Chapter

Imperfectionist Aesthetics, Broadening the Field and Clarifying the Definition

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Book

Imperfectionist Aesthetics in Art and Everyday Life

1. Imperfectionist Aesthetics, Broadening the Field and Clarifying the Definition

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This book presents interdisciplinary research on the aesthetics of imperfection in philosophy, music, literature, urban environment, architecture, art theory, and cultural studies. Written by researchers in these disciplines, the essays connect the aesthetics of imperfection with issues affecting the arts and in everyday life in the city, the marketplace, the social ethos, and the environment. Established authors in the aesthetics of imperfection, notably Ted Gioia, Andy Hamilton, and Yuriko Saito (Chs 3, 4, & 15, this book), are joined by a wide range of researchers whose theoretical and empirical approaches broaden the field of inquiry. After Part I of this book, 'Imperfection Across the Arts and Culture', the next three parts are on imperfection in the arts of 'Music' (II), 'Visual and Theatrical Arts' (III)' and 'Literature' (IV). The second half of this book then moves to categories in 'Everyday Life' (Part V), and branches this further into 'Body, Self, and the Person' (VI) and 'Urban Environments' (VI).

This opening chapter introduces the main areas of the branching out of imperfectionist aesthetics in connection with essays in this book. Brief comments will also be made about the social importance of imperfectionist aesthetics, which is a central concern of this book and a corrective to what one might see as the perversions of perfectionism. This chapter also suggests the scope of imperfectionist aesthetics beyond current studies by touching on various examples such as castle-restoration, altars, kintsugi repair, literary descriptions, rural kitchen tables, and, in more detail, the fragment (in Section 2), attending to Ludwig Wittgenstein and related authors.

The literary or philosophical fragment is paid closer attention here as I analyse how, paradoxically, the fragment can suggest completeness (by intimating ongoingness) more ably than can perfectionist attempts. In the final section (Section 5), I shall demonstrate the important distinction between evaluative and descriptive imperfection and show how it this reveals that descriptive imperfection (e.g. 'the text is fragmentary', 'the clothing is worn or ripped', 'the table is unsanded and unvarnished', 'the improvisation contains mistakes') is a valid and coherent, factual category. This category will be contrasted with ascriptions of evaluative perfection and imperfection (e.g. 'Ah, the imperfection is just right: how perfect!'), which equivocate and are arguably self-defeating.

1. Inviting Contingency

In imperfectionist aesthetics, artists and artisans value openness to contingency as the raw and the unpredictable within the work. Whether by choice or compelled by the irreversible nature of the genre (e.g. live improvisation; ink wash painting), imperfectionism prioritizes flow over correction. Imperfectionists invite the natural, the contingent, the not entirely controllable, rather than strive to eradicate divergence. This also holds for everyday aesthetics, which promotes the dignity of life in balancing the unpredictability of natural and social contingencies with the comforts and conveniences of domestic order.

Like Omar Khayyam's 'Moving Finger', the imperfectionist 'writes; and, having writ, moves on', never '[lured] back to cancel half a line' or 'wash out a word' (*Rubaiyyat*, stanza 70). Reluctant or unable to return to make a correction, the imperfectionist might play so-called 'wrong notes' or paint brush strokes imprecisely, but they are left as organic marks of aliveness or are harmonized by what follows.

Besides discussing the artistic motivations for imperfectionism, the current volume broadens the field into everyday aesthetics, including aesthetics of the body, self, and social life, and urban aesthetics.

A complex of deeply rooted humane concerns motivates and inspires imperfectionist aesthetics in art and everyday life, and these, following the inquiries into art in the first half of this book, lie behind the domestic, urban, and socio-economic situations that have been researched for this volume. Who has not, for instance, visited a home that is just too polite, too perfectly arranged? Such houses are impressive, yet they also unwittingly make guests feel uncomfortable, anxious about where to place themselves (e.g. Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*, ch. 10, qtd in Di Summa, 'Collecting *What*?', Ch. 19, this book, XXX [PAGE/S FOR HESSE QUOTE]). As Saito observes, 'There is something almost inhuman and repugnant about the sign of order that controls every inch of space or every moment of our life' (*Everyday Aesthetics*, 172–3). What unsettles about such homes is the lack of a sufficient degree of looseness, in contrast to imperfectionist attitudes, which extend a freer welcome. Towns and cities, too, can be admired for the resilience and other positive qualities that 'grit' conveys; also, the debate about the social and aesthetic effects of graffiti continues (Conroy, 'Grit and Urban (Im)Perfection', Ch. 27, this book; Baldini, 'Street Art', Ch. 24, this book). And the aesthetics of retaining imperfections in war memorials and sites of atrocities is a concern that deeply effects cultural memory (Handa, 'Memorial Sites', Ch. 25, this book).

Widening further, it is notable how consumerist economic models increasingly promote the aesthetics of perfection, as products are designed to attract with perfect finish, losing their visual appeal when surface wear sets in. This tendency has provoked an opposite desire for goods that can accommodate the signs of age and

repair or even aesthetically improve with them (Saito, 'Consumer Aesthetics').

Broadening imperfectionist aesthetics into social thought, it has been observed that a

positive awareness of imperfection is integral to the politics of social change and to an

inclusive community (Docherty, 'Politics of Realism', Ch. 16, this book; Cheyne,

'Inclusionist Ethos', Ch. 2, this book, discussing Han, *Burnout Society*).

Imperfectionist aesthetics also displays a high reverence for original and unaltered

objects, a tendency that seems to be religiously derived or influenced, although it also

more broadly relates to secular concerns. I refer to the impulse to leave an object

utterly intact, viewing any attempt to finish or improve it as misguided at best and as

sacrilegious or ruinous at worst. This attitude is expressed here and there in the

Hebrew Testament, for instance, especially where Yahweh, issuing the Ten

Commandments, instructs Moses on the proper construction of a stone altar:

> If you use stones to build my altar, use only natural, uncut stones. Do not
>
> shape the stones with a tool, for that would make the altar unfit for holy use.
>
> (Exodus 20:25)

Perfecting the stone, in the sense of forcing a regular shape, it is thought, would

somehow corrupt pollute it. The Yahweh of Exodus is an imperfectionist here,

dignifying the natural qualities of the irregular and unfinished. George Herbert's

poem 'The Altar' (1633) alludes to this verse to refer both to his own work in

physically restoring St Andrew's Church, Bemerton, where he was parish priest, and

to the figuratively comparable edification of a faithful servant:

> A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
>
> Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
>
> Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
>
> No workman's tool hath touch'd the same. (ll. 1–4)

Herbert finds reflected in the human heart that Sinaitic reverence, inflecting the attitude to express the heart of the diligent servant as at once broken, elevated, and framed. This note of the broken yet esteemed also occurs in aesthetic practices such as the Japanese *kintsugi* (lit. golden joining), where a broken item such as a bowl or plate is repaired with glue and powdered gold, emphasizing the repair (Saito, 'Imperfection in Consumer Aesthetics', XX). This aesthetic practice shows in a Buddhist, non-Abrahamic context, a world-enhancing version of the religious esteem for the broken and regard for natural.

It is fitting, in this context, to mention Jesus's admonition in the Sermon on the Mount to 'Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect'. This imperative, however, is limited to love, which, the text emphasizes, should be unconditional, not transactional. The perfection is of loving without prejudice even one's enemies and not just 'those who love you' (Matthew 5: 43–8). Such perfection of love is not at odds with recognizing and embracing a more general human imperfection; indeed, it requires the acceptance of human imperfection. As W. H. Auden put it, 'You shall love your crooked neighbour | With your crooked heart' ('As I Walked Out', ll. 55–6). Learning to love not only with crooked hearts but also crooked bodies, Part V of this book addresses questions of perfection and imperfection in human character and body perception (Irvin, 'Bodily Perfection'; Frazier, 'Inviting Imperfection', this book; Parsons, 'Beauty of Character'; and Hamilton, 'Self, Perfectionism … Imperfection'; Chs 20–3, respectively, this book).

The sacred arts are resonant in this discussion, and Gordon Graham's essay gives a valuable discussion about the physical demarcations of the 'artworld', a 'world' with a relatively short history, versus more open and inclusive kinds of aesthetic participation. Graham notes that 'a powerful blow against the superiority of 'Art

proper', whether from folk art or therapeutic art, for example, is one that 'also strikes a blow against perfectionism' ('Art Proper, Perfectionism, and the Sacred Arts', Ch. 4, this book, XX).

Religious reverence for brokenness finds parallels in the profane world, where the concept of revering rather than replacing original material is also prominent in the European, especially the British, material preservation of ruins *as* ruins, such as castles and abbeys, in contrast to the Japanese practice of restoring historic buildings, such as castles, temples, and shrines, and doing so with a preference for using newly fashioned materials. This restoration often puzzles European visitors, who can feel deprived of a more authentic historical encounter. While relics present material preservation in a way that can be viewed as romanticizing ruin, renovation aims to create an accurate experience of the building restored to former glory, though this can sometimes be jarringly new in appearance. On both sides of the question, people debate the limits of authentic historical encounter, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe provoking debate on describing the installation of an electric lift at Himeji Castle, Osaka, as a 'mistake' ('Osaka Castle "Mistake"''), or the fifteenth-century public house, The Three Tuns, in Canterbury, Kent, proudly displaying a sign claiming that 'The site on which this building is constructed can be traced back to Roman times', despite no material trace remaining from that era, nor any architectural similarity. (Surely that claim is true for every location in the universe, and not only going back to Roman times but, in some sense, to the Big Bang!) It is widely agreed, nonetheless, that deeply significant meanings are uncovered when one addresses issues around the preservation of sites of historical atrocities (Handa, 'Memorial Sites', this book).

2. The Fragment and Parataxis

Imperfectionism is not limited to music, visual art, architecture, and everyday objects but also influences literary and philosophical style. The use of fragments and 'rough' expression is not merely a matter of taste but also influences the level of content in discourses that purport to track the truth. (Relatedly, some modern and postmodern literary explorations of the perfection–imperfection tension will be examined in Section 4). There are at least three main characteristics of the philosophical fragment, understood as a deliberate style where connections are left implicit or absent (thus excluding the inadvertent fragmentariness of damaged or unfinished manuscripts):

i.   *elliptical completeness*, where a sense of fullness or reality is intimated by omission and compression and is left to open in the imagination;

ii. *detached representation*, a kind of *pars pro toto* where the 'torn-away' quality of the fragment indicates a greater whole; and

iii. *parataxis*, where connections between the parts of the work are left open rather than precisely decided and fastened down. Here, the author encourages the reader's intellectual activity rather than requiring only the passivity, however difficult, of attention.

In the first kind, elliptic completeness (*elleiptikós*, Gk. to come short, defective), ideals of perfection are intimated, with the imagination constructing continuity through absences and defects, that is, through shortcomings concerning completeness and accuracy. Thus, impressionism, for example, suggests greater presence and ongoing reality than photorealism, as the explicitly detailed rendering leaves the imagination unstirred, the passive mind adding nothing.

Similarly, romantic fragment poems, such as S. T. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan; or, A Vision in a Dream' (*c*.1798), carry a 'mystery, openness, and depth' multiplied by a self-conscious indication of incompleteness, signalling a greater totality (Mays,

editor's headnote, *Poetical Works*, 1: 510). While the status of 'Kubla Khan' as a fragment is contested—despite the poet, perhaps defensively, adding 'A Fragment' to the subtitle in 1834 and his prose preface claiming it was composed in a dream whose transcription was later interrupted 'by a person on business from Porlock'—it is also beautifully self-contained, and in that sense, whole. Still, his offsetting additions (the preface; the later subtitle) enhance the sense of ongoingness in the poem, inserting the spell of the fragment into the imaginative space opened by the lines on the Abyssinian maid and her 'symphony and song' that would, could it be revived, let the poet 'build that dome in air, …. And all who heard would see them there'. Thus, by ellipsis, the deliberate fragment paradoxically brings the promise or illusion of a whole.

The importance of the deliberate fragment is still discussed (e.g. in this volume, Dunne, 'Incompleteness, Fragmentation', Ch. 12, this book, examines Nathanial Hawthorne's writings on architectural fragments), and it goes at least as far back as Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1670), a collection of around a thousand short notes and fragments that defy coherent organization yet are clearly interrelated and have a fertility of thought that has amply passed the test of time. Admiring this, Friedrich Schlegel profited from the deliberate philosophical fragment, appreciating how:

> Many works of the ancients have become fragments. Many works of the moderns are fragments at the time of their origin. (*Athenaeum Fragments*, §18)

Schlegel filled some 180 notebooks with fragmentary thoughts (Eichner, introduction, 5), exploiting the form into an art of concision that suggested and encouraged ongoing thought without delineating it. He sees the fragment as a work of art, 'entirely isolated from the surrounding world and … complete in itself like a porcupine' (§206). This does not mean the fragment has no relations beyond itself. Rather, its jaggedness

pointedly draws attention to itself as a resilient carrier of thought. Further, Schlegel understood that, of certain kinds of fragment (such as 'architectonic wit'):

> It has to be properly systematic, and then again it doesn't; with all its completeness, something should still seem to be missing, as if torn away. (§383)

The desideratum is a balance between system and standing alone, each vital for aesthetic effect and conveyed meaning. This 'torn away' quality exemplifies the second motivation for the fragment: detached representation. The torn-away fragment retains signs of connection to a larger domain from where it was snatched. The detached representative combines the dimensions of meaning and aesthetics, flickering between a sense of system and of being 'torn'. Shimmering between perfection and imperfection, systematic completeness is at once suggested and snatched away: an aesthetic effect that also suggests further thought at the periphery.

Values concerning perfection and imperfection oscillate between the formal ideal and the material, tangible presence. This shimmering reveals the concepts of perfection and imperfection essentially aesthetic, not in their thought but in their expression. Aesthetics is the route whereby meaning becomes felt. Even when thinking something through by oneself, to get a felt sense of its meaning, the imagination needs to be engaged, a symbol or image created. And if ideas are to have meaning for us, they must be aesthetically expressed (Cheyne, *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy*, 55–8).

A preference for fragments is exemplified, at least putatively, by Søren Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (*Fragments* translates the Danish *Smuler*, lit. *crumbs*) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The paired works explore the question of how, as asked on the title page, one can break into 'eternal consciousness'

from 'an historical point of departure'. Kierkegaard was influenced here by Friedrich Schelling's 'asystasy', which he defines as:

> Ασύστατον [*asústaton*, asystasy]—something whose elements [are] … in a state of inner conflict …. disunity, *bellum intestinum* …. the true system can only be the one that establishes … how unity can co-exist with opposition and … how the one is necessary for the benefit of the other. ('On the Nature' 210)

Expressed thus, Schelling's reaction against Georg Hegel's abstract and intellectualist systematizing is fertile in its suggestions for the interrelation of perfection and imperfection. Like Kierkegaard's development from Schelling, Friedrich Nietzsche followed Schopenhauer's irrationalist stance against the logicizing totalities of Immanuel Kant and Hegel, with Nietzsche going stylistically further into embracing imperfectionism, advancing via aphorisms and fragments for aesthetic, methodological, and philosophical reasons.

Kierkegaard's influence on Ludwig Wittgenstein is widely known, but Nietzsche's effect on him is less discussed. In a fragment from 1947, Wittgenstein shows how he advanced methodological imperfectionism from the Nietzschean fragment by understanding not only that a writer needs to produce much bad work to create good, but that all of it retains a use, though only a precious little will be beautiful:

> Nietzsche writes somewhere that even the best poets and thinkers have written stuff that is mediocre and bad, but they separated off the good material. But it is not quite like that. It's true that a gardener, along with his roses, keeps manure and rubbish and straw … but what distinguishes them is not just their value, but mainly their function in the garden.

> Something that looks like a bad sentence can be the *germ* of a good one.
>
> (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 59, citing Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 1, § 155)

Dissatisfied with the essay form, or at least with the results he got from it, Wittgenstein recorded his thoughts and their connections paratactically,[1] that is, by laying notes in succession and foregoing the elegant prose connections required for a flowing and unified argument, feeling these to be an artificial and useless diversion.

> If I am thinking just for myself without wanting to write a book, I jump about all round the topic; that is the only way of thinking that is natural to me. Forcing my thoughts into an ordered sequence is a torment for me.
>
> Should I even attempt it now?? (*Culture and Value*, 28, September 1937)

One might imagine Wittgenstein's paratactic method as a dry-stone wall: rough yet conforming to nature; holding through skill and fit, or else falling, preferable to using mortar. Rife in modernist literature, parataxis (*para*: beside; *taxis*: arranging; hence, side-by-side arrangement) marries naturally with imperfectionism, where connections are open and unforced, free to fail. Basil Bunting's poetry shows mastery of parataxis, allowing insights space to come and go, so that an observation of a ship at sail applies also to the poetic method that sings it, as to flying fish, as to desire, as to a gecko, and to love:

> Flying fish follow the boat,
>
> delicate wings blue, grace
>
> on flick of a tissue tail,
>
> The water's surface between
>
> appetite and attainment.
>
> Flexible, unrepetitive line

> to sing, not paint; sing, sing,
>
> laying the tune on the air,
>
> nimble and easy as a lizard,
>
> still and sudden as a gecko,
>
> to humiliate love, remember
>
> nothing.
>
> (*Briggflatts*, 18–19)

The reader's mind is unforced, freeing the imagination and the ability to consent to an observation or leave it in the air. Open, unforced connections, a hallmark of imperfectionism, invite new insights, suggested in part by the author but also filled out by the reader in the spaces between recorded thoughts. Opening space for movement, not narrowing down some watertight meaning, for Bunting it must 'Take a chisel to write' (15).

   Relatedly, for Wittgenstein, roughness, not polish, allows advance:

> The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction.* Back to the rough ground! (*Philosophical Investigations*, §107)

Wittgenstein felt his philosophical notes would become banal if he attempted to 'finish' them into conventional arguments and essays. Instead of forcing connections,

he gave space for intuition and suggestion through the commonly imperfectionist style of parataxis.

> After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. (Preface, *Philosophical Investigations*)

Wittgenstein ended up preferring more-or-less discrete remarks because that is what worked in the context of his later projects and directions. The process of tidying and finishing would have diluted his concentrated thought and betrayed its quarry. As Herman Melville said, 'Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges' (*Billy Budd, Sailor*, ch. 24). Though the prose style of 'natural, smooth sequence' was Wittgenstein's original intention, he found that advance was only satisfactory through 'remarks, short paragraphs … longer chains … sometimes jumping, in a sudden change, from one area to another' (preface, *Philosophical Investigations*).

Fragmentary styles of philosophical writing, then, are more trusting of the reader, who is given space to enter into the thoughts with the writer and the freedom to perceive and connect for himself or herself, rather than be instructed thoroughly through tightly screwed-down prose with no option but docility in being told what to think so that the flow of the argument is uninterrupted. Fragmentary philosophical styles allow the reader to think around the thoughts to make new connections, so that one feels philosophy stirring in oneself, as views parse, re-articulate, and find expression as something hopefully both true and liveable. In reading such works, one also detects a sense of respect for, not quite the thoughts themselves, for they are

marshalled, but for the truth towards and around which the writer is thinking. Fragmentary philosophical styles sacrifice perfection, completion, and an impressive, flowing totality or systematicity for the sake of the evasive goal, the intellectual quarry, that is, or a non-invasive, respectful approach to truth.

3. Celebrating Existence: Consuming, Enjoying, Collecting

The impulse to find true and authentic expression and a liveable, respectful approach to enjoying one's life and community brings us to the vital and increasingly important topic of imperfectionism in the consumerist age. Delving into the ethical dimensions of aesthetic perfectionism and imperfectionism, Saito, in her essay in this book, argues that, where consumer choice and sustainability is concerned, 'Nothing is stopping us from becoming active and responsible citizens'. This is true, yet something stalls us anyway. That is, nothing *necessarily* stops us, and nothing, on the optimistic view, metaphysically curtails our freedom to change our ways, yet, entrenched, our ways nonetheless have a strong inertia. Part of the problem may be habit. More insidiously, industries nudge consumers toward certain behaviours and actions, such as the disposal of still-functional products. Disposable objects, Lucas Scripter adds (personal email), are an interesting paradox: they are imperfect in the sense that they not meant to last, yet they are perfect in the sense of always being new. Countering the obsolescence trend, the 'right to repair' is gaining more attention in Europe (Sajn, 'Right to Repair'), where 'repair cafés' are on the rise. There, and in the United States, the notion of the right to repair is gaining momentum, with proponents demanding legislation that products come with repair manuals, especially in the electronics, automotive, and farming equipment sectors. This grass-roots

movement is compelling companies to change their design policies, in some cases pre-empting government legislation.

Another arena where the contest between perfection and imperfection occurs is that of collecting, explored in Laura Di Summa's essay in this book. The desire for tidy homes comes in many degrees, some seeking a strict order, others balanced with a tolerance or even desire for some disorder. In everyday aesthetics, life and organic growth are necessarily in creative tension with neatness of appearance and categorization. For the freedom and growth it often naturally represents, an element of disorder can be positively loved for its own sake. It can also be desired as an antidote to what Walter Benjamin called 'the mild boredom of order', there necessarily being 'in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order' ('Unpacking My Library', 59). It is a common experience to feel more at ease visiting homes that do not strive to keep everything in impressively perfect order. Perfect tidiness can be unwelcoming when one's mere presence appears to disrupt a perfect order.

The popular author and tidying-up expert Marie Kondo fits in here. Her style of tidiness develops from her being a Shinto adherent and a former *shinshoku*, or Shinto shrine maiden, tasked with maintaining the order of the site. Shinto upholds the value of purity through cleanliness, placing little mounds of salt at entrances, or sumo wrestlers tossing it in the air just before a bout, with many wooden surfaces lacquered or painted with bright vermillion and glossy black. Everything appears new and clean, while chips, stains, and signs of wear and tear are quickly repaired.

In harmonic contrast, most forms of Buddhism in Japan venerate natural aging, the patina of continued use, and an openness to organic change in a harmony of design and disarray. The *karesansui*, or rock gardens, for example, place jagged, found rocks

within a sea of raked pebbles, maple leaves scattered here and there, where different kinds of moss flourish, and unvarnished wooden posts are allowed, even encouraged, to decay. It is interesting how different principles of aesthetic order promote different ethoses, showing how a thoughtfully cared-for place can unite aesthetic sensibility and ethical reflection.

A collection appears as symbolic of one's attitudes to inclusion (as welcoming), exclusion, and a celebration of existence. As Kondo has it, organization is a humane activity through the positivity of choosing what to include more than the negativity of deciding what to throw away. Whatever 'sparks joy' merits inclusion (*Sparking Joy*). Thus viewed, collections can represent different concepts of social inclusion and manners, creating an ethos that combines aesthetics and ethics. On the one hand, some collecting is generally completist in aim, showing a perfectionist tendency. On the other hand, collecting oddities or everyday items suggests an imperfectionism at play. This difference relates to an older philosophical distinction between the perfect and the imperfect, with the former being in principle completable and the latter impossible to complete, as in, for instance, Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, the former capable of being upheld at all times (e.g. prohibitions against lying, stealing, and so on), the latter impossible to fulfil completely and at all times (self-improvement, helping the poor, and so on). This points to the idea of perfection as completion (not just being finished but being whole). Yet some things by their nature cannot be entirely complete; these would be necessarily imperfect then, in this sense.

Many collectors almost revere imperfections in everyday items, such as misprinted stamps, books, and record covers, or coins with minting errors. This could be understood simply as economic value generated by mere rarity. However, does not an

aesthetic value arise here too? When we see a stamp with the monarch's head upside down, for example, or Rutherford Chang's ongoing collection of over 3,000 used—often heavily so, and blemished, written, or doodled upon—copies of The Beatles' 'White Album' ('We Buy White Albums'), we perceive irregularity within regularity, and this often gives pleasure. Collecting then elevates the imperfect above the perfect. With mistaken irregularities at time of manufacture, the perfection of mass production is interrupted and the wider reality beyond human plans leaves its mark. It seems that existence itself, with its unpredictable contingency, is celebrated in such collecting. Because collecting is comprehensive in its aim to represent variety within a category, it synthesizes perfectionism (as a drive for completion) with imperfectionism (aiming for openness and inclusivity). Sometimes the urge to collect seems like a drive to tame chaos or proliferation with an order that categorizes and catalogues, yet collecting is also about the charms of disrupting order, homogeneity, and tidy categories: a living, evolving thing, the opposition is as lively and desirable as it is inevitable.

4. Literary Approaches

Unsurprisingly, the inevitable opposition of perfection and imperfection is a recurrent theme in literature, where one finds the writer:

> Trying to use words, and every attempt
>
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
>
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
>
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
>
> One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
>
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
>
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating

> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling …
>
> (Eliot, 'East Coker', Four Quartets)

Modernist and postmodern literary experimentation provided opportunities for recognizing and developing imperfectionism and in this section I discuss three related excerpts from French and Italian twentieth-century literature, all of which self-consciously bring perfection and imperfection into collision.

The tension between perfection and imperfection in organic form is used to great effect in an image in Alain Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Les Gommes* (*The Erasers*, 1953), when he transitions from a still life of the perfect tomato as some Platonic ideal that is then made aesthetically ideal, so that tears appear, wrinkles vein, a leaf snaps off, and so on:

> A quarter of tomato that is quite faultless, cut up by the machine into a perfectly symmetrical fruit.
>
> The peripheral flesh, compact, homogeneous, and a splendid chemical red, is of an even thickness between a strip of gleaming skin and the hollow where the yellow, graduated seeds appear in a row, kept in place by a thin layer of greenish jelly along a swelling of the heart. This heart, of a slightly grainy, faint pink, begins—towards the inner hollow–with a cluster of white veins, one of which extends towards the seeds—somewhat uncertainly.
>
> Above, a scarcely perceptible accident has occurred: a corner of the skin, stripped back from the flesh for a fraction of an inch, is slightly raised. (152–3)

Reality and its inevitable but irregular contingencies obtrude on ideality, as the perfect red yields to a weaker pink, and geometric forms subside to pulpy, jellied swelling at the organic 'heart' and 'veins'.

Robbe-Grillet was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. He later commented how, in Sartre's famous depiction, in *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), of Roquentin's contemplation of the contingency and superfluity of brute existence overflowing the categoriality of concepts and schemas, the root of the chestnut tree in the park 'successively becomes a "[dirty fingernail]", "boiled leather", "mildew", "a dead snake", "vulture's talon", "sealskin", etc.' What Robbe-Grillet recognizes in the Sartrean vision, which he finds 'most charged with transformations' and hence alive, yet replete beyond containment, is 'the very impossibility of achieving a true correspondence' through concepts and categories ('Nature, Humanism, Tragedy', 67). Perfection in the sense of correspondence to reality is, in this view, impossible.

In Sartre's description:

> And suddenly, suddenly, the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen…. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench…. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use and their feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface…. Then I had this vision.
>
> It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence'…. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (*Nausea*, 126–7)

Sartre and later Robbe-Grillet convey conceptualized perception and description being uprooted by contingency-riven, immediate existence. That existence is more aesthetically palpable and actual, yet is conceptually far less graspable. Existence thus perceived is *visqueux*, which is Sartre's term, discussing 'Quality as a Revelation of Being', whereby the definite and conceivable is engulfed in the 'slime' of contingency, which eludes firm conceptual grip (*Being and Nothingness*, 604–11). Like Kant's aesthetic idea, Sartre's existentialist epiphany shows being as inducing much thought and transcending all determinate concepts and theories of function. That which is intuited to be most valuable, or that which gets to the heart of being, cannot be anticipated by a concept, rule, or theory.

A more light-hearted play on the tension between the imperfections of the real world and the mathematical perfection of the ideal can be enjoyed in Italo Calvino's story 'Crystals'. Here, the narrator, Qfwfq, regrets that instead of our 'amorphous and crumbling and gummy' world, the planet did not have longer to cool, so that, like some Platonic realm of perfect geometrical forms 'each [element] would have become separated from the others in a single, enormous crystal' (28–9). Qfwfq hankers for the austere beauty of what must surely be the nightmare of perfection. He dreams of 'an indestructible frozen springtime of quartz. Polyhedrons … tall as mountains, diaphanous'. This alternative world is imaged as a 'triumph of order' against the 'wheel of gas and dust', 'that useless dispersal which is the universe' (32–3). Opposing Qfwfq's absurd perfectionism is the view of his partner, Vug, who appreciates crystals not for their monolithic homogeneity but for their imperfections and irregularities.

Reflecting a genuine opposition that cannot simply be resolved by dismissing one side, Calvino shows the beauty in both views. For the perfectionist:

a continent of diamond refracted the Sun's light in a mosaic of rainbow chips … The sparkle was blinding: I could already see a mountain-diamond, a faceted and iridescent chain, a gem-plateau, a Koh-i-noor-Himalaya.

And for the imperfectionist:

crystals were popping up by the thousands at the same time and were interpenetrating one another, arresting their growth where they came in contact, and they never succeeded in taking over entirely the liquid rock from which they received their form: the world wasn't tending to be composed into an ever-simpler figure but was clotting in a vitreous mass from which prisms and octahedrons and cubes seemed to be struggling to be free, to draw all the matter to themselves … (34)

Perfectionist Qfwfq and imperfectionist Vug quarrel over whether rubies, which are aluminium crystals reddened with a scattering of chrome atoms, owe their beauty more to their perfectly regular hexagonality or to 'the intrusion of extraneous atoms' (36). Calvino shows that the world evolving more in Vug's preferred direction, particularized with fissures, cracks, unpredictability, dissolution and mixture, minute variegation, demonstrating that 'real order carries impurity within itself' (37). The aesthetic of imperfection transforms the crystalline, dead realm into a dynamic, vibrant place of growth, where life can develop and flourish through what pure perfectionism would disparage as mistake and error.

Developing and flourishing despite, or through, mistake and error. Artworks, as the examples in this chapter attest, can indicate perfection even when—perhaps especially when—the work itself is imperfectly embodied. That is, because of the extrapolating and idealizing tendencies of imagination, as considered above in the discussion of the fragment and parataxis, works that remain open by resisting the closure and

artificiality of 'finish' are often more effective at opening a space for the ideal than works that are completed with a high degree of finish. This means that the imperfectionist form can better suggest the ideal than the purportedly perfect form can, since the perfect is supposed to embody its message entirely, whereas the clearly incomplete is obviously elliptical and points beyond itself. If imperfection is already built into the method, if one's imagery, for example, is already grainy, then the ideal paradoxically appears through the work more transparently than if the artist attempted to realize the work in a perfectionist manner.

5. Evaluative versus Descriptive Imperfection

As the foregoing pages indicate, many positive and driving motivations exist for inquiry into imperfectionist aestheltics. Nonetheless, it might be objected the imperfectionist aesthetics enterprise is self-nullifying: if the imperfectionist aim is achieved, the result could be conceived as 'perfect' from the perspective of its creator, showing it to be a self-defeating concept and therefore incoherent. However, as I shall argue, this pithy argument rests on an equivocation stemming from failure to distinguish evaluative from descriptive senses of the word 'perfection' and its cognates. This section will oppose the position that 'positively valuing imperfection for its own sake is … inherently unstable' (Lloyd, 'Taking Aim at Imperfection', 25). Clarifying this distinction, I suggest, yields orienting categories that will be useful for the subsequent inquiries.

Must all products that realize the producer's aesthetic intention be unambiguously or straightforwardly 'perfect'? And does successful creative realization preclude significant aesthetic imperfectionism? Against the argument that imperfectionism is ultimately incoherent, I contend that while the maker's or appreciator's

exclamation—'Ah, now it's perfect!'—affirms aesthetic satisfaction, 'perfect' being used *evaluatively* in such cases, it does not imply that the work is not *descriptively* imperfect or imperfectionist (incorporating or celebrating imperfection and/or irregularity and contingency as part of its aesthetic). That is to say, the evaluative concept of perfection and the descriptive concept of imperfection are compatible such that an item can simultaneously be evaluatively perfect and descriptively imperfect. On the same principle, an item can simultaneously be evaluatively imperfect yet descriptively perfect; for instance, a skilfully rendered, blemish-free, neat-and-tidy drawing or painting that adheres to 'rules of composition' might nonetheless hold little to no aesthetic interest. Neither of these outcomes (a. descriptively imperfect while evaluatively perfect, or b. descriptively perfect while evaluatively imperfect) entails conceptual incoherence, and to contend that either is logically incoherent would amount to equivocation.

Evaluative 'perfection' denotes that the maker's intention has been achieved or that the appreciator is satisfied with the effect. Descriptive perfection, however, denotes the perfectionist aesthetic. To satisfy the evaluative category of perfection (i.e. as realization or satisfaction) is to achieve the desired effect such that the work cannot significantly be improved. Achieving this, one might naturally exclaim, 'Ah, now it's perfect! This is what I was after!' The descriptive category of perfection (i.e. as a perfectionist aesthetic), by contrast, connotes a pristine or highly accurate finish and an overall freedom from accident. In terms of avoiding or allowing irregularities and unplanned elements, the use of the words 'perfect' and 'imperfect' are (primarily) descriptive. In terms of satisfactorily realizing an aim or failing to do so, the use of the words 'perfect' and 'imperfect' are (primarily) evaluative. Not to recognize this distinction is to risk equivocation.

Distinguishing primarily from secondarily evaluative words, R. M. Hare notes the primary ones, such as 'good', 'commendable', or 'slovenly', are always clearly value judgements, whereas with terms that are only secondarily evaluative, such as 'tidy' and 'industrious', the descriptive sense holds sway. Thus, 'we can say, without any hint of irony, "too tidy" or "too industrious"' ('Description and Evaluation', 121). And thus, I add, we understand the meaning when it is commonly said that something or someone is 'too perfect'. The imperfectionist, I contend, admits and even embraces *descriptive imperfection* and avoids being 'too perfect', and this is neither logically nor practically incompatible with such productive success or aesthetic satisfaction that may be termed *evaluative perfection*. The evaluative sense of 'perfection', then, is shown here to have two kinds, concerning, that is character and execution. If something or someone is evaluatively 'too perfect', the problem is a feeling concerning character—too smooth, polished, smarmy—whereas evaluative perfection ('just right', not 'too' this or 'too' that) confirms satisfaction with the execution.

Another way to express this distinction is to recognize descriptive perfection (or imperfection) as substantive, and evaluative perfection (or imperfection) as auxiliary. The substantive gives the descriptive *what*; the auxiliary, the evaluative *how*. This grammatical distinction helps clarify what is meant in the popular phrase 'perfectly imperfect'. The *imperfect* in that phrase is so in the descriptive and substantial sense. That is, it exemplifies an aesthetic that is open to the unexpected and which eschews high polish, regularity, and smooth finish. This quality is substantial not only grammatically but also in virtue of its being sustained throughout the development and existence of the item or work. Categorially different, the *perfectly* in the phrase is auxiliary, modifying the substantive, descriptive imperfection with the evaluation that its intended or satisfying effect has been realized in a praiseworthy way.

Without contradiction, then, one may call a finished work 'perfect', in the evaluative sense, to acknowledge that it is well or fully realized, while simultaneously holding that it is not 'perfect' in the descriptive sense. Such a work would be imperfectionist in that it opposed an overall perfectionist aesthetic and presents itself as a positive alternative. Thus, one might call a Jackson Pollock action painting, for instance, perfect in the evaluative sense, insofar as it realizes its intended effect, while imperfect in the descriptive sense, since the work is neither highly accurate nor free from the accidental or contingent—indeed, to the contrary, these descriptors characterize the essence of the work. To rephrase, there is an important but overlooked distinction between the word 'perfect' used loosely as a judgement that a work (perfectionist, imperfectionist, or otherwise) has achieved its aim, and its use in the more accurate sense which is a judgement that a perfectionist aim or style has been realized. The former meaning can be used of imperfectionist works, the latter cannot.

Thus, a joiner may exclaim 'Perfect!' on seeing that a rustic table is complete, meaning that any further work would not improve upon and could even detract from its aesthetic appeal. At the same time, the joiner would be aware that a rustic table requires an imperfectionism of finish, such as uneven surfaces and coloration, some irregularity of line or shape, and the like. This requirement largely follows the aesthetic appeal of the style itself, knowing that a table glossed to a perfect finish, for instance, would look and feel out of place in an otherwise rustic setting. While a skilled joiner has high standards of strength and reliability in choosing materials and fashioning joints for both rustic tables and chic and slickly finished ones, he or she would also know that the rougher style brings pleasure through an imperfectionist aesthetic while the highly finished style pleases through a perfectionist appeal.

It should be added that imperfectionist aesthetics do not require a tight connection between aesthetic value and utility. This is not the relative and functional beauty of Socrates' dung basket, in Xenophon's account, valued over a golden spear considered 'ugly' because less effective at its intended use (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.8.6). There might, nonetheless, appear to be a middle ground between aesthetic and functional value. In contrast to the glossy surfaces of most high-tech products, intolerant of scratches and dents and incapable of ageing comfortably (Saito, this book, **xxx ['iPhones']**), there is an imperfectionist beauty to items that gain in appeal with patina and accrue personality with knocks and scratches. Byung-Chul Han, too, in *Saving Beauty* (ch. 1), critically discusses the aesthetics of the smooth, using examples including the 'self-healing' exterior of the LG *G Flex* phone. For Han, such compulsive haptic perfection negates the contemplative distance required for aesthetic judgement as opposed to mere sensual immediacy. Here, then, we can see how perfectionism effects an impressive front, eliciting a 'wow' at the dazzle of the flawless and appealing to sensual immediacy—although it can have other, more humane effects, too, such as presenting ideals to which one may strive. On the other hand, the effects of imperfectionism include or shine through palpable flaws, presenting qualities such as magnanimity, humility, and a confidence that eschews the dazzle of finish.

So, while an imperfectionist, patina-welcoming finish or surface might naturally be described as a utilitarian concern, this too is really an aesthetic matter, for a scratched and scuffed iPhone or Wedgwood cup is no less functional than a pristine one and would be replaced only for aesthetic reasons. By the same aesthetic principle, in a reversed example, a dented, hand-hammered copper kettle, with decades of patina, is admired for its accrued imperfections of finish or surface. While the perfectionist

designer anticipates the product being discarded with signs of wear, imperfectionist products tend in the opposite direction, being more cherished for their marks of age.

For a further example, consider a Japanese potter making a *chawan*, or tea bowl, for tea ceremony. A perfect circle is not even considered, because it opposes the principles of *wabi* (rustic simplicity, impermanence, imperfection) and *sabi* (loneliness, Buddhist non-attachment, tranquillity, beauty in agedness). An imperfect circle, fashioned with an aesthetic eye and feel, is preferred in wabi styles not only for aesthetically conveying certain meanings, such as humility, acceptance ('relax, nothing is "perfect" here'), and openness to natural imperfection, but also because the shape better fits the hand, as it can be turned to fit pleasingly with a variety of hand sizes. Unlike the considerations of finish, raised in the previous paragraph, this example better suggests a middle ground between aesthetic and functional value, since the better hand-fit of the irregularly shaped tea bowl is a matter of both feel and of being fitted to use. The cup is informed by irregularities, including its shape and glaze, which is often only partial and uneven, and these imperfectionist qualities are appreciated for their human warmth, the unassuming welcome they offer, and the way they reflect natural, rustic appearances.

Now, to argue that the imperfectionist aesthetic is self-defeating or incoherent because someone might happily call such a bowl 'perfect' is to miss a number of points. First, in the sense used in the argument that imperfectionism is self-defeating, the word 'perfect' indicates approval, as I suggested above. The words 'successful' and 'fitting' would be more accurate than 'perfect' in this context. This approving sense of 'perfect' is synonymous with 'best' or 'desirable'; thus, in this use, 'good, better, *best!*' is interchangeable with 'good, better, *perfect!*' The second point is that the well realized tea-ceremony cup, like the well-realized rustic table, not only admits

imperfection but invites it. Such imperfections are not faults. In Japanese aesthetics, Tenshin Okakura thus describes 'the beauty of …' or 'the art of imperfection' and Shin'ichi Hisamatsu called it 'the rejection of perfection'. Soetsu Yanagi, in a more encompassing view, consider this aesthetic as:

> beyond the dualistic thinking of perfection or imperfection; borrowing from Zen terminology, I would call it natural beauty, the beauty of everyday life, of egoless freedom …. not a clinging to the duality of imperfection or perfection; it is the beauty of absolute freedom.

Maintaining the distinction I made above, such works are descriptively imperfect, not evaluatively imperfect. Items in this style cherish irregularity and the openness that Yanagi calls freedom, the descriptive imperfection being essential to the overall aesthetic. So long as no imperfections impede the function (as a cup, as a table), then the imperfectionist aesthetic is maintained and a desirable result is achieved.

A third point missed in the argument that imperfectionism is self-defeating, is the difference regarding the restrictedness of intended outcome in realizing a work of aesthetic perfectionism versus one of aesthetic imperfectionism. That is, when aiming at the beauty of perfection—where exactitude, high clarity, and perhaps gloss or sheen are part of the aesthetic effect—the range of intended outcomes is much narrower than for imperfectionist works, which aims for beauty in a sense of freedom, open-endedness, and a much greater degree of looseness, roughness, and so on. A high level of mastery would be required in both the imperfectionist and perfectionist works of art or artisanship—it is not the case that one style requires greater control or proficiency than the other. Rather, any perceivable yet, functionally speaking, superficial deviation from the design, such as a scratch, a thumbprint, an unevenness of glaze, in a cup, say, that has been designed to appeal with perfect finish, regularity

of form, and the like, will have strayed beyond the acceptable range of outcomes. Indeed, in a perfectionist work, there is often only one acceptable outcome, albeit allowing for a narrow range of deviation in concession to inevitable human and natural error.

In an imperfectionist design, however, having a relatively large range of desirable outcomes is part of the process, and, since unplanned contingencies are often invited, unforeseen deviations can often prove to be highly valued elements within the work. To call a perfectionist work 'perfect' on execution is therefore a literally descriptive judgement, where only one outcome is preconceived. In contrast, to call an imperfectionist work 'perfect' is an evaluative use of the term, praising the skill of the maker and perhaps the fortuitousness of some happy accident, but it does not describe a fine-grained alignment between the intention and the outcome.[2]

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