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## The Boundaries of an Organism: Purposefulness and Autonomy

In this article I want to argue that the organic metaphor—most commonly associated with the Romantic notion of an artwork being analogous to a living being—served throughout the last two centuries as a means of conceptualising autonomy, remaining in a dialectical relation to the latter concept: the structure of the metaphor posited within different critical traditions influenced the theorists', critics' and artists' ideas of what it meant for an artwork to be autonomous, while itself being shaped and modelled by their expectations and beliefs regarding the ontology of the artwork and the possibility of the latter's autonomy. Over this time the metaphor has undergone substantial modifications, supporting both art's claim for autonomy, and an attempted denial of the latter. In order to illustrate these shifts, I will discuss three theoretical and critical moments in the history of the organic metaphor: Romantic organicism, centred on the concept of the principle of life, New Critical formalist organicism, which turns out to shadow forth what Michael Fried called literalism, and postmodern organicism, as exhibited by the environmental humanities and ecocritical discourses. The brief outline of the recent history of the organic metaphor is intended to offer an aid to understand-

ding the origins of contemporary organicism, and to show that its reluctance towards the idea of aesthetic autonomy stems from the characteristically postmodern notion of organic form. Finally, I propose to show how the concept of organic form can be fruitfully reinterpreted in light of Kant's considerations on teleological judgement and Anscombe's views on intention.

**Keywords:** autonomy, purposefulness, organicism, literary criticism, romanticism, ecocriticism

## Organic growth and organic origin—the Romantic imagination

The organic metaphor is probably the most basic and widespread conceptual device in modern aesthetic thought; it permeates practically every attempt at literary criticism and forms the implicit or explicit basis of the considerations regarding the nature of a work of art formulated within various critical traditions. It is at work not only when we say that an artwork is (or should be) like a living being—this is probably the most widely recognised version of organicism, associated primarily with German idealism and Romanticism—but every time when we claim to recognize an *inner principle* that governs it *from within*. What we theorise about in such cases is the artwork's autonomy—conditions on which it exists as a distinct, individual thing, separated from its environment, and, moreover, independent from it to some degree thanks to a quality that is intrinsic to it. This is the most basic and rough characterisation of aesthetic organicism, which, in the course of the last two centuries in particular, was contested, augmented and reformulated, resulting in a wide variety of theoretical and artistic propositions that can be linked to this term.

For the sake of the argument I want to develop, it is apt to look first at Romantic organicism, developed foremostly in Germany and in England and predicated on the analogy between a work of art and a living being—most often a plant. Having appeared as a response to 18th-century psychological theories of association, this species of organicism was first and foremost concerned with developing an alternative to a mechanistic view of life in general, and of the human imagination in particular—and, as a consequence, also of the creative process. As Armstrong argues, within the Romantic tradition “organicism is not understood as a fact of nature or as a merely aesthetic phenomenon..., but rather as a grounding systematics for understanding all holistic structures. It is, to put matters simply, a way of thinking meaningfully about wholes” (Armstrong 2003, 2). According to one of the most famous formulations of the problem, in which Samuel Taylor Coleridge repeats after A.G. Schlegel,

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a predetermined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form (Coleridge 1960a, 198).

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The main difference between a mechanical and organic process was, according to Coleridge, the source of the power perpetuating the growth and of the principle governing it; in the case of a mechanism it was external, in the case of an organism—internal. What an organism possessed was therefore a kind of sovereignty, which coincided with a condition of organic unity, described by Coleridge in Kantian terms as a quality exhibited by the entities in which the parts are “so far interdependent that each is reciprocally means and end” (Coleridge 1854, 388).

There was a certain normative aspect to organicist aesthetics, which was twofold. First, the Romantic critics required that every artwork *strived* for the condition of organicity, which was, in their view, desirable and which marked a genuinely successful piece. The numerous passages where Coleridge tries to show that Shakespeare’s dramas do exhibit organic qualities testify to the conclusion that the Romantics viewed organicity as a supreme goal that all art should try to achieve. Organic form was thus a normative concept: artworks could be judged with regard to the degree to which they were able to instantiate it. For Coleridge the notion of organicity provided criteria for aesthetic evaluation, which involved open-endedness, heterogeneity, blurriness, richness and boundedness (see Abrams 1953, 220-221).

But once an artwork succeeds in fulfilling these requirements, another normativity comes into play. If an organic work of art should approximate in its constitution a natural organic entity, its regulatory principle must, as in the case of the latter, be set from within, not from without, as in the case of a mechanical structure. This means that it achieves an autonomy similar to that entertained by an organism—an autonomy which consists in the fact that it is able to establish its own normativity, or, in other words, to itself make the law according to which it should be judged. Intrinsic purposefulness becomes intrinsic lawfulness, and the latter constitutes the superiority of an organic work. It is evident in the criticism of Coleridge, who values organically devised texts far more than the mere associative clusters of different elements, because in the case of the latter the only unifying factor is an arbitrary decision of the artist that doesn’t find support in the nature of the elements used, while the unity of an organic text is absolute—it does not exist except in the very form it assumes, nor do its elements, which wouldn’t retain their identity if severed from the text’s body or otherwise disassembled. An organic poem is thus autonomous insofar as it establishes the meaning of every its element without any external aid; in fact, it is inconceivable that the meaning of any of its elements could be established otherwise, for what these very elements are is constituted

by their partaking in the whole of the text. This is what Lee Rust Brown calls “semantic self-reliance” and what he views as the largest of the “extreme claims about relations between texts and their meanings” (Brown 1991, 235) made by organicism.

It is easy to see why such a view of the autonomy of art poses a problem for any aesthetic thought. As Abrams notes, “if a growth of a plant seems inherently purposeful, it is a purpose without alternative, fated in the seed, and evolving into its final form without the supervision of consciousness” (Abrams 1953, 173). In a somewhat exaggerated manner, he describes the organic transition in aesthetics as a “historical shift from the view that the making of a work of art is a supremely purposeful activity to the view that its coming-into-being is, basically, a spontaneous process independent of intention, percept, or even consciousness” (187). Fogle repeats this objection, adding that “the spontaneous growth of the plant from its seed is predetermined and inevitable, so that if the figure is identical with the theory there is no room for will, judgement, understanding—in short, for ‘art’ in general. ‘Nature’ usurps the whole domain” (Fogle 1962, 66). What is so hard to swallow here is that in the light of the spontaneous growth thesis an author is practically devoid of agency. If the autonomy of a work of art consists in its absolute self-sufficiency, the artist serves as no more than a passive medium; a tool for the expression of the transcendent natural logic which operates on equal rights both when it comes to the development of natural forms, and with regard to artistic invention—a process of the development of ideas, which for Goethe is “a process of nature within the realm of mind” (Abrams 1953, 206). Although the issue of authorship within organicism phrased in such simplifying terms might seem irresolvable, in fact the structure of the Romantic organic metaphor didn’t force Coleridge to endorse any of the undoubtedly counterintuitive implications. In order to see this, one has to realise that the whole enterprise of committing literary criticism to the peculiar image of the spontaneous appearance of the artwork in the mind of an unconscious genius rested on a particular assumption about the place of man within the universe of life; an assumption that is best expressed by Coleridge’s parallel concepts of life and beauty.

Life for Coleridge is essentially “the principle of unity in multeity” (Coleridge 1854, 387), and what it entails is the tendency to individuation—a dialectical relation of the forces of attraction and repulsion, which together constitute the polarity inherent to nature, responsible for the processes of “perpetual reconciliation, and ... perpetual resurgence of the primary contradiction, of which universal polarity is the result

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and exponent” (403). This tendency accounts for the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity of nature and manifests itself in “an ascending series of intermediate classes, and of analogous gradations in each class,” resulting in a spectrum of forms of various complexity, each of them nevertheless equally endowed with the quality of life, all of them being “degrees and different dignities of one and the same tendency” (387). The arrangement of these classes of forms is such that in every higher class the simpler powers are not merely employed, but assimilated by the higher.

life, in general, be defined *vis ab intra, cuius proprium est coadunare plura in rem unicam, quantum est res unica*; the unity will be more intense in proportion as it constitutes each particular thing a whole of itself; and yet more, again, in proportion to the number and interdependence of the parts, which it unites as a whole. But a whole composed, *ab intra*, of different parts, so far interdependent that each is reciprocally means and end, is an individual, and the individuality is most intense where the greatest dependence of the parts on the whole is combined with the greatest dependence of the whole on its parts (388)

If so, then, as Fogle notes, “the highest degree of life is the intensest unity, which is also intensest individuality” (Fogle 1962, 19).

Natural forms exhibit different degrees of unity; the lowest class is constituted by metals, then come crystals, then rocks, and then plants and animals, of which the highest is man, “that last work, in which Nature did not assist as handmaid under the eye of her sovereign Master, who made Man in his own image, by superadding self-consciousness with self-government, and breathed into him a living soul” (Coleridge 1854, 412). In the case of man “the individuality is not only perfected in its corporeal sense, but begins a new series beyond the appropriate limits of physiology” (390). The phrase “new series” refers to the spiritual, or supernatural aspect of man, the ascent to which, as Fogle argues, can be accounted for in terms of evolution, similar to the one occurring in the progression from the inorganic to organic structures, resulting from the process of assimilation of the lower forms by the higher—despite the fact that the supernatural obviously comes from God.

Coleridge’s allusions to life treat it indifferently as animal or as spiritual, and depending upon the context either as immanent or as transcendent, within or above, or both; for, according to the point of view, it may be the body informed by it, or the informing principle, or the reconciliation of the two, the higher power always informing the lower. Life as subject is always conceived as anterior to life as object, or organization (Fogle 1962, 27).

This “life as subject” can be identified with the aforementioned principle of life, which, importantly, does not supervene on an organised living object—the “life as object”—but realises itself in it; it is not a function of organisation, but a transcendent tendency that characterises both physical and spiritual domains.

This which, in inanimate Nature, is manifested now as magnetism, now as electricity, and now as chemical agency, is supposed, on entering an organized body, to constitute its vital *principle*, something in the same manner as the steam becomes the *mechanic* power of the steam-engine, in *consequence* of its compression by the steam-engine.... Now this hypothesis is as directly opposed to my view as supervention is to evolution, inasmuch as I hold the organized body itself, in all its marvellous contexture, to be the PRODUCT and representant of the power which is here supposed to have supervened to it (Coleridge 1854, 400-401).

Moreover, each living being is a reconciliation of the two opposite directions of this principle, the one coming *ab intra*—the force of assimilation and ascension—and the other coming from above in the form of the God’s designing intellect, which allows for the appearance of consciousness and soul, fully present only in man, but in fact penetrating the whole of nature. Every organic unity—which for Coleridge might comprise a plant or animal, or a society, or an idea, or a work of art—must therefore “reconcile matter with spirit, and substance with form”, and, due to the primacy of the principle of life that is the condition of possibility of an organic structure, “it is a real thing, but is never wholly objective or self-contained” (Fogle 1962, 28). Organic forms—including artworks—never emerge and develop by themselves and out of themselves; they clearly cannot do this, for then the principle of life would simply be a name for their physical self-sufficiency, while the most perfect unity—the highest degree of interdependence of parts on the whole—is precisely equivalent to the highest *dependence* on a principle of life, and the latter comes as much from the inside, as from the outside, because it consists in a reconciliation of what’s internal and emergent and what’s universal. This is why an organic artwork is never “objective or self-contained”, or at least not absolutely, and it is not reducible to “shape”, or dead form: “Remember”, Coleridge writes, “that there is a difference between form as proceeding, and shape as superinduced;—the latter is either the death or the imprisonment of the thing;—the former is its self-witnessing and self-affected sphere of agency” (Coleridge 1907b, 262).

Beauty, defined by Coleridge analogically to life as “Multeity in Unity,” (232) also varies in degree, and in its highest form it approaches the condition of organic life.

It [beauty—A.P.] is, in the abstract, the unity of the manifold, the coalescence of the diverse; in the concrete, it is the union of the shapely (*formosum*) with the vital. In the dead organic it depends on regularity of form, the first and lowest species of which is the triangle with all its modifications, as in crystals, architecture, & c.; in the living organic it is not mere regularity of form, which would produce a sense of formality; neither is it subservient to anything beside itself (257).

Because in the case of living beings beauty does not consist only in “regularity of form”—it is not a matter of the physical shape, but, as we have already learned, it has to do with the principle of life—the imitative enterprise of art cannot rest on the task of imitating the *natura naturata*, the arrangement of elements. An artist has to “master the essence, the *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the highest sense and the soul of man” (257). This “bond” is just another name for the continuity of natural and supernatural life discussed above, and in art this fundamental affinity is revealed; the existence of fine art requires the relation between matter and spirit, and the successful work of art testifies to the continuity of the conscious and unconscious in nature.

In man there is reflexion, freedom, and choice; he is, therefore, the head of the visible creation. In the objects of nature are presented, as in a mirror, all the possible elements, steps, and processes of intellect antecedent to consciousness, and therefore to the full development of the intelligential act; and man’s mind is the very focus of all the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature. Now so to place these images, totalized, and fitted to the limits of the human mind, as to elicit form, and to superinduce upon, the forms themselves the moral reflections to which they approximate, to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature,—this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts. Dare I add that the genius must act on the feeling, that body is but a striving to become mind,—that it is mind in its essence! (257-258)

That man can grasp the essence of nature is due to the fact that nature and mind are fundamentally similar in kind, just different in degree. In a work of art a reconciliation of nature and mind—of subject and object—is at once revealed and enacted.



[I]n every work of art there is a reconciliation of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it ... He who combines the two is the man of genius; and for that reason he must partake of both. Hence there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius (258).

The faculty mediating between the conscious and unconscious, or, the active and passive powers of mind, is imagination, described by Coleridge as “essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead”, and as a power which “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify” (Coleridge 1907a, 202). If the “vital” in an organism—and in a work of art—is what supersedes its literal shape and makes the former irreducible to the latter, and if, at the same time, imagination is “vital” inasmuch as it transforms fixed ideas and images and allows for the emergence of a unity analogous to that observed in an organism, then “organic unity” in Coleridge’s aesthetics is not so much the name for the self-sufficiency of a work of art, as it is a name for the relation between an artist and his creation—the former’s ability to render the literal shape a life. An organic form is a living form, because, unlike the mechanical, dead aggregate of elements, it involves a reconciliation of the subjective and the objective. A principle of imagination—a species of a principle of life—transferred onto the material that undergoes artistic refinement results in a principle of life fused into a work of art—an organic unity with which the work is consequently endowed. The success of this transfer is equivalent to the degree to which a principle embodied in a work of art is really *its own principle*—and according to this degree it can be critically evaluated.

To the idea of life victory or strife is necessary; as virtue consists not simply in the absence of vices, but in the overcoming of them. So it is in beauty. The sight of what is subordinated and conquered heightens the strength and the pleasure (Coleridge 1907b, 262-263).

The artist’s striving to subordinate the material to the “form as proceeding”, or to reconcile matter and spirit, becomes the artwork’s striving to realise its own organic potential. Aesthetic judgement is therefore not inconsistent with an organic theory of art, and assessing a poem, as Fogle says, “according to its harmony, or to its unity, or to its fidelity to its own living principle,” (Fogle 1962, 69) is precisely assessing an artist’s performance in the task of making “the external internal, and internal external”. Speaking of a work of art in Coleridgean terms of organic

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unity, one never disarticulates it from the author. Rather, the organic metaphor so conceived is a very means of securing the place of the author, whose task, modelled after the process of divine creation, consists in transferring onto a poem a certain quality, initially characteristic of the creative process—a quality of organic form.

James Benziger points to the same conclusion when he notices that part of Coleridge's admiration for Shakespeare had to do with the idea of "freedom of dramatic characters" (1951, 38). Commenting on *The Tempest*, Coleridge praised Shakespeare for evincing the power of "introducing the profoundest sentiments of wisdom, where they would be least expected, yet where they are most truly natural," as a result of which in his dramas "separate speeches frequently do not appear to have been occasioned by those which preceded, or which are consequent upon each other, but to have arisen out of the peculiarity of the speaker" (1960b, 131). Unlike an ordinary writer, who develops the dialogues by means of mechanical association, a "vital writer, who makes men in life what they are in nature, in a moment transports himself into the being of each personage, and, instead of cutting out artificial puppets, he brings before us men themselves" (132). A literary character so understood seems analogous to a work of art in that in Coleridge's view both are immanently vital by virtue of a peculiar transfer that occurs in a creative act and that makes the freedom of an artist immanent also to the work of art. In this way Romantic organicism attempts to resolve the contradiction that Benziger sees as central to the whole modern organicist doctrine: it manages to tell the artwork apart from the mind of the author (to make the distinction between "the poet's idea and his expression of that idea") by making the quality that characterises the creative act—that is, freedom—part of the work itself.

#### The literal organism of a poem—New Critical organicism

Thinking of a work of art in terms of dependence—in the case of Romanticism, on the principle of life—is the exact opposite of the position advanced by the New Critics, who developed their own notion of organicism, stressing the work's variously understood independence. A canonical version of this notion was expressed by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in *The Intentional Fallacy*, where they explicitly renounced the Romantics for adopting the overly intentionalist image of literary creation: "It is not so much an empirical as an analytic judgment," they wrote, "not a historical statement, but a definition, to say

that the intentional fallacy is a romantic one” (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946, 471). In place of criticism concerned with the question of “what he intended” (468), posed by critics looking for “external” and at the same time “private or idiosyncratic” evidence (“revelations ... about how and why the poet wrote the poem—to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother”; 477-478), they proposed focusing on what is “internal” and at the same time public: “discovered through the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of the language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries, in general through all that makes a language and culture” (477). In this perspective

The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge (470).

The above implicates a different view of the task of criticism:

Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work. It is only because an artifact works that we infer the intention of an artificer. “A poem should not mean but be.” A poem can *be* only through its *meaning*—since its medium is words—yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant (469).

Taking *The Intentional Fallacy* as a starting point, R. Jack Smith developed an account of what a formalist notion of meaning implies for organicist thinking, and, at the same time, what an organic metaphor could mean for a formalistically oriented critic—and what this account foremostly involved was rejecting an element of purposiveness, which is “alien to the organic nature of poetry” (Smith 1948, 626). A short list of theses that Smith considered fundamental to organicism—of which MacLeish’s dictum “the poem must not mean but be” he took to be a “representative slice”—included three statements:

1. A poem is essentially an object, not a message.
2. A poem, as an object, is as separate from the poet as a brooch is from a jeweler.
3. A poem, as an object separate from the poet, has a structure that is organic and complete (626).

From this follows for him that “purposiveness ... has no place in our thinking about such a structure. In fact, if we give full value to the

metaphor implicit in the word ‘organic,’ we can see that purposiveness in poetry is identical with teleology in science” (626). He went on to say that

Poetry does not have “intention” or “purpose” in any usual meanings of those words; it has instead a pervasive and vital unity brought about by the convergence of all its elements into a fused wholeness (632).

To correct the teleological mistake of intentionalist criticism, Smith proposed replacing the talk of intention—or purpose—with a far more neutral notion of “organic centre”, itself being just a version of “general intention” adopted by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, which was used to designate “the *poem’s* intention, not the poet’s”, and which for Smith was unfortunate only because it misleadingly suggested a species of purposiveness.

Perhaps we also need a new metaphorical representation of the way a poem works. Perhaps we could free ourselves even further of purposive notions by employing a more abstract, diagrammatic metaphor in describing its essential structure. It might be useful for us to think of the elements of a poem as having direction and, in an intensive sense, velocity. Then the concept of organic fusion might be represented as the convergence of these vectors upon a central but spatially non-existent point within the poem. Where these elements came together would be found the very center of the “meaning” of the poem, the very crux of its organicity (631-632).

Translated onto critical practice, such an approach would involve “examining relationships [within the poem—A.P.] in the light of some hypothesis”, which would not include any stipulations about authorial intention, but instead take note of the poem’s establishing “the norms of its realm” (627) and thus “reveal the vital interplay of all the parts of the poem” and “bring the whole poem into synthesis” (628). Such a method, similarly to Romantic metaphysical organicism, would allow for there being different degrees of organicity, and deliver criteria for the evaluation of the poem’s success in achieving an organic condition, such as e.g. “the amount of the material taken up into the organic whole” (629).

In light of Smith’s as well as Wimsatt and Beardsley’s remarks it becomes clear that what the New Critics saw as a foundation of an artwork’s autonomy was precisely its *shape*—the same feature that Coleridge disavowed as an opposite of a living *form*, or as inferior to it and demanding to be rendered alive in order to count as a substance of

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a successful work—the combination of objective qualities of the artwork as a thing, similar to a “brooch” or a “pudding”. The formalist transition thus turned the organic metaphor upside down; intended by the Romantics as a means of de-naturalising art and de-objectifying an artwork—an endeavour inspired by analogous attempts in biology—it eventually yielded an opposite outcome. The New Critical image of the world was a causal image—Wimsatt and Beardsley went to great lengths to deny that either causes or effects were relevant to the poem’s meaning, but causes and effects were nevertheless all they saw—while what the organic metaphor allowed from its very conception was precisely escaping causality and introducing immanent purposiveness in its place. When it was equated with mere formal arrangement, it lost its chief function of explaining why formal features cannot decide on semantic features—why the principle that constitutes the meaning cannot appear out of nothing.

What the formalist transition then entailed—and what went unnoticed both by the New Critics and by the postmodern writers that claimed to subvert the formalist paradigm—was abandoning the autonomy of art and embracing its objecthood. Jennifer Ashton carefully follows this transition, concluding that “by treating the objecthood of the text as if it were equivalent to the meaning of the text, the New Critical commitment to the heresy of paraphrase cannot help but entail a commitment to the affective fallacy—if the meaning of a text is reducible to the text’s objecthood, it can only consist of the reader’s affect” (Ashton 2005, 10). The conclusion is inspired by the arguments of Michael Fried—repeated by Walter Benn Michaels in *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004)—who in his *Art and Objecthood* (1998) pointed to the fact that once we remove the frame that delimits the artwork, approach it as an object, not as a representation, and put the *situation* of beholding it at the centre of aesthetic attention, there is nothing other than the beholder’s experience that can constitute the artwork’s meaning. The experience may change from situation to situation, and we are deprived of any normative element that could tell us which experience is *correct* and which is not, hence there is no way the beholder can *misunderstand* the artwork. This condition, characteristic for the postmodernist, as opposed to modernist aesthetic thought, Fried calls *objecthood*, and the aesthetic ideology that underwrites it he refers to as *literalism*. Both foreclose the work’s claim to autonomy, which would necessarily involve the irrelevance of the beholder to the work’s meaning—the irrelevance of what Michaels will call the “subject position”. The New Critical independence turns out to be a peculiar kind of dependence on the reader’s

experience—the dependence that postmodern aesthetics will readily employ in its search for an infinite, unbounded work.

### Organism without borders—postmodern organicity

That postmodernism defied the notion of organic unity is widely recognised as almost definitional of it. Rosalind Krauss in her influential writings on postmodern art identified the organic metaphor—one that urges us to pay attention to “formal features that preserve and protect the life of the organism, such as unity, coherence, complexity within identity, and so on” (1985, 4)—to be one of the modernist myths. Dismissing the organicist doctrine that viewed an artwork as “profound” (3), and the “call for unity” that “assumes that it is possible to draw boundaries around the aesthetic organism”, she proposed that the emergence of meaning within art should be theorised within the structuralist paradigm as resulting from “a system of substitutions” where “there are only differences without positive terms” (4). The revolution in the visual arts that Fried lamented, and that Krauss happily welcomed—and the revolution in literary theory that Ferdinand de Saussure initiated and Jacques Derrida brought to its logical conclusion—can be seen as a pivotal point in the history of the organicist option. If from the 1960s on a new paradigm demands that a successful work of art recognise Smith’s lesson learned during a car ride on the unfinished Jersey Turnpike—and thus strive towards delivering an experience so unbounded that “there is no way you can frame it” (Fried 1998, 158)—what should “organic” mean, if it is to mean anything at all?

A possible way of incorporating a species of organicism into the postmodern worldview—one that follows Krauss’s reliance on structuralism and its theoretical implications—was suggested by Richard Shusterman in his somaesthetics manifesto, *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (2000), where he challenges the dominant (in his view) analytic tradition in Western philosophy of art, and tries to formulate an alternative inspired foremostly by works of John Dewey, but also of Jacques Derrida, among others. An influence of that last figure, and of the poststructuralist theoretical framework more generally, is clearly discernible when Shusterman discusses the notion of organic unity as one of the aesthetic prejudices that should be amended. And although he declares that he proceeds by “pitting deconstruction against analytic philosophy” as two “rival philosophies” that remain in a “deadlock” (64) that can be overcome only by assuming a pragmatist outlook (defending and updating

pragmatism is the goal of the book), he visibly sides with deconstruction, not only as a logical consequence of the fact that the whole book is written against analytic philosophy (so deconstruction is treated as an enemy of an enemy), but also because Shusterman, critical of the deconstruction's hyper-relativist and pan-textualist agenda as he is, does nevertheless seem to unhesitatingly adopt the picture of meaning as emerging from "language's play of differences" (70).

Surprising as it may seem, according to Shusterman, deconstruction, despite opposing the notion of organic unity on the surface, "at a much deeper logical level, it is itself fundamentally committed and inextricably wedded to one central (originally Hegelian) sense of organic unity" (64). This commitment becomes clear when one considers the notion of *différance* as it appears in Derrida's thought. What it entails is that the identity and meaning of any object of discourse is constituted by its differential relations with other objects (and by "object of discourse" we really mean any object, since "all the objects and concepts of our world are linguistically mediated"), so "what any thing is, is essentially a function of what it is not", and nothing is ever "fully present in itself or constituted simply by (or for) itself" (71). Now compare this, Shusterman says, to Hegel's idea of organic unity, refuted by G. E. Moore and other analytical philosophers. Moore criticised Hegel for assuming an understanding of an organic dependence of parts and whole as not only causal—so that no part can survive without the other parts—and emergent—so that "the properties of the whole are different from the sum of the properties of its individual parts and not reducible to them" (67)—but also logical. This logical understanding of organic unity entails that "just as the whole would not be what it is but for the existence of its parts, so, the parts would not be what they are but for the existence of the whole" (Moore 1959, 33). Moore rejects this as self-contradictory (if we were to satisfy the requirements posed by this understanding, we would have to for example assume that parts are at the same time distinct from the whole and including the whole; see Moore 1959, 34–36), but, Shusterman points out, his rejection stems from some deeply internalised notions of the "reality of self-identical particulars or logically independent individuals" (69), which are themselves just prejudices (here again Shusterman aligns with poststructuralism).

It is not hard to see, Shusterman concludes, that *différance* and the "radical concept of organic unity" (69) are essentially the same: both assume that "each part derives its meaning from its relations to the whole's other parts" (72), the whole, in Derrida's case, being the "system or structure of linguistic differences" (71–72). Now if we take decon-

struction's arguments against organic unity as an aesthetic notion—most notably the assertion that a work of art is constituted by what has been excluded outside its frame—we can see that these arguments follow the radical organic logic mentioned above. Although Derrida would not be keen to agree with such statement (it bears too visible a trace of the metaphysical thinking he steadfastly worked to repudiate), deconstruction rests on a picture of the “world as a totality of interrelated and reciprocally defined elements” (Shusterman 2000, 80): every whole can in turn be regarded as part of a larger whole, and *ad infinitum*.

A species of this radical notion of organic unity is what seems to be organising the theoretical imagination of contemporary environmental humanities. It is especially visible in ecocritical discourse, whose proponents can be said to share the understanding of organicity—if they use this concept—that associates this notion not with unity, wholeness and boundedness, but with relationality, penetrability and flux. Margaret Ronda, linking the recent poetic attempts to rethink the notion of organic form with a wider discourse of plastic and plasticity, highlights their difference from late modernist and avant-garde traditions, such as those developed by the Black Mountain poets:

“while midcentury writers such as Levertov, Olson, Duncan, and Richards consider poetic form in relation to natural materials (plants, cells, and animal life, as well as wood, clay, and stone) and portray systematicity through ideas of unity, wholeness, and balance, practitioners of contemporary eco-poetics enact these portrayals of systems under the sign of toxicity, pollution, and global climate change” (Ronda 2021, 122).

Inviting thinking in terms of interfusion and dependency, “plastic has become a particularly central locus of eco-poetic meditation and an extension, in new directions, of these conceptions of organic form” (123). Lynn Keller, sharing the same intuitions, suggests that the contemporary “poetics of interconnection”, as represented for example by Adam Dickinson and Evelyn Reilly, stresses “the permeability between what has conventionally been considered the bounded inside and outside; and the thorough interrelation of living things with one another and with substances in their environments” (2017, 61).

Postmodern ecocritical organicism, similarly to its Romantic predecessor, situates itself “in opposition to the mechanistic view of nature which assumed that things could be broken down to smaller elements and then examined, as if each element existed independently of all the others” (Fiedorczuk 2020, 229). But while it is committed to the Cole-



ridgean idea of fundamental “continuity of life within and outside the human being” (230)—the unity of man and the rest of organic and inorganic nature—it simultaneously denies the former the privileged status as the “head of the visible creation” that Coleridge was inclined to grant him. Inheriting the “romantic distrust of instrumental rationality,” (231) these aesthetic enterprises are manifestly hostile to the idea of man’s exceptionality stemming from either consciousness, agency, or language. According to Ewa Domańska and her summary of the premises of the different strains within this tendency,

Ecological humanities is critical towards the traditional paradigm based on mechanistic science on the one hand, and on patriarchal values on the other (patriarchism is understood here as the domination of man over nature). In its perspective, the world is seen again in terms of the organism; or rather an organic system. This species of humanities is based on the structural metaphor of organicism, which entails its characteristic preference for ontology of connectivity, relational approaches and the so-called flat alternatives that consider things in interconnectedness and interdependence. In the production of knowledge within the ecological humanities we encounter key concepts characteristic of organicism, such as: integration, wholeness, holism, coherence, combining and inclusion, connections and relationships (Domańska 2013, 19-20).

Autonomy, viewed as an elitist and dangerously anthropocentric idea, is amongst the concepts notoriously contested within the postmodern organicist paradigm. In what can be regarded as one of the canonical manifestos of Polish ecocriticism, Julia Fiedorczuk writes:

one of the most fundamental gestures performed by ecological criticism is the contestation of the high modernist idea of the autonomy of a work of art, including a literary work. Drawing inspiration from biosemiotics and new materialism, ecocriticism rejects the dichotomous ontology juxtaposing humans (as conscious, active agents) to (passive and meaningless) “nature” or “matter.” As a result, literary texts are understood not as unique phenomena resulting from exceptional human creativity but rather as belonging to a complex mesh of co-emergent material entities (Fiedorczuk 2020, 228–229).

In the light of preceding considerations on Romanticism and New Criticism both passages might come as a surprise, but on a closer examination it is difficult not to see them as a logical and inevitable consequence of the postmodern turn in 20th-century aesthetics. After Minimalism the categories such as interconnected, interdependent, or holistic cannot apply to a work of art, or at least not in the way they

did, because that would stress the work's boundedness. The concept of organic whole, if it is to retain its applicability, must refer to a work that is holistic but not delimited; unitary but infinite. The only such thing can be the whole of nature, which, in the view of postmodern organicism, cannot help but become an enormous work of art, dissolving the art-specific notions such as purpose and intention altogether. Reiterating Wendy Wheeler's new materialist thesis that matter "is not merely a passive substratum but a *meaning-bearing* field of agency," (Wheeler 2014, 70) Fiedorczuk goes on to agree that the "linguistic activities of human beings, including poetry, are not qualitatively different from other creative acts," (Fiedorczuk 2020, 251) because "non-human creative acts—rivers shaping landscapes, bacteria gathering into collectives in order to form new organisms, bees dancing so as to communicate the location of nectar—are like poems" (253). Symmetrically, the meaning of the poem, as Alfonso D'Aquino's texts remind us, is "like crystal, is always in the act of becoming, it is never final, it has no preordained aim, and in this it resembles all the other biological processes... If halite is a text that can be read like poem, a poem can grow like crystal" (273).

This is why autonomy is precluded from the new materialist and ecocritical image of the world; although in its deliberations on the continuity and similarity between works of art and natural entities postmodern organicism much resembles the Romantic belief in the uninterrupted progression of forms, it effaces in the work of art the only factor that could allow for its autonomy; namely, *form*. What was necessary to make an entity autonomous for Coleridge was the principle of life—manifesting itself variously as imagination, beauty, genius or organic unity—because it transformed shape into form, thus not only making the organism or an artwork *alive*, but also *delimiting* it: it was the principle that produced an organic unity and determined its identity, specifying with what being, within what boundaries, we are dealing with. The example of New Criticism helped us see why it is so important: an attempt to establish the form of the poem—and so consequently its meaning—by appealing to the "public" rules of language results in us seeing in its place an object that can be different for different readers. An account exclusively resting on public norms quietly introduces experience into the picture; a "public" frame, Fried would say, is no frame, and a frameless poem indeed does "grow like a crystal"—it is virtually infinite, and it is hard to imagine how—and why—an infinite entity is supposed to be autonomous. Bearing in mind the literalist roots of contemporary organicism, it is easier to see

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that the—now widespread—celebration of posthumanist and relational organicity is a way of celebrating objectified, nonautonomous art.

Objective purposiveness and the necessity of form—Kant's aesthetics

In order to grasp the importance of the notion of form for the theorising about the autonomy of art, and to unpack the relation of the original Romantic organic metaphor to the former, it is worth taking a step back to Kant and his considerations on aesthetic judgement which greatly inspired Coleridge. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant introduces two species of purposiveness, formal and real—or, subjective and objective—the first being the one we appeal to when judging art, and the second being appropriate to studying nature. The power of judgement, which is applicable in both cases and which, in most general terms, can be described as “the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal” (Kant 2000, 66; 5: 179)<sup>1</sup>, contains in itself a legislative *a priori* principle of its own for seeking laws:

the particular empirical laws, in regard to that which is left undetermined in them by [the understanding, which prescribes universal laws to nature], must be considered in terms of the sort of unity they would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition, in order to make possible a system of experience in accordance with particular laws of nature (67-68; 5: 180).

The hallmark of Kant's aesthetics is precisely this operation of positing an auxiliary teleology for the sake of reflection, that results in us treating natural entities *as though* they were purposeful, even if we know we cannot claim that they *really* are. “The unity of nature in accordance with empirical laws and the possibility of the unity of experience”—the correspondence of nature and our mental faculties—although it is contingent, it must be assumed by the power of judgement “as an *a priori* principle for its own use”, because otherwise “no thoroughgoing inter-

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<sup>1</sup> The first number indicates the relevant page in the contemporary edition of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (see the Bibliography section below); the number after the semicolon refers to the pagination of the standard German edition of Kant's works, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1900–).

connection of empirical cognitions into a whole of experience would take place” (70; 5: 183).

Still, all this is just subjective purposiveness—seeming purposiveness in relation to our mental faculties, which enables us to pass aesthetic judgements about beauty that can be universally valid on the basis of the assumption that we all share the same psychic organisation, but does not allow for deciding whether any actual purposiveness, independent of our mental faculties, does indeed exist. If we are to pass judgements about the *objective* purposiveness of things, so to judge them as *ends of nature*, something more is required.

Experience leads our power of judgment to the concept of an objective and material purposiveness, i.e., to the concept of an end of nature, only if there is a relation of the cause to the effect to be judged, which we can understand as lawful only insofar as we find ourselves capable of subsuming the idea of the effect under the causality of its cause as the underlying condition of the possibility of the former (239; 5: 366-367).

In an end of nature (a thing possessing real or objective purposiveness) “the idea of the effect” must be part of its cause; whatever produced it must have operated according to an idea, so, in other words, “lawfully”—being guided by some principle. What is more, the existence and the causal dispositiveness of such an idea must be necessary, or, such a thing must be *possible only as an end*:

In order to see that a thing is possible only as an end, i.e., that the causality of its origin must be sought not in the mechanism of nature, but in a cause whose productive capacity is determined by concepts, it is necessary that its form not be possible in accordance with mere natural laws (242; 5: 369-370).

Kant gives an example of such a thing:

If someone were to perceive a geometrical figure, for instance a regular hexagon, drawn in the sand in an apparently uninhabited land, his reflection, working with a concept of it, would become aware of the unity of the principle of its generation by means of reason, even if only obscurely, and thus, in accordance with this, would not be able to judge as a ground of the possibility of such a shape the sand, the nearby sea, the wind, the footprints of any known animals, or any other non-rational cause, because the contingency of coinciding with such a concept, which is possible only in reason, would seem to him so infinitely great that it would be just as good as if there were no natural law of nature, consequently no cause in nature acting merely mechanically, and as if the con-

cept of such an object could be regarded as a concept that can be given only by reason and only by reason compared with the object, thus as if only reason can contain the causality for such an effect, consequently that this object must be thoroughly regarded as an end, but not a natural end, i.e., as a product of art (*vestigium hominis video*). 242-243 (5: 370-371)

While the above conclusion is pretty clear, it is at the same time not quite convincing. To say that the “contingency of coinciding” with a concept is “infinitely great” is not the same as to say that such coincidence is impossible. In the picture given by Kant we do not deal with necessity, but with probability—in the *physical shape* that we encounter on the beach there is nothing that *forces* us to connect it with “a concept that can be given only by reason”, or in general with any other cause that might have brought it about (we do not know how and why it has appeared there). Although Kant phrases the problem in terms of causes—and claims that in certain circumstances we have to view an object as caused by a concept—a closer look at the categories he uses reveals that in fact it is not a special kind of causality that has to be looked for. Yet if we introduce a slight amendment to this image, we can both fix the fishy notion of causality, and arrive at the necessity that is missing there.

Let us first take a look at two kinds of relationship between causes and effects that Kant distinguishes in context of aesthetic and teleological judgement: the nexus of efficient causes (*nexus effectivus*) and the nexus of final causes (*nexus finalis*). The causal nexus is always descending: it “constitutes a series (of causes and effects)” such that that “the things themselves, which as effects presuppose others as their causes, cannot conversely be the causes of these at the same time” (244, 5: 372). In contrast, a purposive nexus, “conceived in accordance with a concept of reason (of ends)”, involves “descending as well as ascending dependency, in which the thing which is on the one hand designated as an effect nevertheless deserves, in ascent, the name of a cause of the same thing of which it is the effect” (Ibidem). Kant also calls the first the “connection of real causes”, and the second the “connection of ideal [causes]” (244, 5: 373).

But in what sense can a concept be an “ideal cause” of a thing? Indeed, it is hard to imagine what an immaterial causality should look like. Rather, we would be more inclined to say that if something is seen as a cause of the work, it is always a material cause—and as such, as Wimsatt and Beardsley rightly note, it does not tell us anything about its meaning. Such a conclusion seems even more pressing in light of

Unity is always an abstraction posited as a basis for our cognition; something we cannot experience in the world, but is nevertheless required to be assumed as a principle for a meaningful experience to take place.

Kant's account of the nature of concepts. The key term in the above cited passage is the "unity of the principle". One of the crucial distinctions in the considerations on the power of judgement is between the manifold and the unitary. The power of judgement, which, again, "in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal" (66, 5: 179), the latter consisting in e.g. "the rule, the principle, the law" (66-67, 5: 179), in dealing with a manifold of the empirical data, must assume "as an *a priori* principle for its own use that what is contingent for human insight in the particular (empirical) laws of nature nevertheless contains a lawful unity, not fathomable by us but still thinkable, in the combination of its manifold into one experience possible in itself". Unity is always an abstraction posited as a basis for our cognition; something we cannot experience in the world, but is nevertheless required to be assumed as a principle for a meaningful experience to take place. In the above example a mathematical figure of a hexagon is a concept given by reason, which was then instantiated by a shape in the sand, and so consequently the shape can be judged as purposeful according to the concept. The judgement assumes a unity that is not actually observed—the unity of the concept of a hexagon—and treats an object (which can come in a manifold of actual physical shapes) in light of this assumption.

What this "unity" might more precisely mean is suggested by Kant's seminal remarks on the objective teleology of nature—the idea of an organism as a natural end that inspired Coleridge's definition of organic unity. According to Kant, "a thing exists as a natural end if it is cause and effect of itself". Using an example of a tree, he goes on to explain that this peculiar kind of causal reciprocity occurs when an entity is (1.) capable of reproducing itself in the form of offspring, and so sustaining a species, (2.) of generating and preserving itself as an individual, and when (3.) "one part of this creature also generates itself in such a way that the preservation of the one is reciprocally dependent on the preservation of the other" (243, 5: 371). For what is required for a natural object to be an end "without the causality of the concepts of a rational being outside of it" is that

its parts be combined into a whole by being reciprocally the cause and effect of their form. For in this way alone is it possible in turn for the idea of the whole conversely (reciprocally) to determine the form and combination of all the parts: not as a cause—for then it would be a product of art—but as a ground for the cognition of the systematic unity of the form and the combination of all of the manifold that is contained in the given material for someone who judges it (245, 5: 373).

Such an “organized and self-organizing being” (245, 5: 375), if we are to understand its structure, should be judged according to a maxim, which says that “nothing in it is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature” (248, 5: 376). This arguably strange assumption follows from the concept of natural end, which

leads reason into an order of things entirely different from that of a mere mechanism of nature, which will here no longer satisfy us. An idea has to ground the possibility of the product of nature. However, since this is an absolute unity of the representation, while the matter is a multitude of things, which by itself can provide no determinate unity of composition, if that unity of the idea is even to serve as the determining ground *a priori* of a natural law of the causality of such a form of the composite, then the end of nature must extend to everything that lies in its product (248, 5: 377).

It is here that we can grasp the meaning of Kant’s use of the term “unity”. We cannot disagree that in fact there *obviously* are contingent elements in an organised living being, and most certainly an infinite multitude of them, but once we decide to regard it as an organic whole—to treat it *as though* it was determined by an idea (even if we know that “in reality” it is not)—we assume that everything there is in this being is regulated by this idea. To phrase it differently, the act of delimiting an organism is precisely an act of specifying what counts as a part of it (on this particular teleological account). The reason for that is the reciprocal relation of the whole and the parts that occurs in an organism: if the parts are “possible only through their relation to the whole” (245, 5: 373), then they are *necessarily* the parts of this particular whole and not another. Therefore an organism can be said to possess not only a physical shape, but also a *form*, which, like an idea, is unitary and necessary—by recognising an object’s form, we recognise it as a purposeful object, and once we do this, we conclude that everything that is purposeful in this object can be accounted for through an appeal to its form.

It is worth noting that in such a picture of an organised being an idea is by no means a *cause*—it is not prior to the emergence of an organism, but immanent to it: it is a way (for Kant the only possible way) of accounting for the existence of an organism as a natural end. Now this fact is particularly interesting with regard to Kant’s remarks on art. Although he acknowledges that both natural organisms and artworks are objectively purposeful—they are both “possible only as an end”—and that in the case of an organism it means that the guiding

idea must “determine *a priori* everything that is to be contained in it” (245, 5: 373), he does not recognise the consequences of these claims that follow for art. If we keep in mind an analogy between organisms and works of art, we can rethink the *nexus finalis*—the relation of a concept to the work of art—and offer a slightly modified and more convincing version of it. A “concept”, seen as something “ideal” (as in Kant’s account of *nexus finalis*), should not be considered a cause of the work, but a part of an account of it as a purposive object, in which nothing is contingent with regard to this concept—in other words, it should be treated in the same way Kant treats an “idea” when he speaks of natural organisms. Such an image of an artwork as immanently purposeful would be in certain respects similar to how Elizabeth Anscombe views intentional action. When speaking of meanings, she sharply distinguishes the domain of physical events and the domain of “the question ‘Why?’”.

Of course we have a special interest in human actions: but what is it that we have a special interest in here? It is not that we have a special interest in the movement of these molecules—namely, the ones in a human being; or even in the movements of certain bodies—namely human ones. The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question “Why?” did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question “Why?” So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question “What does it say?” It is of a word or sentence that we ask “What does it say?”; and the description of something as a word or a sentence at all could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning (Anscombe 2000, 83).

Intentionality is not a matter of a certain arrangement of things and bodies, or of a peculiar kind of causal relations, but a matter of a “form of description of events” (84). What is more,

in describing intentional actions as such, it will be a mistake to look for *the* fundamental description of what occurs—such as the movements of muscles or molecules—and then think of intention as something, perhaps very complicated, which qualifies this. The only events to consider are intentional actions themselves, and to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it (29).

If the same goes for purposefulness, we might add to what has been said above that there are not two kinds of causality—material and ideal—but two kinds of explanation that we may harbour when talking about



a creative process; two possible accounts of a work of art. Within the causal explanation—the account of a work as a material object—we can invoke a variety of factors that entered the physical process of the appearance of a work, both material (a painter moving his hand, a poet sitting on the lawn, and so on) and “ideal” or “conceptual” (a painter intending to express an idea, a poet thinking of a lady or a friend), which will nevertheless be irrelevant to the meaning of the work, if only because we have no criteria for choosing the relevant (the “real”) ones. Looking back at Kant’s example of a hexagon on the beach, we notice that, in the causal perspective, what seems to him to be accountable only in terms of “concept that can be given only by reason”, in fact can be accounted for solely in terms of the mechanical laws of nature as well; is it not true after all that whoever draw that shape in the sand, displaced the grains of sand with the moves of their arm that were caused by the neural activity of their brain—and that all that was subject to the laws of physics? None of these things, including what can sometimes be called (in this case misleadingly) “intentions”—in Kant’s vocabulary, “concepts”—is nonetheless interesting from the point of view of the meaning of the work, or the purpose of an object.

Within the purposive explanation—which, if I am right, should be more appropriately called an intentional explanation—on the other hand, what we deal with is not a cause of a thing, but a form of its description; in other words, not something that preceded it, but something that is immanent to it. In the amended version of Kant’s aesthetics a work of art is not something that we can conceive of only as caused by a concept (as Kant does in an example of a hexagon drawn in the sand), but something we can conceive of only as intentional—an object for the appearance of which we *can* provide an intentional account (apart from an infinite number of causal accounts that are just as appropriate), and we *must* provide it in order to grasp it as a work of art. What is more, once we provide it, the intention that we posit becomes the “determining idea”—determining not in a causal, but in a conceptual sense—through which we can apprehend it as purposeful. Therefore, “the same action can be intentional under one description and unintentional under another,” (28) but the description under which it is intentional will not be a causal description. If we view Kant’s aesthetics through the lens of Anscombe’s considerations on intention, we might say that, by means of an analogy with natural entities, he elaborates on the role a “concept”—which in such a case is equivalent to intention—plays in the emergence of an artwork. We might also say that while he speaks of concepts and ideas, he might as well be speaking of meaning and inter-

pretation; and in the picture he gives, asking what a work means would not involve finding empirical evidence (a cause), but providing a convincing account of it as intentional.

An ability to give such an account is equivalent to asserting that a work possesses not only a shape, but also a form—that apart from being caused by multiple factors it was also intended to be this way and not another. It is here that we find the necessity that Kant's considerations on teleology called for from the very outset. Viewing intention as immanent to the work—and as providing it with purposefulness that can be said to be “internal”—is also, as I would like to suggest, a way of understanding the consequences of Coleridge's “principle of life” that for him was a means for finding an element of lawfulness in organic entities—either living beings or works of art—and that was the basis of the autonomy of a Romantic work of art. The requirement that the principle of growth of an organism—the form—comes from within, and at the same time subordinates the matter contained in it, is indebted to Kant's organicism that consisted in thinking of certain objects as immanently purposeful. And if the Kantian “determining idea” is seen as a prefiguration of the Coleridgean “internal law” according to which an organic artwork was supposed to be judged, then tracing this indebtedness might help understanding the normative aspect of Romantic organicism. An organic artwork possesses intrinsic normativity because in light of the account of it as purposeful (its intentional description) the idea (or the principle of life) *necessarily* guides everything that is contained in it—or, more precisely, everything that counts as meaningful. For both Coleridge and Kant, then, the notions of purposefulness and normativity were tied to the act of *delimiting* an organic entity: setting the boundaries within which “nothing ... is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature”.

Now compare this notion of an organic entity in which “nothing ... is in vain” to what Stanley Cavell says about an artist, who is “responsible for everything that happens in his work—and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is *meant*” (Cavell 1976, 236). At first it may seem counterintuitive to hold an artist responsible for every single detail that appears in the body of the work; surely, some of them may have appeared there by accident—unintentionally, we would say. Or, rather, considering the immense multitude of physical elements that constitute the materiality of the work, some of them *must* have appeared there by accident; it is impossible to fully control an array of chemical particles on a canvas or on a page. But bare materiality is exactly what Cavell is *not* interested in. Paying careful attention to “what is *there*” in

the work may lead us to the New Critical scepticism about intention only if we forget that, indeed, “what counts is what is *there*”, but “everything that is there is something a man has *done*”. And the question about what has been done is the ultimate question of criticism and interpretation—one that reveals an alternative between “what is there” and “what is intended” to be a false alternative. “Intention is no more an efficient cause of an object of art than it is of a human action; in both cases it is a way of understanding the thing done, of describing what happens” (236). Therefore, while an artwork may not be fully intentional in the material sense—and a constatation that it is not is somewhat trivial—it is fully intentional as something that was meant, which is the same as to simply say that it is a result of an intentional action. To understand what was done (to understand the action) is to understand what is there. Inquiring about intention and inquiring about the work is one and the same thing.

Cavell’s insistence on the full responsibility of an artist with regard to the content of their work, predicated on his understanding of the relation of intentional action—the “what was done”—and meaning—the “what is there”—bears some similarity to Fried’s insistence on the full *instantaneousness* of the meaning that stems from his understanding of the role of frame in modernism. The difference between a minimalist (or, literalist) and a modernist work of art is, in Fried’s view, that while the former aims to elicit an experience that “persists in time” (Fried 1998, 166) and creates a sense of endlessness, in case of the latter “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest”. Preoccupation with duration—or, more precisely, with an *indefinite* duration—is what amounts to minimalism’s ultimate theatricality—that is, to its foregrounding of the viewer’s perspective and abandonment of its own autonomous claim to meaning—and what makes it antithetical to modernism. And this is not to say that modernist paintings and sculptures do not exist in time, for they obviously do; and it is not to say that a beholder can actually perceive a modernist painting (not to mention sculpture) *instantly*, for they clearly cannot—it is both physically and psychologically impossible. But an experience of a modernist artwork “is not incomplete ... simply because one has seen it only from where one is standing” (167), because the proper mode of the experience of a modernist artwork is not interest, but conviction. Within the minimalist paradigm, as Donald Judd writes, “a work needs only to be interesting” (1964, 184), and art that aspires to be interesting by very definition involves temporality: it has to elicit interest and sustain it. By contrast, art that aspires to convince makes temporality irrelevant, for conviction is not a matter

The question about what has been done is the ultimate question of criticism and interpretation—one that reveals an alternative between “what is there” and “what is intended” to be a false alternative.

of time; therefore, a modernist artwork can be treated “as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it” (1998, 167). Where minimalist art emphasises *presence*—the physical “being there” in its monumental or uncanny materiality that continues in time and that is designed to disturb the viewer and make him unable to ignore it—modernism strives for achieving *presentness*: a kind of “perpetual creation of itself” (167) whereby all the meanings it bears can be said to be there at once. Even if, physically and psychologically, such full meaning cannot be perceived or attended to simultaneously, when it is grasped, it subsumes the physical and psychological process of the viewer’s contact with the materiality of the work—just like Cavell’s inquiry into “what is there” subsumes the (trivial and void) inquiry into what is physically present in the work, and Kant’s “idea” subsumes everything that is contained in an organism.

Such a take on the issue might help explain what Benziger considers the chief problem of the modern organicist doctrine, one that leads “right to the heart of the matter” (1951, 28); namely, the relation between the author and the work. On one hand, Benziger writes, if we were to reformulate Coleridge’s famous definition of organic form (a form that is innate and that “shapes as it develops itself from within”) in modern terms, we would say that “the organic poet thinks immediately in terms of his medium, and his thoughts are inseparable from their expression” (24). On the other hand, the practical discourse of criticism nevertheless requires organicists to make the distinction between thoughts and expressions, or else they would not be able to define the object of their inquiry—they are to judge expressions, not thoughts, after all. So the contradictory task organic critics face is to reintroduce into the picture “the very distinction which their theory regards as inadmissible” that is, “the distinction between the poet’s idea and his expression of that idea” (25). And in Benziger’s view this is a task that the Western philosophical thought faced many times before, for example with regard to the idea of God, who, within certain theological discourses, was considered at the same time as being “both everywhere in the created universe and as being quite external to it” (28). But, as Benziger goes on to say, the doctrine of the transcendence of the Creator, held by the “orthodox Christian philosophers”, by the end of the eighteenth century started to lose traction within philosophy, and the founding fathers of the modern organicism like Herder, Moritz, Schelling or Schlegel were more inclined to “stress the immanence of the Divine Spirit only” and

to deny or forget the transcendental nature of the Divine. As a consequence, the imaginary relation between the Creator and the creation changed, and together with it the relation of the idea and the expression, which was modelled on the former. In the earlier philosophical tradition the human soul was considered to transcend the body—just like the Creator transcends the creation and the idea transcends the expression—and to differ in this regard from the “individuals souls” (or entelechies, or life principles, or substantial forms, as they came to be variously called) of other living beings which were “not thought of as destined to exist outside their physical habitation”. Within this “new aesthetic” of Romanticism this difference waned, and as a consequence the entelechy of, say, a tree could be considered a “sufficient analog to the poem and its idea”; because “the idea was not thought of as transcending the poem, but as being identical with it” (34). (An example of such thinking, we should add to Benziger’s narrative, was evident in Coleridge’s treatment of the hierarchy of forms that for him differed only in the degree of their unity, not in kind, for all of them possessed the principle of life, variously distributed throughout the universe). Now if we take this analogy to be explicable in terms of the notion of purposefulness suggested above, and think of the resemblance that a poem bears to a tree as a matter of it being internally purposeful—that is, immanently intentional—the identity of “idea and expression” that posed a problem for Benziger can be readily assimilated to the model of intentional expression. Within this model “idea” and “expression” are indeed one, because the idea is another name for what has been expressed; just as in Kant what does not belong to the “determining idea” is just not part of the organism, so in an intentional expression what does not belong to intention just has not been expressed.

This is not to say that either Kant or Coleridge defended an Anscombian understanding of intention, or that they shared Fried’s commitment to frame; it is rather to say that they both inquired into how beauty and form are possible, and the notions of purpose, unity and normativity they found indispensable to this task point to the same conceptual dependence of meaning upon intention that is revealed in the writings of Anscombe, Fried, Cavell, and, notably, Michaels. This is why it seems appropriate to say that modern organicism—the one that secured autonomy—was always about frame, and it was always about intention, variously dubbed. Postmodern organicism, which inherits the minimalist reluctance towards frame (the unwillingness to acknowledge the boundaries of the work) stemming from the New Critical reluctance towards intention (the unwillingness to see it as immanent to the work)

Organicist aesthetics in the course of the 20th century changed sides and acquiesced in the market reality, surrendering the claim to autonomy that was crucial to modernism.

is in fact its exact opposite. But a theoretical shift within the critical discourse on the ontology of the work of art does not change the ontology itself. What it does, though, is point to the way in which organicist aesthetics in the course of the 20th century changed sides and acquiesced in the market reality, surrendering the claim to autonomy that was crucial to modernism. For the logic of an unbounded entity that postmodernism introduced as a blueprint for construing the work of art is to a large extent the logic of the commodity.

When discussing Kant's aesthetics, Nicholas Brown distinguished two modes of existence an artwork assumes in the conditions of market economy, or, two aspects it possesses. First, it is a commodity—this stems from its material constitution. As long as it is a material object, it has a use value, and “use values, in societies whose metabolism takes place entirely through the exchange of equivalents, are immediately subject to the logic of consumer sovereignty” (Brown 2019, 38)—every object is exchangeable, therefore its use value yields to its exchange value. But at the same time it is something more; namely, it is a meaningful entity, and its meaning does not change along with the different uses it is put to. This is a difference between a work of art—which is always *also* a commodity—and a *mere* commodity, such as a hammer or a stool. If you use a stool as a slicing board or a flower stand, you are not actually misusing it, because it has no normative dimension to it; there is no way that you *should* be using it in a strong sense (apart from different weak senses of the word “should”, which are implied by facts such as that people usually use it that way not another, or that you are told it is appropriate to use it that way not another, etc.). This is primarily because its use value manifests to its producer only via exchange value, that is, by virtue of the fact that it has a use value for someone else. The producer is indifferent to the way in which you use it, as long as you want to buy it, because it is not intended by him to be used in any particular way, rather, it is intended to be bought—and “the less he legislates what its actual use value should be, ... the happier he is” (4). A work of art, on the other hand, boasts that very normativity that a mere commodity lacks; because it is made to be exactly that way and not another (not like commodity, which is made just the way that would sell best), it possesses an internal purposiveness—one that Brown calls after Kant “purposiveness without external purpose” (13), that is, without any use it should be put to, or an end it is to serve. It has a form that is meant.

At this point one may begin to see that the unbounded liberty of a commodity is in a way similar to an unbounded infinity that postmodern organic theorists are willing to attribute to an artwork. Both have

virtually no boundaries; just as there is no limit to the uses a commodity can be put to (which all reside in its very nature and none of them is in fact inappropriate), so similarly there is no limit to the meanings a postmodern work of art can be construed as having (since, according to organic theorists, it emerges out of the meaningful fermentation that occurs in every bit of matter in the universe, and that no one intends). Again, it is not that a postmodern work *actually* is that way—it continues to be an intentional artefact, no matter what we imagine it to be—but an effort to imagine it as equal to the effects of non-intentional natural processes is parallel to an effort to imagine a work of art that could be *just* a commodity, devoid of the normative dimension.

What does “organic” mean today, then, and what could it mean? Well, a notion of organic unity, just like in the times of Coleridge, can be used as an evaluative tool—as a means for telling the good artworks from the bad ones—that designates certain features we expect or demand an artwork to possess. Be it the features that modernism valued—such as internal coherence, justifiability of form, or freedom from arbitrariness—or the ones that are likely to satisfy the ecopoetry writers of today—features found probably in the artworks that uncover the interdependence between man and his environment or bring to mind associations with natural forms. But there is a more important bearing that the notion of organic form or organic unity can have on our understanding of art. For the adjective “organic” seems also to name something that an artist indeed *can* achieve and *does* always achieve, not by virtue of some special formal decisions (such as Coleridge’s or Fiedorczuk’s), but because of the nature of the very act they engage in. We can say that an artwork is always already organic in a Kantian sense, which means it cannot be comprehended otherwise than as an intentional object. As long as it is intentional, it is also at least to some degree autonomous, which means that it is neither reducible to its physical shape nor, as a consequence, to its exchange value. It is worth remembering that the organicist aesthetics, despite its later postmodern shift, is at least partly rooted in the Romantic striving to understanding an artwork’s autonomy in terms of its internal purposiveness—and that this perspective can be useful in conceptualising the possibility of art’s at least partial independence from the market economy today.

We can say that an artwork is always already organic in a Kantian sense, which means it cannot be comprehended otherwise than as an intentional object.

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**Abstrakt:** W artykule chcę wykazać, że metafora organiczna – najczęściej kojarzona z romantycznym pojęciem dzieła sztuki jako analogicznego wobec żywej istoty – przez ostatnie dwa stulecia służyła jako środek konceptualizacji możliwości uzyskania przez dzieło sztuki autonomii, a związek pomiędzy nimi miał charakter dialektyczny – struktura metafory organicznej zakładana w ramach poszczególnych tradycji krytycznych warunkowała wyobrażenia na temat tego, co może oznaczać autonomia estetyczna, sama jednocześnie kształtując się pod wpływem przekonań dotyczących ontologii dzieła sztuki i możliwości uzyskania przez nie autonomii. W tym czasie sama metafora uległa modyfikacjom na tyle istotnym, że w różnych momentach historycznych mogła posłużyć uzasadnieniu przeciwstawnych sobie postaw teoretycznych i estetycznych: wykorzystywano ją zarówno w obronie autonomicznego statusu dzieła sztuki, jak i w charakterze argumentu przeciw autonomii jako pożądanemu punktowi dojścia działań artystycznych. Aby zilustrować te zmiany, omówię trzy momenty w historii metafory organicznej: organicyzm romantyczny, skupiony na pojęciu zasady życiowej, formalistyczny organicyzm Nowej Krytyki, który, jak się okaże, zapowiada to, co Michael Fried nazwał literalizmem, oraz postmodernistyczny organicyzm, charakterystyczny dla humanistyki środowiskowej i dyskursów ekokrytycznych. Krótki zarys niedawnej historii metafory organicznej ma za zadanie pomóc w zrozumieniu genezy współczesnego organicyzmu i pokazać, że jego niechęć do idei autonomii estetycznej wynika z charakterystycznie postmodernistycznego pojęcia formy organicznej. W zakończeniu artykułu zarysowuję możliwą interpretację pojęcia formy organicznej w świetle rozważań Kanta na temat sądu teleologicznego oraz poglądów Anscombe na temat intencji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** autonomia, celowość, organicyzm, krytyka literacka, romantyzm, ekokrytyka