Chapter 5

Motherwell's *Elegies*

Let's consider a case where aesthetic beauty is artistically right— Robert Motherwell's *Elegies for the Spanish Republic.* I have already mentioned how beautiful I found one of these paintings to be when I first saw it, without knowing anything more about it than that. The critic Clement Greenberg used to cover his eyes while someone put a painting in place, and then abruptly opened them, acting on the thesis that what strikes the eye without reference

FIGURE 16 Robert Motherwell, *Elegy for the Spanish Republic No. 172 (with Blood),* 1989 © Daedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

The beauty belongs to the meaning.

to previous thought is the test of a painting's excellence. In a way, Greenberg's methodology connects with a thought on beauty by Kant. Kant writes that "The beautiful is that which apart from concepts is represented as the object of universal satisfaction." I want to stress "apart from concepts." It suggests that beauty is a non-conceptual content of certain experiences, which of course can contribute to a larger experience of an artwork, when it is taken up as part of the latter's meaning, as we saw in the previous chapter. Greenberg, if I am right, sought to get an impression of the object before a concept could come into play, and rest his judgment of the work on this conceptually uncontaminated "first glimpse." In my own view, we have no clear idea of how much extra-aesthetic information comes with the first glimpse. But I must admit that when I first saw Motherwell's painting, I knew that it was beautiful by this test—I had been stopped in my tracks by its beauty. At the time I did not much reflect on what it meant. But when I did, I came to the view that the *Elegies*—Motherwell painted over 170 of them by the time of his death—

were artistically excellent not simply because they were beautiful but because their being beautiful was artistically right. By that I mean that when I grasped their *thought,* I understood that their aesthetic beauty was internal to their meaning.

The *Elegies* are characteristically large black-and-white compositions, with occasionally a spot of red or ochre. There are usually two or three black ovals interspersed with wide vertical bars. They are freely and rather urgently painted—the black paint feels as if it is splashed on, with some residual spatters and drips. *Elegy for the Spanish Republic 172 (with Blood)* also has a *tache* of blood-red paint. Viewers have read the forms in different ways. Some have seen the ovals as the testicles, the uprights as the penis of a bull, but this loses plausibility when there are more than two ovals and more than one vertical. Some see ovals and uprights with reference to the traditional egg-and-dart decorative motif, but that makes the title of the paintings obscure. I saw the ovals as figures in black shawls, and the verticals as broken uprights, as if remnants of shattered buildings. The beauty of the paintings does not translate into thinking that what these forms represent are themselves beautiful. "How beautiful those mourning women are beside the shattered posts of their burned and bombed houses, standing against the pale morning sky" is not a morally permissible vision. If, that is, one were to see a sight like that in reality and find it beautiful, one would wonder what sort of monster one had turned into, and quickly think instead of what could be done to help. Motherwell's stark black forms nevertheless do feel like shapeless figures set in a broken landscape, which has to be a scene of suffering. But the works are unquestionably beautiful as befits the mood announced by their titles as elegies. They are visual meditations on the death of a form of life. Elegies are part music and part poetry, whose language and cadence are constrained by the subject of death and loss and which express grief, whether the artist shares it or not. The *Spanish Elegies,* as they are called, express, in the most haunting forms and colors, rhythms and proportions, the death of a political ideal, whatever the awful realities that may historically have been part of it.

Elegy fits one of the great human moods; it is a way of responding artistically to what cannot be endured or what can only be endured. Motherwell was honored by the Spanish government, after the death of Franco, for having sustained the only mood

morally acceptable through the years of dictatorship, a kind of abiding moral memory unmatched, I think, by anything else in twentieth-century art. Picasso's *Guernica,* for example, is not elegiac. It expresses shock and outrage. It too is black and white, but it would be false to call it beautiful. It was widely exhibited to raise money for anti-fascist causes. In its way, *Guernica* was painted in the spirit that inflected the work in Whitney Biennial 1993.

Elegies are artistic responses to events the natural *emotional* response to which is sorrow, which Webster's defines as "deep distress and regret (as over the loss of something loved)." I feel we understand too little about the psychology of loss to understand why the creation of beauty is so fitting as a way of marking it—why we bring flowers to the graveside, or to the funeral, or why music of a certain sort defines the mood of mourners. It is as though beauty works as a catalyst, transforming raw grief into a tranquil sadness, helping the tears to flow and, at the same time, one might say, putting the loss into a certain philosophical perspective. Recourse to beauty seems to emerge spontaneously on occasions where sorrow is felt. In the 1980s, when so many young men were beginning to die of AIDS, the gay funeral became a kind of art form. The victims would plan their funerals with care and originality, and fill them with what had given beauty to their lives. The beauty embodied the values they had lived by. Again, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, impromptu shrines appeared all over New York City. They were all more or less the same, and very moving: votive candles, flowers, flags, balloons, sometimes scraps of paper with poems. They were the immediate vernacular responses to the immense sadness that overcame everyone in New York. The mood was elegiac rather than angry, and the shrines were the outward expression of hearts broken by what was perceived as the end of a form of life. "Nothing will ever be the same" was the common remark in those first days after 9/11.

The conjunction of beauty with the occasion of moral pain somehow transforms the pain from grief into sorrow, and with that into a form of release. And since the occasion of the elegy is public, the sorrow is shared. It is no longer one's own. We are taken up into a community of mourners. The effect of the elegy is philosophical and artistic at once: it gives a kind of meaning to the loss by putting it at a distance, and by closing the distance between

those who feel it—who are in it, as we say, together. I think this is what the Spanish government must have felt that Motherwell's paintings had done. They kept the feeling alive. Because these are elegies, they universalize through philosophization. But there is another kind of response, precisely the response of anger—the response evoked by *Guernica* in the case of art and "the war against terrorism" in the case of politics. It is one thing when distant empires have collapsed, and all that remain are the ruins, the trunkless legs of Ozymandias, King of Kings, and the boastful legend is rendered instantly pathetic by the surrounding wastes and the thin desert winds. We do sentimentalize ruins, which is why they were so stirring to the temperament of the Romantics, who could stand beneath or within them, and reflect on the transitoriness of glory. But we hardly can do this before raw wreckage, where the blackness is not so much the patination of age and nature, but the charred effect of fire and dried blood. Is the elegiac mood ever appropriate to so close a political catastrophe? Doesn't beauty distance it too abruptly? Have we a moral right to wax elegiac over something that was not all that inevitable or universal or necessary? Think, to bring it back to the individual death, to which beauty itself is the human response, when one feels that death was not inevitable (though death abstractly considered is): suppose one's lover has died of AIDS, and one feels that something should or could have been done, one feels anger that it has not been done, one blames and accuses: then beauty to which one is spontaneously moved also seems wrong, wrong because one is called upon to act (to "act up") and not to philosophize. Then elegy conflicts with the impulse to counteraction and the prolongation of struggle.

This might be a criticism to which Motherwell's paintings are subject. The *vita contemplative* and the *vita activa* point to different paths, in art no less than in moral conduct. My immediate concern is philosophical. It is to stress that the beauty of Motherwell's paintings is internal. The paintings are not to be admired because they are beautiful, but because their being so is internally connected with their reference and their mood. The beauty is ingredient in the content of the work, just as it is, in my view, with the cadences of sung or declaimed elegies. But it is also true that it is wrong at times to present as beautiful what calls, if not for action, then at least for indignation. Beauty is not always right. Sabastao

Salgado's photographs of suffering humanity are beautiful, as his work invariably is. But have we a right to show suffering of that order in beautiful ways? Doesn't the beauty of the representation imply that its content is somehow inevitable, like death? Are the photographs not unedifyingly dissonant, their beauty jarring with the painfulness of their content? If beauty is internally connected to the content of a work, it can be a criticism of a work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so.