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The force of disgust in Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness*

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Abstract

When, in 1853, Karl Rosenkranz published his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* or *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, the very title was indicative of the work's ground breaking nature, it being the first time that the ugly was expressly accorded some measure of dignity within the philosophy of art. And yet, so this article asks, can the ugly be understood in its full force within the paradigm of an Idealist aesthetics such as Rosenkranz espouses? Although in such a frame the ugly is not merely the absence of the beautiful, it can only ever be a secondary phenomenon which is subordinate to the sensuous appearance of the Idea; Rosenkranz consequently never progressed beyond affirming the always-already established primacy of the beautiful. Within a short space of time, however, the internal development of art would begin to challenge this primacy in earnest. To illustrate this, the article focuses on the particularly visceral form of ugliness that is the disgusting, through a reading Rimbaud's *Venus Anadyomène*, and concludes by arguing that a better understanding of the force of disgust compels us to reconsider and rethink, if not altogether abandon, the Idealist understanding of art as the sensuous appearance of the Idea.¹

Keywords: aesthetics, German Idealism, Karl Rosenkranz, Arthur Rimbaud.



Writing in the early third century A.D., Aelian recounts an old legend concerning the strange way in which the Greeks once honoured Homer, their most exalted poet:

Ptolemy Philopator built a temple to Homer. He set up a fine statue of the poet, and around it in a circle all the cities which claim Homer as theirs. The painter Galaton depicted Homer being sick, with the other poets drawing upon his vomit (Aelian 1997: *Historical Miscellany*, XIII 22)²

Some fifteen centuries later, Rosenkranz would introduce the same story into his *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, with rather more detail:

¹ This article is based on a paper presented by the author at *Disgust*, the eighth *Skepsi* conference held at the University of Kent, 29–30 May 2015.

² It is here hard not to be reminded of a well-known tradition related by Athenaeus about 'the comment by the noble and distinguished Aeschylus, who used to claim that his own tragedies were steaks cut from Homer's great banquets' (Athenaeus 2007–12: *The learned banqueters*, 8.347e).

[...] selbst eine komische Wendung ist möglich, wie [...] in jenem Gemälde einer griechischen Vase, wo Homer, auf einem Polsterbett hingestreckt, sich in ein am Boden stehendes Gefäß erbricht. Eine weibliche Gestalt, die Poesie, hält ihm das göttliche Haupt. Um das Gefäß herum stehen eine Menge Zwergfiguren, die eifrig das Ausgebrochene wieder zum Munde führen. Es sind die spätern griechischen Dichter, die von dem zynisch weggeworfenen Überfluß des großen Poeten sich ernähren. Auch eine Apotheose Homers! (Rosenkranz 2007: 301)

[[...] even a comical turn is possible, like [...] in a Greek vase painting, where Homer, reclining on a couch, vomits into a vessel standing on the floor. A female form, Poetry, supports his divine head. Around the vessel are a crowd of dwarf-like figures, who eagerly put into their mouths what has been vomited up. They are the later Greek poets, who feed themselves with the cynically discarded excess of the great poet. This, too, is a Homeric apotheosis!]³

The description conjures up a curious image: the reclining poet, his head tenderly supported by the Muse, vomits profusely into a basin; the surrounding crowd of later Greek poets enthusiastically supping the vomit spewed forth, as if it were some choice and delightfully warm delicacy. What are we to make of this scene? Is the true wine of inspiration a poet's puke, the poetic act itself an exercise in obscene regurgitation? And where would this feast of vomitological poetics lead us, were we to give it any consideration? The philosophical understanding of what seizes us most profoundly in art has, after all, often found itself baffled by the force of disgust and, even where it has recognised this force, has been unwilling to accommodate it. For what distinguishes the disgusting is its assailing immediacy, its unavoidable *thereness* in a proximity at once too intimate to bear and yet too fascinating to escape.

The historical achievement of Karl Rosenkranz and his 1853 *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* is to confer, explicitly and for the first time, a measured dignity within the philosophy of art upon the ugly and, within the sprawling taxonomy he gives that phenomenon, also upon the particularly visceral form of the ugly that is the disgusting. Rosenkranz argues that if art is a form in which our being at home in the world is expressed, it has the right and indeed the duty not just not to look away from the ugly but rather to seek it out; so the philosopher must too, like Dante, descend into the 'Hell of the Beautiful', if he is to attain comprehension of the aesthetic. I shall, therefore, follow Rosenkranz's descent into this Hell, where:

[d]ie Schrecken der Unform und der Mißform, der Gemeinheit und der Scheußlichkeit umringen uns in zahllosen Gestalten von pygmäenhaften Anfängen bis zu jenen riesigen Verzerrungen, aus denen die infernale Bosheit zähnefletschend uns angrinst. In diese Hölle des Schönen wollen wir hier niedersteigen (*ÄdH*: 11).

[the terrors of shapelessness and misshapeness, commonness and hideousness surround us in countless forms, from their pygmy-like beginnings to those gigantic distortions out of which infernal evil grins at us with bared teeth. It is our intention to descend into this Hell of the Beautiful.]

³ Translations from Rosenkranz are the author's, except where otherwise indicated. From here on, Rosenkranz will be cited thus: (*ÄdH*).

The question I shall pose in this article is whether disgust is, or even can be, understood in its full force within the paradigm of Idealist aesthetics. For if Rosenkranz makes a descent *ad infernos*, he does so only in the steadfast assurance that he will rise again; although he acknowledges that the shapelessness, incorrectness and disfigurement whereby ugliness expresses itself are more than the mere absence of the beautiful and have a redoubtable negative force of their own, they are nevertheless only to be accorded the rights of second-class citizens in the realm of the beautiful, a secondary element folded into and subordinate to the Idea's sensuous appearance.

Notwithstanding this, ugliness can, says Rosenkranz, afford pleasure and does so in not one but two ways:

Auf gesunde Weise, wenn das Häßliche in der Totalität eines Kunstwerks sich als eine relative Notwendigkeit rechtfertigt und durch die Gegenwirkung des Schönen aufgehoben wird. Nicht das Häßliche als solches bewirkt dann unser Wohlgefallen, sondern das Schöne, welches den Abfall von sich, der auch zur Erscheinung kommt, überwindet. [...] Auf krankhafte Weise, wenn ein Zeitalter physisch und moralisch verderbt ist, für die Erfassung des wahrhaften, aber einfachen Schönen der Kraft entbehrt und noch in der Kunst das Pikante der frivolen Korruption genießen will (*ÄdH*, 55–56).

[In a healthy way, when the ugly justifies itself as a relative necessity in the totality of an artwork and is cancelled out by the counteraction of the beautiful. Not the ugly as such causes our pleasure then, but the beautiful overcoming its apostasy, which also appears. [...] In a pathological way, when an era is physically and morally depraved, powerless to register true but simple beauty, still wishing to enjoy in art what is piquant in frivolous corruption (2015: 54)]

As an element contained in the composition of the beautiful, the ugly affords us a healthy pleasure; yet where the ugly and 'what is piquant in frivolous corruption' it promises are pursued for themselves, such a pursuit turns sick, and consumes like a disease the beautiful embodiment of the Idea that is the work of art.

This distinction between the healthy and the sick shows that Rosenkranz remains caught in affirming an always-already established primacy of the beautiful. Yet it is precisely in his time — Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* would be published a mere four years after Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics* — that the internal development of art begins to challenge this primacy in earnest. Through a reading Rimbaud's sonnet *Venus Anadyomène*, the eponymous subject of which is notoriously 'belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus [*hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus*]', I shall argue that where the disgusting in art, as a to be determined paradigmatic form of the ugly, is understood in its proper force, we find ourselves compelled to reconsider and rethink, if not altogether abandon, the Idealist understanding of art as the sensuous appearance of the Idea.

1. The centrality of aesthetics to Idealism

First, however, it is appropriate to recall briefly why aesthetics should have become the passionate preoccupation of Idealism it is. For it has historically not always been obvious that aesthetic experience should constitute a *philosophical* problem, let alone what it became to Idealism: a key to the questions at the heart of philosophy itself. Kant for one would have been baffled if upon the appearance of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he should have been told that a concern for the beautiful, at this juncture altogether absent from his critical project, should furnish the means to point beyond the seemingly insurmountable antinomies of finite reason and provide an intimation, however hesitant and however inscribed in our inescapable need to see the world in a certain light, rather than in the world itself, of the super-sensible substrate of nature and freedom. Yet this intimation of the super-sensible is precisely what Kant, for all his Enlightenment aversion to *Schwärmerei* [enthusiasm], comes to affirm as the keystone of critical philosophy.

The phenomenal world, as the first *Critique* demonstrates, cannot be conceived of other than as a causally determined whole; yet critically, we cannot show that causal determinism extends beyond the realm of the senses, and so it must be at least conceivable that it does not rule out freedom in the noumenal realm, of which we cannot have knowledge. Already the second *Critique* goes well beyond this epistemological modesty; here our own practical reason imposes on us the duty to obey the moral law, but this duty would make no sense whatsoever if we were not also free in fact to fulfil it. That we *ought* to, Kant famously argues, implies that we *can* do so. If this holds good, then the freedom we, as moral agents, enjoy is not merely not ruled out but is conceptually established as a precondition for us to have moral intuitions at all; it is, in Kant's bold phrase, a fact of reason. With that, however, the question how the causally determinate nature of the phenomenal world and our duty to actualise our noumenal freedom in that world might be thought together become pressing. It is this question, and not merely the desire to discuss yet another subject matter which happens not yet to be discussed in critical philosophy, that pushes Kant to investigate the beautiful. For it is the beautiful which, by exhibiting a structure of purposiveness without determinate purpose, sets our faculties of understanding and imagination in free play and thus hints that the world, which on the one hand is a causally determined whole, is nevertheless there for us and for the realization of our moral purposes. As Kant says:

Da es aber die Vernunft auch interessiert, daß die Ideen auch objektive Realität haben, i.e. daß die Natur wenigstens eine Spur zeige oder einen Wink gebe, sie enthalte in sich irgend einen Grund, eine gesetzmäßige Übereinstimmung ihrer Produkte zu unserem, von allem Interesse

unabhängigen Wohlgefallen (welches wir a priori für jedermann als Gesetz erkennen, ohne dieses auf Beweisen gründen zu können) anzunehmen: so muß die Vernunft an jeder Äußerung der Natur von einer dieser ähnlichen Übereinstimmung ein Interesse nehmen (Kant 2009: AA 5:300).

[But since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) also have objective reality, i.e., that nature should at least show some trace or give a sign that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize a priori as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. (Kant 2002: 5:300)]

While Kant consistently hedges about such claims with caveats, assuring us that the glimpse of the super-sensible which the beautiful affords always remain within a logic of ‘as if’, part of our subjective grasp of the world rather than the world itself, regulative rather than constitutive, his Idealist offspring have no such qualms. For our purposes here it suffices to recall in the briefest of terms that to the young Schelling it is in aesthetic intuition and only there that the Absolute manifests itself fully; the work of art, as the determined presentation of the indeterminate, is the one true and eternal revelation we can recognise, and it reaches beyond where philosophy itself can go, into the direct yet infinitely rich, infinitely varied apprehension of the super-sensible. Hegel, for his part, may mark his distance from Romanticism by denying that the sensuous form of art can ever be an altogether adequate and final presentation of the Idea, which is properly at home only in the medium of conceptual thought; yet for him no less, art is at home in the realm of absolute spirit, and the truth which sensuously shines out from it outstrips the distinctions and contradictions that riddle the finite understanding.

The question of the beautiful is thus situated at the heart of Idealist philosophy, and its solution promises not merely an intimation but the assurance of our freedom at home with ourselves in this world. With this, the primary locus of the aesthetic shifts from nature, as a mere reflection of human spirit, to spirit itself as manifest in the work of art; and the work of art is no longer seen as occasioning one particular experience and thus tied to a particular experiencing subject but as presenting the self-assertion of spirit as such and as a whole. The work of art does not provoke or report on a hint of our being at one with the super-sensible but is a particular form of self-knowledge constituted in and articulated through sensuous appearance and, as such, is not an incidental but an essential step in affirming who we are.

2. The ugly in general and the disgusting in particular as aesthetic categories

Now that we have a clearer grasp of why the beautiful should have become a crucial philosophical question in Idealism, how do we approach that which resists, denies, or subverts the beautiful? What can be done in the categories now established to grasp the ugly and, within

the broad phenomenon of the ugly, to grasp its perhaps most salient manifestation, the disgusting, as that particular form of ugliness which fills us with visceral repugnance and is yet an odd attraction? The free yet harmonious play of our faculties of which Kant speaks cannot account for it, and from this perspective ugliness cannot be more than a privation of beauty. Disgust fares yet worse, for insofar as it is at least in part a physical sensation it is, like our desire for the sensible tickle of delicate food, a topic for anthropology rather than aesthetics.

Yet the post-Kantian image of art, in which it appears not merely as the source of a subject's particular experience but, in full-blown terms, as the sensuous auto-constitution of the Absolute, is not only more accommodating of the ugly but also demands it. Nor is this merely the case because there can be no beauty without ugliness and so, as a contrasting pair, the one stands in need of the other for its existence, if it is to become visible and carry any meaning. This is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far; in this way beauty and ugliness are merely contrasted externally, and yet such an external contrast can have no meaning from the perspective of the beautiful as the sensuous appearance of the idea in its totality; for the more the work succeeds at this particular form of constitution of self-knowledge, the more it is beautiful, and neither needs nor benefits from an outside contrast.

The necessity of the inclusion of the ugly must thus, Rosenkranz argues, have deeper grounds; they lie in the essence of the Idea itself (see *ÄdH*: 43). In its sensuous appearance the Idea must be expressed in its totality. An essential element of the essence of the Idea is that it leaves the existence of its appearance free and thus allows for the possibility of the negative. Our lives are filled with a chaotic crisscrossing of the accidental, of brute drives, of caprice and passion, all of which demand to be reflected, but receive, in the unity of the work of art, an organising principle. If art is to present the Idea not in a merely one-sided fashion but represent nature and spirit in their full dramatic depth, then it must include the negative. However, precisely because it is negative, the ugly remains secondary to beauty, for the beautiful on its own can be art, while the ugly only has its place in a larger economy in art where it is opposed, contained, and overcome by the beautiful.

This principle in place, Rosenkranz provides us with an elaborate taxonomy of the ugly. Of interest to us here is above all the disgusting, which he categorizes as a type of *Deformation* [disfigurement], namely one that is *widrig* [repugnant] and, more specifically, *scheußlich* [abhorrent]. Within the abhorrent, one finds the ideal form of *das Abgeschmackte* [the tasteless] which consists of negation of the understanding; disgust, on the contrary, is the real form that

negates physical beauty of shape through putrefaction; in this sense, it is the sensuously absurd, a reversal of the order of life over death, or the idea of death grotesquely imitating life.

Könnte man eine große Stadt, wie Paris, einmal umkehren, so daß das Unterste zu Oberst käme und nun nicht bloß die Jauche der Kloaken, sondern auch die lichtscheuen Tiere zum Vorschein gebracht würden, die Mäuse, Ratten, Kröten, Würmer, die von der Verwesung leben, so würde dies ein entsetzlich ekelhaftes Bild sein (*ÄdH*: 295).

[If one were to turn upside down a great city like Paris, so that its lowest parts would come out on top, and not merely the filth of the sewers would be made manifest, but also the creatures that shy away from daylight, the mice, the rats, the toads, the worms who live off of all that is putrid, this would be a horrifyingly disgusting image.]

Despite Rosenkranz's obvious relish for the vileness of this description, however, it is his yet greater love for philosophical category-mongering which precludes for him the possibility of recognising in it something akin to the sublime. For, unlike the relative isolation in which the analytic of the sublime stands within Kant's aesthetics — it does not form a genuine part of the programme of a critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, and testifies only to the sovereignty of the subject, not to its being at home in the world, Rosenkranz reintegrates the sublime by making both it and the agreeable two sub-forms of beauty. Sublime beauty is negated in its lofty nobility by what is base or common; the agreeably beautiful by the disagreeable or repugnant. It is this a priori exclusion of any notion of sublimity from the field of disgust which critically blinds Rosenkranz to the potential aesthetic force of the disgusting. Yet it is precisely this possibility which Rimbaud would explore and exploit a couple of decades later.

3. Rimbaud's challenge

The particular strength of fascination which the polluted, the rotten, and the revolting exercise upon the febrile imagination of French verse of the second half of the nineteenth century provides Rosenkranz's aesthetics of ugliness with a crucial challenge. Baudelaire's infamous 'Une charogne' no doubts leads the way; but Baudelaire's taste for putrefaction, genuine though it be, here serves ironically only to rescue the all-too perishable beauty of the world from its destruction, and thus testifies, in a way by no means exceeding the Horation *aere perennius*, to the imperishable splendour of his verse: it is the poet who can exclaim 'j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine / De mes amours décomposés [*I have kept the divine form and essence / of my decomposed loves*]' (Baudelaire 1963: 47, 46).

In Rimbaud's *Venus Anadyomène*, on the contrary, it is not in contrast with and in spite of the irredeemable corruption of the world but precisely in and through it that the poet touches the divine. Not only does this invert the hierarchy of what perishes and what is eternal in beauty,

but it does so not incidentally but by usurping both the most classical of images of the beautiful
— Aphrodite herself rising from the sea — and the most classical of verse forms, the sonnet:

Venus Anadyomène

Comme d'un cercueil vert en fer blanc, une tête
De femme à cheveux bruns fortement pommadés
D'une vieille baignoire émerge, lente et bête,
Avec des déficits assez mal ravaudés;

Puis le col gras et gris, les larges omoplates
Qui saillent; le dos court qui rentre et qui ressort;
Puis les rondeurs des reins semblent prendre l'essor;
La graisse sous la peau paraît en feuilles plates:

L'échine est un peu rouge, et le tout sent un goût
Horrible étrangement; on remarque surtout
Des singularités qu'il faut voir à la loupe...

Les reins portent deux mots gravés: CLARA VENUS;
—Et tout ce corps remue et tend sa large croupe
Belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus (Rimbaud 2005: 24).⁴

*[As from a green zinc coffin, a woman's
Head with brown hair heavily pomaded
Emerges slowly and stupidly from an old bathtub,
With bald patches rather badly hidden;*

*Then the fat gray neck, broad shoulder-blades
Sticking out; a short back which curves in and bulges;
Then the roundness of the buttocks seems to take off;
The fat under the skin appears in slabs:*

*The spine is a bit red; and the whole thing has a smell
Strangely horrible; you notice especially
Odd details you'd have to see with a magnifying glass...*

*The buttocks bear two engraved words: CLARA VENUS;
—And that whole body moves and extends its broad rump
Hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus (Rimbaud 2005: 25).]*

Crucial for grasping what is at stake here is that Rimbaud's poem, though clearly the inversion of a long poetic and pictorial tradition, cannot be assimilated into the non-threatening form of a mere parody. Rimbaud lampoons the sonnet form, but he was certainly not the first to do so — the anti-Petrarchan sonnet is almost as old as its Petrarchan model itself;⁵ he also lampoons a classical image: Venus rising from the sea is not merely an exemplar of beauty but erotic beauty itself in its divine form; but this divinity is not so much questioned as underlined by the horrifying fascination the spectacle of disgust provides.

⁴ *Venus Anadyomène* was written in 1870.

⁵ For example, this had already been done by none other than the man who first introduced the sonnet in French poetry, Clément Marot, roughly a contemporary of Rabelais. Indeed, outside of the sonnet form, Marot is more than happy to put his *blason* 'Du beau tétin' alongside its counterpart 'Du laid tétin'. Faced, in the latter, with a hideous nipple, the poet begs that he's not made to vomit: 'Laissez le là, ventre Saint Georges, / Vous me fairiez rendre ma gorge [Leave off, by the belly of St. George! / You'll make my stomach heave]' (Marot 2007: I, 454-56 [author's translation]).

What is at stake in Rimbaud is something altogether different from a mere negative counterpart of a nevertheless enduringly dominant idea of beauty; it is rather the brutal assertion that the disgusting is no less radiantly present in the aesthetic, that its force in all its repugnance not only equals but outdoes that of the merely beautiful. As Adorno comments:

Die harmonistische [denn Gleichgewicht-in-Spannung] Ansicht vom Häßlichen ist in der Moderne zu Protest gegangen. Ein qualitativ neues wird daraus. Die Anatomiegreuel bei Rimbaud und Benn, das physisch Widerwärtige und Abstoßende bei Beckett, die skatologischen Züge mancher zeitgenössischen Dramen haben mit der Bauernderbheit holländischer Bilder des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts nichts mehr gemein. Das anale Vergnügen und der Stolz der Kunst, überlegen es einzuverleiben, dankt ab; im Häßlichen kapituliert das Formgesetz als ohnmächtig (Adorno 1984: 75).

[The harmonistic conception of the ugly [i.e. the ugly as a counterpoint moment in the appearance of the beautiful] has been revoked in modernity. It becomes something qualitatively new. The horrors of anatomy in Rimbaud and Benn, the physically repugnant and repulsive in Beckett, the scatological traits of much contemporary drama have nothing in common any longer with the peasant coarseness of Dutch images of the seventeenth century. Anal pleasure and the pride art took in being able to incorporate it resign their task; faced with the ugly, the law of form surrenders in powerlessness (Adorno 2002: 46).]

But if this is true, Rimbaud's poem no longer merely represents an aesthetic event. Where the sensuous appearance of the idea fails as a form of construction of our self-knowledge as free and reconciled with the world, it must on Idealist grounds be the Idea itself that has failed. That freedom as part of a harmonious and moral whole which the experience of beauty promised is not achieved; it is unmasked as violent caprice, unrecognised and unreconciled, the ground on which the light of beauty is built and which threatens at all times to re-emerge from its hiding place and engulf the world.

Why is it, however, we may ask in conclusion, that if ugliness, understood not merely as a contained moment in the manifestation of the beautiful but as an autonomous force in its own right which breaks through attempts at its dialectical neutralisation, poses a deadly threat to the reformulation of Idealist aesthetics which Rosenkranz undertakes, why is it that, if this is the case, it should be particularly in the guise of the disgusting that this autonomous force manifests itself most strongly and clearly? It was shown earlier that the schemata of Rosenkranz's thought lead him to deny the disgusting any link to the sublime; it is opposed not to the nobly and divinely radiant but to beauty in its merely pleasant and pleasurable shape. This Rimbaud's darkly fascinating goddess unmask as an error or, perhaps worse, a self-comforting illusion. But in what does the sublimity of disgust reside?

Adorno, who broadly speaks here of the ugly, but whose remarks on the scatologically and anatomically repugnant are for all that unambiguously angled at the disgusting, hints that 'the law of form surrenders in powerlessness'. Despite Rosenkranz's attempt at re-absorbing the sublime under the beautiful, it is clear that the sublime even in its positive form in Kantian

aesthetics is precisely that which refuses form, because it exceeds any boundary of conceivability. Yet the disgusting such as it is encountered here is of a modality which radically diverges from that of the raging waves of the dark sea or that of the brooding height of mountains. For the disgusting manifests itself in, or in reference to, what Idealist aesthetics exalts as the highest form for the work of art to take: the human body, seen as the sensuous appearance of spirit in its sovereign freedom. It is not the merely ugly body, the lame Hephaestus, at whose hobbling about the gods erupt in mirth and forget their strife, but the sublimely disgusting refusal of form we find in the diseased, broken, and putrid body and the excretions it leaks forth which most fundamentally subverts the idea of sovereignly free spirit in the sensuous realm.

If this be so, then the visceral fascination which accompanies disgust lies perhaps in the unspoken, unconscious realisation it provokes that, for all human pretention to rise above the chaotic maelstrom of the material world, our sheer corporality is not so easily laid aside; try as we might, it will not cease from revolting against our sovereignty, and makes a mockery of it by reminding us of a truth we cannot disavow: *tat tvam asi* – that thou art.

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