art works can be possible only in a restricted sense of the term. Thus, paradigmatic value here implies that since there cannot be a causal connection between the first and second order properties, all reasons in evaluation have to begin with a specification of context; of a model; of a particular art work. It is the 'family resemblances' between one model and another that have made the classification of styles and techniques possible in art history. But these 'family resemblances' cannot be held absolute, they represent a certain point of view and thus have a restricted application. They are not a priori,

\(^7\)This reference to the 'paradigm-case method' owes its origin to Ruby Meager.

rather on the other hand the discovery of these family resemblances is based upon an acquaintance with actual art objects. This shows that groupings and classifications of art objects are possible, keeping in view at the same time, the uniqueness and individuality of art works. These groupings can any time be rejected and reformulated the moment they are detrimental to aesthetic uniqueness. However, in this context it must be noted that for any family resemblances to be recognized one dimension of universality has necessarily to be assumed, i.e. the potentiality of art works to evoke a uniform response in all the spectators that are confronted with them. For no family resemblances can be recognized without this minimum amount of inter-subjectivity in responses. But this by itself does not vouch for any universal norms. Now, it has already been conceded that if generic norms of evaluation have any bearing it is relative to the particular class in question, and since the classes are formed out of a recognition of the family resemblances between various works of art, it is clear that the norms for aesthetic evaluation have arisen out of particular art works and not a priori principle. Thus in the context of the principles of aesthetic evaluation Carmichael holds that "A more critical regard for the term principle would be rewarding here.... Principles are widely assumed to be changeless, indisputable, irreplaceable,
universally binding. So they are, in a static, Platonistic context, but not in other contexts, where they are only guides or policies, subject to change at any time. Today if not always the arts lie in those contexts."

This implies that there can be no Absolute Idea or prime-symbol that can be a principle of aesthetic evaluation for ages to come. There is a multiplicity of norms and all are relevant for their particular context. And no single Absolute can be accepted or need be canvassed for either, to discharge the obligations of evaluation or criticism, for there is no hierarchic order of norms. This sort of pluralism Spengler also accepts. But where he was wrong was to hold certain norms absolute in certain cultures. For, in spite of his apparent cultural relativism and denial of a unilinear system of art history he too conceded to universals. On the one level to the Absolutes of Cultural prime-symbols, on the other level to the supreme Absolute of Time. This created a priori norms that ceased to have any bearing upon actual art objects.

The concept of family resemblance can be understood and applied more exhaustively if attempts are made to clarify the semantic connotations of the first and second order properties of art works. (However this has been

8 Peter Carmichael, op. cit., p. 238.
already seen that, the connotation of these first and second order properties has to be contextual and cannot be decided once for all). Furthermore, if attempts are made to analyse and elucidate our perceptions and interpretations of art works then their resemblance can be visualized much more clearly. This would direct attention both to the individuality of the art work and at the same time attempt to build generic norms with reference to a group of art works.