" Standing at the Very Edge of the Infinite”: Beauty, Transcendence and the Modern Kalliphobic Rebellion

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Beauty, Transcendence and the Modern Kalliphobic Rebellion

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between the experience of beauty and intuitions of transcendence. The first two chapters explore the role that natural beauty plays in humans' existential ruminations, finding an intimate connection between beauty and belief in transcendent realities. The final three chapters examine the post-WWII turn away from beauty in fine art, and argue that this turn is intimately connected with a broader turn away from transcendent horizons in the wake of the second World War, e.g. that seen in Rawlsian Liberalism. Finally, an argument is developed that a culture without transcendence and beauty is unlikely to thrive in the long run, and so the postwar turn against same should be carefully, soberly abandoned.

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Introduction

An experience of beauty is an experience of transcendence. For most thinkers in the Western philosophical canon, this hardly needs to be argued for. It is taken up with confidence in the writings of Plato, Augustine, Plotinus, Bonaventure and countless other pre-modern thinkers, and comes to particularly furious flower in the intellectual aftermath of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Hegel, speaking for many of his contemporaries, assigns beautiful art the task of "bringing to our minds and expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit." For the phalanx of Romantic artists and Idealist philosophers who followed Hegel, beauty was both a sacrament of sorts and a cultural-political weapon to be brandished, more or less violently, against what they saw as a desiccating modern rationalism and world-wrecking industrialization, the two of which had conspired to produce a cruel novelty: "a nature shorn of the divine."[1]

As so many others have, these modern thinkers contrasted their own dystopic present with a pre-modern utopia in which "Man acknowledged a higher nobility in Nature / To press her to love's breast", a world in which "Everything to the initiate's eye / Showed the trace of a God."[2] Schiller, Hölderlin, Fichte and their counterparts in the

[1] Friedrich Schiller, quoted in Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1975), 26-7

[2] Ibid.

Anglophone world succeeded in mitigating the Enlightenment project of disenchanting and instrumentalizing the material world. The Romantic view answers to some deep longings of the human heart – for harmonious unity with nature, the Divine, one's fellow man, etc. – and as we will see below, is in fact better phenomenology than a mechanized Newtonian weltanschauung. As a result, it has remained a small but persistent part of the Western cultural DNA. It can be detected in Evelyn Underhill's immensely popular 1911 book *Mysticism,* where Underhill argues that to the sensitive eye, "hints of a marvelous truth, a unity whose note is ineffable peace, shine in created things."[3] Or the literary critic Graham Hough's description of "that unified apprehension of nature, and of ourselves as part of nature, which can fairly constantly be recognized . . . not only as that which gives value to aesthetic experience but also as one of the major consolations of philosophy."[4] The Romantic vision has seeped even into popular culture. In the 5-Oscar-winning 1999 film *American Beauty*, the quasi-mystic character of Ricky Fitts sees a discarded plastic bag blowing – or rather, he says, dancing – in the wind, declares it the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, and comes to a dramatic conclusion: "I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid, ever."

But if Ricky Fitts's epiphany sounds a little jejune to educated ears, that's telling. The Romantic victory has been only a very partial one. Whatever it may or may not capture about human experience, its intellectual bona fides are fiercely contested, and a strong, institutionally powerful counter-wave views it as a symptom of soft-headedness, or worse. If many have experienced, and even still do experience, beauty as a sturdy rung

[3] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 4th ed., 1912), 87.
[4] Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (London: Duckworth, 1960), 176.

on the ladder of spiritual ascent, this view is no longer sanctioned at the upper reaches of intellectual and cultural life, especially now, after the world has learned, for instance, that the guards of Nazi concentration camps compelled their Jewish prisoners to perform Beethoven for them, as an evening respite from the labors of genocide.[5]

Given these realities – given, they would say, the fractured nature of reality itself – many postwar thinkers and artists have considered the very creation and enjoyment of beauty to be irresponsible escapism, a failure to confront the wild disorder of nature red in tooth, claw, bullet and barbed wire. "To write poetry after Auschwitz," the Marxist critic Theodor Adorno famously writes, "is barbaric."[6] To be realistic, Adorno's dictum has in no time or place been fully embraced – at least not in actual practice – and its sway over the worlds of contemporary art and letters is far from complete. But its deep human rationale – that subterranean level where an ethical principle finds its mate in pre-existing human needs, fears, desires, etc. – remains vital, and indeed powerful in our present day. We still live, seven decades after V-J Day, in a distinctly postwar world. On an intellectual and even emotional level, there is much to be said both for and against this phenomenon, which the philosopher of art Arthur Danto has dubbed "kalliphobia" – the intentional abstention from creating or enjoying beauty[7] – but it first needs to be seen for the novelty that it is.

Writing in 1927 about the intellectual atmosphere of the pre-WWI 20th century, the Harvard professor George Santayana reminisces:

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[5] Lamberti, Marjorie. "Making Art in the Terezin Concentration Camp." *New England Review (1990-)* 17, no. 4 (1995): 104-11. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/40243120.
[6] Rothberg, Michael. "MODERNISM "AFTER AUSCHWITZ"." In *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, 17-24. University of Minnesota Press, 2000. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv6p4.6.
[7] Arthur Danto, "The Abuse of Beauty" in *Daedalus*, Vol. 131, No. 4, "On Beauty" (Fall, 2002)

> "We were not very much later than Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold. Our atmosphere was that of poets and persons touched with religious enthusiasm or religious sadness. Beauty (which mustn't be mentioned now) was then a living presence, or an aching absence, day and night."[8]

Santayana paints an attractive picture, and draws salutary connections between religious and aesthetic inclinations that we will unpack in depth below. But like many elegiac recollections, it draws too sharp a line between the golden past and the fallen present. The most incisive part of Santayana's recollection is his observation about what can and cannot be "mentioned" now – specifically in the polite environs of a place like Cambridge, Massachusetts. But he is too profligate in his use of the past tense; beauty is still now very much a live presence in our lives, and its absence still aches. The difference is that for a significant subset of late-modern Westerners, our natural, human – probably ineradicable – attraction to beauty is now a vice to be resisted. This prohibition has driven a wedge between how *bien pensant* sophisticates are *supposed* to feel, and how they actually feel.

How they actually feel is roughly how humans have always felt – they love and are attracted to beauty. Directors of symphonies know that contemporary compositions (which are much more likely to eschew beauty on philosophical grounds) must be wedged between pieces by Beethoven and Haydn. If they are not, concert-goers will intentionally arrive late or leave early, to avoid taking their medicine. My home town of Boston contains a prominent physical example. During the can-do boom of the postwar fifties, Boston's historic West End neighborhood was declared, against the protests of its working-class residents, a blight. The neighborhood was subsequently razed in the name

[8] Quoted in Arthur Danto, "The Abuse of Beauty" in *Daedalus*, Vol. 131, No. 4, "On Beauty" (Fall, 2002), p 38

of urban renewal, and in its place was installed the eleven-acre City Hall Plaza, crowned by a newly constructed City Hall, a sort of inverted concrete pyramid built in the modern "brutalist" style. The architects, Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, approached their commission with evangelical conviction. In an interview about the design of the plaza, architect Gerhard Kallmann said:

> "We distrust and have reacted against an architecture that is absolute, uninvolved and abstract. We have moved towards an architecture that is specific and concrete, involving itself with the social and geographic context, the program, and methods of construction, in order to produce a building that exists strongly and irrevocably, rather than an uncommitted abstract structure that could be any place and, therefore, like modern man— without identity or presence."

Kallman is not the first to bemoan the intellectual and spiritual homelessness of modern people; it is a long-standing lament among artists and intellectuals of various political stripes. So it seems philanthropic that when Kallman *et al.* sat down at the drafting table, they strove to conceive a public space that would be "specific and concrete," rejecting "absolute, uninvolved and abstract" architecture in order to restore "identity" and a sense of "presence" to modern Bostonians. Stated so abstractly, these goals seem commendable enough, and when City Hall Plaza, also known as Government Center, was completed, it was hailed as a masterpiece of architectural invention. In 1976 the American Institute of Architects voted City Hall the sixth greatest building in American history.

But how, exactly, are we to be returned to the specific and concrete from our exile in the absolute and abstract? In a September, 2009 interview, McKinnell recalled that when he and Kallman were told by the architect Philip Johnson that their proposed design was ugly, "we thought that was the greatest praise we could get." Reading between the lines, it seems that beauty is an agent of escape and unreality, whereas ugliness is the

opposite. This line of reasoning would be perfectly at home in Santayana's 1927 -when beauty couldn't be mentioned. But to a very significant degree, the feelings of present-day Bostonians would still be at home in Santayana's 1901. In pleasant weather, Boston Common and the Public Garden – classically beautiful public spaces – swarm with parents and children, strolling lovers, sun-bathers, and frisbee-players. City Hall Plaza is almost always deserted, and has come to be recognized by most observers, Bostonian or not, as a travesty of urban planning. (The Project for Public Spaces has named it the worst plaza in America).

There is something bracing, perhaps even heroic, about the muscular self-assertion of City Hall, but it self-consciously *not* beautiful, and demonstrably *not* a place where people want to spend their time. Why this pervasive kalliphobic didacticism? Why continue to draft aesthetic sermons that serve mainly to empty the church? The first thing to say is that the unpopularity of a sermon is no proof that it is mistaken. Perhaps Bostonians are cowardly and unwilling to look at deep, uncomfortable truths. Maybe kalliphilia is a vice, and kalliphobic elites are prophets in their own home towns. It is possible. There is no human community without some "official" moral commitments, and there is sometimes a mismatch between these commitments and the inclinations of the common people; the relationship between popular ethical practice and elite rule-codification is often a complex one. Sometimes moral innovations come top down, say, via scholastic deduction or religious revelation, while others come bottom-up, as common practice morphs, and intellectual elites conjure neologisms to tie new practices into existing theoretical systems. This dialectic between theory and practice not infrequently results in periods of real tension, where theory and practice are out of sync.

We live in one such period now, in regards to our aesthetic judgments. Kalliphobia is a top-down moral innovation that has not, up until now, been widely embraced. Adorno is correct that this innovation finds, if not its origins, then its definitive rationale, in the bleared, smeared, bare-trod dirt of Auschwitz.

After Auschwitz hammered its horrible nails into the coffin of traditional Western metaphysics, beauty seems to promise far more than it could possibly deliver. Beauty seems, as we will begin to explore in our chapter on Plato, to offer a foreshadowing, a hint of some ineffable, supra physical reality. But what if that promise is illusory, as Arendt seemed to discover when she surveyed the events of the 20th century? The atheist Camus captures this conflict well: "Beauty", he writes, "is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should like to stretch out over the whole of time."[9] Camus's position stops short of kalliphobia. He does not eschew beauty. He is a kalliphile – a lover of beauty – who rightly senses the spiritual core of aesthetic experience, but cannot bring (or allow) himself to believe that this core is real. For Camus, beauty might seem to open a small window to a realm beyond our finite, fragmented spatio-temporal existence, but every adult knows that things are not always how they sometimes seem.

The Kalliphobes, taking Adorno's dictum as marching orders, go further than Camus – the enjoyment of beauty is not just an exercise in self-delusion – it is barbaric.[10] There is a noble and profound emotional logic here. Adorno never expounds it at length, but somehow, that logic has resonated deeply and broadly. It feels right. To begin with,

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[9] Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942* (Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 65

[10] See, for example, Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*, explaining the continued dominance of Adorno's kalliphobia in German music: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/24/ghost-sonata

the kalliphobe rightly sees that our most powerful experiences of beauty are about more than well-assembled objects. “Beauty is,” the French writer Stendhal declares, “the promise of happiness.”[11] And he’s right. On a deep, subtle, usually-unarticulated level, a truly consoling experience of beauty contains at its core a granular intuition that “all will be well, and all manner of things will be well,” to borrow a phrase from Julian of Norwich. That serene peace that soaks through the chest as one becomes absorbed in a beautiful painting, or floats along the strains of a sonata, consoles entirely more than a mere pretty object should. In book 13 of his *Metaphysics,* Aristotle writes that the chief markers of beauty are “symmetry, order and definiteness.” It is true that these formal characteristics of an object just do please sense organs like the ones we have, but so do salt, garlic and soft blankets. Beauty is different – it is not just about itself. It is inherently referential, gesturing towards something more. The harmonious unity of a well-composed work of art promises, or at least suggests, that fragmentation is not the last word on existence.

And yet, what if it is? The post-metaphysical beholder of beauty knows that here and now it will sometimes be true that a mother must watch in agony as her young daughter is raped and tortured by hungry, exhausted invading soldiers; and yes, one of the most sophisticated, humane, cultivated nations on earth might, some time again, rise up and attempt the mass extermination of the Jewish people; and of course most romantic loves perish before actual death parts the lovers; in short, everything dies sooner or later, and sometimes it dies in horrible agony. And there’s no higher harmony that will make all of this carnage make sense. The kalliphobe sees all of this, and then she sees the lover

[11] Stendhal, *On Love (*Hesperus Press; 1St Edition, 2010), 17

of beauty reveling in the beauty of a concerto, luxuriating in the way that Bach simply makes everything seem alive, and unified, and full of joy. She is outraged and scornful.

Kalliphobia is, in large part, a sort of emotional rigorism, a call to feel responsibly, to forego consolation out of solidarity with the fragmented, disjointed nature of reality, and most especially the suffering of our brothers and sisters. We can find an important analog in Ivan Karamazov, the atheist brother in Fyodor Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov, his towering meditation – arguably *the* towering meditation – on modern faith and doubt. Ivan has made himself a student of human cruelty and misery, scanning the newspapers and cutting out the most appalling stories he can. After recounting a number of instances of child-torture, Ivan explains that he rejects God, not because God doesn't exist (he claims to be agnostic on this point) but because it would be morally intolerable to participate in any beautiful, perfect eschaton that required for its achievement a world where innocent children are tortured: "I absolutely renounce all higher harmony. It is not worth one little tear of even that one tormented child . . . I don't want harmony, for love of mankind I don't want it. I want to remain with unrequited suffering."[12] Adorno and his ilk, beholding the spectacles of no man's land and Auschwitz, suggest that all the world has become Ivan's scrap book. The reality of wickedness and fragmentation now impose themselves upon our consciousness so vividly that only willful ignorance can allow one to indulge in the pleasures of graceful artistic composition.

Kalliphobia is not, then, as some on the right would have it, mere cultural vandalism. In its more refined forms, it has a serious and humane point to make. It is

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[12] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: FSG, 1990), 245

important to note, however, that it is primarily an *ethical* point, not an epistemological or ontological one. That reality is wicked, and beauty therefore deceptive, are established before the conversation begins. What we talk about when we talk about aesthetics in an Adornian key is the application of an ethos, entailing a sort of aesthetic hygiene: what things are seemly and unseemly to make and look at, given what we all now know about the fundamental nature of reality. Anyone who has been forced, as Arendt was, to disown even the thinnest residue of metaphysical reassurance, simply cannot believe what beauty has to say, and so if she continues to revel in beauty, she is trafficking in cheap epicureanism – simply eating and drinking, because tomorrow we die. And in the grand scheme of things, kalliphobia and aesthetic epicureanism do have much in common. The kalliphobes simply think that decency demands we don sackcloth and ashes during the few days we have here. Either way, sorrow remains the final word. It's just a matter of how bravely and intently we want to gaze at it.

One lingering problem, however, is that our bodies are reticent to go where the zeitgeist directs them in this instance. We still feel drawn to beauty, and it still seems to speak, even if we turn as quickly as we can to shush its more extravagant promises. It is well worth asking whether this war between our minds and bodies can or should long continue. At the end of his speech about the suffering of children, Ivan Karamazov is accused by his monkish brother of rebelling against God. Ivan answers immediately, with feeling: "Rebellion? I don't like hearing such a word from you . . . One cannot live by rebellion, and I want to live."[13] In later chapters, we'll ask whether it is indeed possible to live by the Adornian rebellion, and if not, what hopes there might be for a decent,

[13] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 245

humane cessation of the struggle. The first step will be to ask some more basic questions about the human experience of beauty, and indeed metaphysics. Plato's *Symposium* will be of particular use in helping us to explore the primal human experiences of limitation, fragmentation and reconciliation that make beauty so shocking, and so important.

First, though, a brief word of clarification about our itinerary in this project. In her essay "What Went Wrong with the Concept of the Beautiful?" Agnes Heller capably describes how the "deconstruction of metaphysics" after Hegel led to the demise of the concept of the Beautiful. In sum, "when there is no One from which everything emanates then the traditional Idea of the Beautiful cannot be meaningfully employed."[14] In an assiduously post-metaphysical world (if that is indeed where we live) we will indeed have a difficult time describing what it is that all beautiful things share. This much seems clear enough to me, but I have no intention in joining Heller in arguing that "the Beautiful" itself cannot be meaningfully discussed without recourse to the idea of "the One." I have a parallel (and perhaps more radical) argument to make: It is impossible to *experience* beauty without experiencing the One. The human body – emotion and sense – gravitates towards a unifying transcendence as surely as the most analytical mind. This will, I think, begin to emerge in our examination of Plato, and be enriched by our examination of the deep rationale of kalliphobia.

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[14] Agnes Heller, *The Concept of the Beautiful* (Lexington Books, 2012), 33.

Chapter I: "Human Nature and Its Afflictions"

Plato's Symposium on Living in Time and Space

Plato's *Symposium* is set in the aftermath of a drunken debauch. The members of the party – a number of prominent Athenians – are sick and exhausted from the previous night, when they feted their friend Agathon for his victory in the city's annual drama competition. Thus addled, they can muster no desire for additional drunkenness, and agree instead to spend their evening dining, drinking moderately, and making speeches about the virtues of Eros, the Greek god of desire. The philosopher Socrates, alone in this hobbled group, would be willing and able to drink heavily. As the physician Eryximachus puts it, "Socrates can go either way, he will be content with whatever we do."[15]

This description of Socrates the contented begins to set the puzzle that will drive the dialogue towards its esoteric conclusion. Socrates, who is equally happy to plunge into drink or remain sober, seems at first glance the perfectly un-erotic man. Yet he will shortly declare that he has expert knowledge of "nothing but erotics."[16] How, if at all, do these two halves fit together? Why should persistent contentedness characterize a man whose only expertise rests in the knowledge of human desire? As we will see, Socrates is in fact the Platonic exemplar of eroticism, the character who has followed eros to its proper end. Plato, in the reading I will present, thinks that the experience of beauty, which both responds to and intensifies erotic attraction, contains intimations of a

[15] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. by Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 176C. All quotations from this edition, unless otherwise noted.
[16] *Symposium,* 177D.

transcendent, metaphysical reality. And he thinks that properly prosecuted, our erotic pursuit of beauty can put us in touch with that transcendent reality. It is here, if anywhere, that our deepest desires can be addressed, and our shallower eroticisms shown up as illusory, shallow, not to be pursued. However, before we can understand the deepest prescriptions of Eros, we must first attend to his diagnoses of our default condition. Aristophanes, the great comedic playwright and guest at the Symposium's table, begins his speech by telling the physician Eryximachus, who has just spoken of Eros as a healer, that one "must first understand human nature and its afflictions"[17], and do so through an examination of erotic desire. Aristophanes's mandate will set the first part of our itinerary.

We will use the Symposium, first, to explore the natural afflictions that are correlated to life in a spatio-temporal world. In the speech of Aristophanes we are confronted with the problem of space (alienation), and in the speech of Diotima, with the problem of time (disintegration). As we will see, these are two aspects of one experience: the fragmentation of life in a spatio-temporal world. Secondly, the Symposium will help us to see that some of our deepest human desires – most especially for interpersonal union and reproduction– are actually sublimated attempts to overcome these two aspects of fragmentation via combination and generation, respectively. Thirdly, we will see that it is the necessary futility of such attempts that motivates the *Symposium*'s ascent away from the spatio-temporal plane, in an attempted flight from fragmentation to unity, or put otherwise, from worldly complexity to other-worldly simplicity. Finally, we will provide

[17] *Symposium,*189D

a brief sketch of the key roles that beauty plays in this dialectic, focusing on beauty as composition, that is, as ideal balance between simplicity and complexity.

In this reading, the *Symposium* lays out a fundamental asymmetry between human desire and earthly experience, and paints this asymmetry as the existential seed-bed of metaphysical speculation. This calls for something other than a straightforward commentary on the *Symposium*: it is an effort, instead, that is hermeneutic, phenomenological and in an indirect way, polemical. It will draw freely from outside sources, both philosophical and literary. And it need not proceed systematically through the *Symposium*, but will focus instead on some key moments.[18]

We may begin with the obvious: none of us is Aristotle's un-needing, self-contemplating god. We want to have what we lack, and to be what we are not, and so we look for enrichment to lovers, friends, fame, piety, offspring, accomplishment, moral excellence, etc. Our existence is marked by a myriad of desires. But how, in the first place, do we come to be struck by desire? How do we first recognize our native poverty? Surely there are some fundamental desires – for sustenance, sex, shelter, etc. – that simply impose themselves upon us as embodied beings. An infant need not know what food is to feel hunger. And yet, without exposure to a desirable object, even these basic desires would remain somewhat inchoate – they are intensified and crystalized through the presence of a desirable object. If this is true for the desires that humans share with the rest of the animals, it is true *a forteriori* for the more rarefied, one might say spiritual desires that are interwoven with our simple, easily-satisfiable animal urges. These higher human desires are chiefly awakened through admiration of a desirable object.

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[18] For a systematic interpretation of the *Symposium*, see Allan Bloom's long essay "The Ladder of Love". Bloom reads the text differently than I do, but his analysis is searching and insightful.

Admiration, most basically, is a sort of relationship between admirer and admired, which carries with it an attendant pleasure – I simply enjoy the sight of a beautiful face, painting or landscape.

But if many desires develop as a result of admiration, admiration can exist with or without giving rise to desire, and admiration, moreover, necessarily involves maintaining distance. The possibility of un-erotic admiration will, as this dissertation progresses, prove absolutely central, but for now we'll concentrate exclusively on admiration that gives birth to desire – erotic admiration. Erotic admiration, whether directed towards a potential mate, a piece of food, or a neighboring kingdom, is a relationship of apprehension that is accompanied not just by pleasure, but also by an urge to possess the admired thing, in one way or another. This possessive urge finds its root in a desire to augment, or even complete, myself – to make up what I lack by somehow becoming one with my desideratum, somehow incorporating its admirable aspects into my own being. In so doing, I hope to enlarge and augment the sphere of my identity – to make myself better, fuller, more complete.

This incorporation can take different forms, depending on the object. A proper and complete possession of a piece of food is different than the proper and complete possession of a friend or lover or artwork or moral virtue. To confuse the various modes of incorporation is to do desire wrongly. In his speech in the *Symposium*, the Athenian legal expert Pausanias argues that if an erotic act is done "nobly and correctly, it proves to be noble, and if incorrectly, base."[19] He then denounces base lovers who seek to possess only the bodies of their lovers, and not their souls. Such a lecherous lover is to be

[19] *Symposium,* 181A

condemned for loving another person improperly, reducing her to a delectable piece of flesh. This sort of reductive incorporation is foolishly shallow, because it misidentifies and misuses the thing it desires. And so it fails; the possessor does not have the desired person or thing in any meaningful way. This is amateurish eroticism, the province, according to Pausanius, of "good-for-nothing human beings."[20]

Pausanius's argument here is thin but sufficient, because the men around the table are for the most part erotic novices, not amateurs. They know, from the previous night no less, what it is to be filled with the wine of mere sensual pleasure, and they are now ready for something richer and more sustaining. Pausanius, accordingly, praises lovers who desire their beloved for reasons both carnal and spiritual, and who therefore hope to spend their entire lives together, not just a few ecstatic minutes. This more comprehensive eroticism aims to have the whole beloved, not just a part. But while Pausanias gestures towards this more integral, respectful form of the incorporative urge, it will fall to his fellow dinner guests to crystallize it, and then to mark its limitations.

Based on the order in which they were seated around the table, the great comedic playwright Aristophanes ought to have followed Pausanias. However, just as he was to begin speaking, Aristophanes becomes afflicted with hiccups, and asks the physician Eryximachus either to cure him of his hiccups or take his place. Eryximachus prescribes sneezing as a fix (perhaps a winking parallel to orgasm?) and then volunteers to make his speech while Aristophanes applies it. The doctor goes on to prescribe the strongest earthly cure to the afflictions that will be dramatized in what follows: virtuosic composition. This cure will, in the end, be shown up as inadequate, a mere springboard to

[20] *Symposium,*181B

the real, supra-physical panacea. The change in speaking order reflects this – it serves to mitigate the force of Eryximachus's prescription. Lest the reader really believe that Eryximachus has the cure for the fragmentation that Aristophanes will soon describe, we are given the proposed cure first, and then, in a much more compelling presentation, a picture of the wound that neither Aristophanes nor Plato trust Eryximachus's version of eros to cure.

For Eryximachus, Eros is a force that binds together conflicting elements. In medicine, for instance, it binds together bodily elements that are naturally in conflict. Eros makes "the things that are most at enmity in the body into friends and [makes] them love one another. The most opposite things are the most at enmity: cold and hot, bitter and sweet, dry and moist, and anything of the sort."[21] Properly functioning eros holds these opposite elements in a healthy equilibrium, by modifying each of the extremes, making them harmonious rather than dissonant. In fact, despite his profession, Eryximachus' principal image for the work of Eros is musical rather than medical. He discusses antagonistic elements in terms of disparate musical tones:

> " . . . from the prior difference between the high and the low, there arises from their later agreement a harmony by means of the art of music; for there surely would no longer be a harmony from high and low notes while they were differing with each other; for harmony is consonance, and consonance is a kind of agreement. But it is impossible to derive agreement from differing things as long as they are differing; and it is impossible, in turn, to fit together the differing or nonagreeing – just as rhythm arises from the fast and the slow, from their prior state of difference and their subsequent agreement."[22]

So the composer works by modifying high tones and low tones, so that they may be joined in harmonious friendship. He takes radically differing things, and changes them in

[21] *Symposium,*186D
[22]*Symposium,* 187B

order to forge agreement. The craft of composition will become more important later in our discussion. For now, though, we move on to Aristophanes's delayed intervention.

The justly famous speech of the great comedian begins with a farcical but evocative myth of human origins, in which each human being originally had four arms, four legs, two heads, two sets of genitals, etc. There were male-male combinations, female-female combinations and male-female combinations. These massive, spherical creatures were, however, too powerful, and the gods, fearing revolt, decided to split each ur-human into two pieces. We bipedal humans are each products of this split – a heterosexual individual is half of an original male-female being, and a homosexual is half of an original male-male or female-female being. The visual comedy of this myth is balanced by an emotional tragedy. This primal cleavage has left a sharp, persistent ache.

This loss, felt but not understood, accounts for the fact that, according to Aristophanes, none of us quite knows what we want from our lovers, however strongly we long for them. He scoffs at the idea that our real desideratum is mere sex. Rather, he says, "the soul of each plainly wants something else. What it is, it is incapable of saying, but it divines what it wants and speaks in riddles."[23] What we each want, finally, is to find and be rejoined with our other halves, to once again "become one from two."[24] But as we will unpack below, this is much easier desired than realized, and in lieu of actual reunion, impossible on earth, we've been given sex as consolation. After the initial sundering, Aristophanes explains, humans' genitals were placed on their backs, so that the lovers' embrace disallowed sexual intercourse. This arrangement led to mass starvation, as the lovers refused to disentangle themselves long enough to eat. Zeus took pity, and moved

[23] *Symposium,* 192C-D
[24] *Symposium,* 193E

their genitals to the front, so that sexual reproduction could take place between a man and a woman, and so that regardless of the lovers' genders, "there might at least be satiety in their being together; and they might pause and turn to work and attend to the rest of their livelihood."[25]

Since we have no reliable way of finding or identifying our other half, and since sex is clearly not all we want, Aristophanes counsels fealty to the gods. If we are sufficiently pious, he suggests, Eros will "lead us to our own." Aristophanes does not seem very sanguine about this possibility, and concedes that the very best thing we can hope for here on earth is union with "a favorite whose nature is to one's taste."[26] And yet, he offers the further speculation that Eros might, sometime in the future, have even more to offer us. He might not simply lead us to "a favorite," but to our true other halves, and if we are sufficiently pious, he might "restore us to our ancient nature and by his healing make us blessed and happy."[27]

Aristophanes' beautiful, evocative myth undeniably strikes a nerve. It vividly illustrates the unitive urge, which is especially powerful in the realm of romantic attraction – the Hebrew and Christian traditions, for instance, use the image of two lovers becoming "one flesh." But while sexual desire is perhaps the cardinal example, the unitive urge is broad as it is deep. The desire for union with one's beloved, to begin with, is not confined to our physical relations. As Aristotle reminds us in the first line of the *Metaphysics*, all men by nature desire to know, and in a romantic context, we desire to fully know and understand, to be fully known and understood. In fact, the physical and

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[25] *Symposium,*191C
[26] *Symposium,*193C
[27]*Symposium,* 193D

psychic desires are profoundly intertwined. The Judeo-Christian tradition, to reference it again, refers to sexual consummation as coming to "know" one's spouse. Aristophanic lovers in the grips of desire want comprehensive incorporation – they want their souls to be joined as tightly as their bodies.

The Unitive urge is, to push further outward, not confined to the relations of romantic partners. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes of a deep sense of primal separation, matched by the individual's deep desire, manifest in Dionysiac revelry, to break apart "the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or 'impudent fashion' have established between human beings" and to feel oneself "not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbor, but quite literally one with him . . ."[28] Nietzsche's sense of alienation was surely fortified by his reading of Schopenhauer, and both of these thinkers can be read as products of the anti-enlightenment movement that began among German Idealist philosophers like Fichte (whose lectures Schopenhauer attended while studying in Berlin). The German Idealists, and their literary brethren the Romantics, were repulsed by materialist, mechanized weltanschauung that emerged from Newton's physics. They argued that the Newtonian eye was blind to authentic mystery, and to the spiritual communion between humanity and nature. Schiller wrote of this new godless nature: "Like the dead stroke of the pendulum / She slavishly obeys the law of gravity, / A Nature shorn of the divine."[29] The earnest desire of Schiller and his cohort was that the individual, in Charles Taylor's formulation, "be united in communion with nature, that his self-feeling (*Selbstgefuhl*) unite with a sympathy (*Mitgefuhl*) for all life,

[28] Nietzsche, BoT, 18
[29] Taylor, *Hegel,* 27

and for nature as living."[30] If all of this is correct, the unitive urge, the desire to be joined with people and / or things around us, is a deep-seated and wide-ranging part of the human experience. The feeling that one is incomplete, alienated from some native unity, underlies many of our most powerful desires.

If Aristophanes's speech is one of the most moving and enduring passages of the *Symposium*, it is also among the most tragic. By setting our ideal telos well beyond the realm of mundane possibility, by rightly depicting erotic desire as a longing for total fusion with one's lover, Aristophanes dramatizes a lingering sense of incompleteness that survives even the most intimate earthly unions. This is the existential affliction that comes with a spatial existence: alienation. Aristophanes's lovers cannot, save possibly by divine intervention, achieve the comprehensive union that they so deeply desire. The stubborn borders of the body are clear enough, but alienation is not merely a matter of physiology – both the physical and intellectual portions of the lovers' longing are destined to be frustrated. Whatever our attempts at mutual transparency, the deep recesses of a lover's psyche must remain forever obscure, glimpsed from time to time, but never fully or finally apprehended.

If the affliction of space persists between lovers, it is present a forteriori between Nietzsche's "Dionysiac enthusiasts" who find that the dark, seemingly dense core of communal intoxication is actually a void. As Nietzsche puts it, "from highest joy there comes a cry of horror or a yearning lament at some irredeemable loss."[31] Precisely in these moments of intense communality, it suddenly seems as if nature itself "had cause to

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[30] Taylor, *Hegel, 25*

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21

sigh over its dismemberment into individuals."[32] In fact, the problem of alienation spins further and further outward, covering vast tracts of human experience. If we cannot finally, definitively know the humans around us, neither can we finally know anything else. As Leszek Kolakowski writes: "There is no absolutely transparent distance (let alone abolition of distance) between us and the world, no cognitive void whereby the world, in its undistorted shape, could reach and enter our inner space."[33] The other will remain other, despite our physical, emotional, intellectual attempts to grasp it. Albert Camus, like many others, sees a symbol of this alienation in the vastness of our spatial environment. At the end of his short story "The Guest" Camus writes: "Daru looked at the sky, the plateau and, beyond it, the invisible lands stretching out to the sea. In this vast country which he had loved, he was alone."[34] Such vistas can strike one as a sensible symbol of the space that persists between us and our desideratum, the ineradicable otherness of the world, our corresponding loneliness within it. Space seems to decree that the deepest, headiest hopes of lovers, revelers, romantics and philosophers will always remain elusive.

This decree is indeed binding, because our sense of alienation springs from fundamental facts of our physical and psychological constitution. There is, in the Aristophanic lover, a deep tension between the individual's desires for personal integrity, and for interpersonal penetration. The two urges are, generally speaking, at odds. It is not without philosophical resonance that orgasm has been referred to as *le petit mort*, the little death. In its most intense iterations, the ascent to orgasm is an increasingly intense

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[32] Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 21
[33] Leszek Kolakowski, "The Death of Utopia Reconsidered" *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 232
[34] Albert Camus, "The Guest" in *Exile and the Kingdom,* (Penguin Classics, 2010), 121

clenching together of the lovers. At the height of this clenching, one's whole self seems to be channeled towards a single, concentrated point of contact with the lover. This point, where the lovers comingle, becomes everything, a temporary contraction and crystallization not just of the self, but, it seems, of the cosmos. Nothing else matters, least of all considerations of what is mine and what is yours. Discretion, the holding back of oneself, the preservation of privacy, evaporates – indeed, any hint of it would seem like a betrayal. The ecstatic blindness of the final, fullest contraction involves a sensation of self-forgetting that borders on oblivion – in the moment it is oblivion, an overwhelming rush of silence in the lovers' heads, or as Diotima puts it later in the *Symposium*, the lover simply "dissolves."[35]

Dissolution, the destruction of some previous order, is a telling image. No living entity can dissolve, and remain what it was; identity cannot survive dissolution. The deepest throes of passion, where the project of physical unification seems closest to consummation, is a back and forth flirtation with death – a systole and diastole of personal integrity and absorption in the other. Nietzsche, while eschewing any serious discussion of sex, recognizes the same threat in the sweetest, deepest rages of communal intoxication. "Intoxicated reality", he writes, seeks to "annihilate, redeem and release [the individual] by imparting a mystical sense of oneness."[36] In this condition, our subjectivity vanishes "to the point of complete self-forgetting."[37] Nietzsche calls our desire for this redemptive annihilation the Dionysian drive. It is, he says, at perpetual war with the Apollonian drive, the desire to protect and preserve "the limits of the individual."[38]

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[35] *Symposium,* 207D.
[36] Nietzsche, *BoT*, 19
[37] Nietzsche, *BoT*, 17
[38] Nietzsche, *BoT*, 27

So lovers must navigate between two opposing, but related, hazards. The first is seeking too little union with one's beloved. The reductive, flesh-fixated lovers dismissed by Pausanias represent this pole. They ask, and receive, only the slightest sensation of wholeness. The second hazard is a misguided quest for totalized union here on earth. It involves a denial of the fact of space, of distance, and it necessarily flirts with the destruction of one or more of the individual lovers. The narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita*, referring to his first romantic relationship (when he was still a child), writes: "All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other's soul and flesh . . ."[39] As Nabokov avers, this is a hopeless situation. For finite, corporeal creatures, the only possible mode of total physical incorporation would be actual consumption, and one cannot in any sense "have" or admire a beloved whom one has literally destroyed.

More relevant are metaphorical analogues to cannibalism, in which the character of the other is maimed or partially destroyed in the process of incorporation. Hegel sees something like this in the master-slave relationship. For our purposes we might think of an oppressive, abusive relationship in which I seek to possess my partner in a way and to an extent that disregards her personal integrity, that treats her in some way as chattel. I might demand from her a degree of self-sacrifice that borders on self-negation, or deprive her of her free agency or her ability to speak for herself. Or, conversely, I might surrender these things myself in mad pursuit of the redemption and release that Nietzsche rightly describes as intermingled with the terrors of Dionysiac annihilation. Whichever way the

[39] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita,*

surrender goes, the immoderate, too-greedy attempt at unification involves eviscerating the otherness of one of the partners. And in a way, any such move amounts to reduction *a la* Pausanias. If I attempt to fully possess my lover by depriving her of her freedom, then I have only part of her.

All of this to say that Aristophanic lovers are in a difficult, or maybe impossible, position. Contra Pausanian reductive incorporation, they want all of each other. Contra consumptive unification, they want to achieve this total union without destroying or badly warping the character of the individual partners. But these two goals cannot be fully accomplished in tandem, at least not with purely material resources. For corporeal beings in a spatial world, the affliction of space is deep, and seemingly intractable, at least by any means readily at the disposal of mere mortals. Short of divine intervention, lovers must indeed attempt to achieve some sort of a peaceable tension. It is just here, once Aristophanes has clarified the problem of space, that the wisdom of Eryximachus becomes apparent. The key is his image of artistic composition – the most virtuosic form of combination available to mortals.

Eryximachus's metaphorical reflections on the artful combination of notes and rhythms answer, as well as any earthy thing can, to the predicament of the Aristophanic lovers. In his discussion of composition, we are given a glimpse of the way that parts can be combined into wholes while preserving the integrity of the parts. In a well-composed piece, the parts are arranged in such a way that wholeness is achieved without falsifying or damaging the nature of the constituent pieces. A composer who aims to create a great sonata which features, say, a piano and a cello, must write the two lines so that each one has its own integrity and natural trajectory, which simultaneously supports the other. If

the piano part, in order to support the cello part, is made weak, meandering, choppy or forced, then the composer has failed. In order to play a part in a greater whole, each part must bend, but if the composition is good, it will not break.

This sort of compositional achievement represents the apogee of earthly combination. It's the closest that two individual parts can get, given the intractability of the problem of space. The best that lovers can hope for is to be drawn and joined together by their mutual eros, thus enabled to participate in a whole, much like a cellist and pianist are joined together by a musical score, and become parts of a whole sonata. This is all reasonable enough, and perhaps it should be good enough for us, but recall, Plato chose to displace Eryximachus, to remove him from the position in which he might appear to answer Aristophanes. Instead, Aristophanes gets the final word of their exchange; mere composition is not enough for the Aristophanic lovers. They want to truly "become one from two."[40] But the sort of wholeness that is created in the composition of lovers and musical parts is a complex wholeness, and not a simple one. As such, it is inadequate to mankind's deepest desires. Fragmentation remains a problem, and Plato's dialogue is propelled onward. Composition will have its revenge, however. Beauty (understood as the virtuosic composition of parts into wholes) has been lurking in the background throughout the proceedings thus far, and while no human relationship is itself beautiful enough to fully satisfy, the beauty we do see gestures and invites towards a fully satisfying harmony. We will return to this below.

Aristophanes began his speech by saying that we must first understand human nature and its afflictions. He got us part of the way there. Alienation is the aspect of

[40] *Symposium,* 193E

fragmentation that is correlated with our existence in space. Diotima, as we will see, explores the affliction that is correlated with our existence in time – the problem of disintegration. The two are not unrelated. On the contrary, they are deeply interwoven, in both experience and theory. The temporal aspect is first hinted at in Socrates' questioning of Agathon, and is finally taken up in Socrates's great Diotiman speech. First, though, a few words about the intervening speech of Agathon.

Immediately after the comedian's tragic speech, the dialogue runs through a largely light-hearted interlude – the speech of the beautiful, vapid tragedian Agathon, who manufactures a hilariously effete account of love, delivered in intentionally precious language. Eros is, in Agathon's speech, young, tender, beautiful, just, wise and courageous. Juxtaposed with the gravity of Aristophanes's speech, the comical fatuity of Agathon's intervention seems the apogee of dewy-eyed, saccharine eroticism. But it is also a useful intervention for the progress of the dialogue. His speech is premised, as Socrates soon points out, on a wrong-headed conflation of eros with the object of eros, ascribing to eros the allure of the beloved, rather than the ardor of the lover. It is also the most theological of the speeches, focusing its attention directly on Eros rather than on lover and beloved. The combination of Agathon's theological orientation and his tendency to paint eros with the colors of the beloved allows Socrates, in his interrogation, to turn his attention to the poverty of eros itself, and as we will see, this turn proves decisive for the trajectory of the dialogue.

The first thing that Socrates "discovers" in his cross-examination of Agathon, is that desire must be desire for some thing that the desirer lacks. Eros, since he desires beauty, must therefore lack it. The discovery of Eros's poverty amounts either to an

assault on the perfection of the gods, or on Eros' divine status. Socrates, as we will see below, opts for the latter. This decision opens up an immediate philosophical puzzle, because people sometimes seem very much to want things that they already possess, things that they don't in fact, lack. Socrates solves this puzzle by positing a futural orientation in such desires:

> "For whenever anyone says, 'I am healthy and want to be healthy or I am wealthy and want to be wealthy and I desire those very things that I have, we should tell him 'You, human being, possessing wealth, health and strength, want to possess them also in the future, since at the present moment at least, whether you want them or not, you have them."[41]

This is a major pivot point in the dialogue. It takes up, once again, the insatiability of natural human desire, offering a new variation on the theme. From Aristophanes we learned that some of our deepest longings are not susceptible of total satisfaction, at least not here and now. From Socrates' interrogation of Agathon, we begin to see that even the small satisfactions that can be realized here and now are inadequate. They whet our appetite for future satisfaction – we want not merely to acquire our desiderata, but to keep them. The subject of time has now entered the picture, and the Aristophanic tragedy is soon to be compounded, because as Diotima will make clear, no mortal can accomplish this task of keeping, even in regard to his very self.

Having subtly set up this problematic, Socrates goes on to construct his own myth, or, to be more accurate, a myth within a myth. He announces that in lieu of making his own speech, he will recount a conversation in which a woman named Diotoma of Mantineia delivered her own myth of Eros. He will do so, he says, "on the basis of what

[41] *Symposium,* 200D

has been agreed upon between Agathon and myself."[42] The agreed-upon poverty of Eros leads Diotima (through the mouth of Socrates, of course) to demote Eros from a god to a daemon – a sort of spiritual courier who is neither mortal nor divine. To avoid this demotion, Diotima would have had to make a much more revolutionary argument, to the effect that gods can be imperfect.

Eros' daemonic task, and power, is to mediate between gods and men, carrying prayers and sacrifices from humans to gods, and commands and blessings from gods to humans. Diotima offers a religious permutation of Aristophanes's theme of distance, explaining that in relation to the mortal and divine realms, Eros' power "is in the middle of both and fills up the interval so that the whole itself has been bound together by it."[43] In Aristophanes's account, eros binds the lovers together. In Diotima's account, Eros binds men to gods. The interval between mortal and immortal, heretofore only gestured towards, has now been filled, and "*to pan auto*", "the whole itself" has been bound together. These are stark, surprising words. It remains for us to unpack what Diotima means by them, but the stakes of desire and beauty have undeniably been raised. The human afflictions of alienation and disintegration, broached by Aristophanes and the interrogation of Agathon, have now been definitively linked by Diotima.

Having promised this much on behalf of Eros, Diotima moves on to deliver a symbol-laden myth of his origins. On the day of Aphrodite's birth, according to Diotima, the gods were feasting in celebration. Eros' mother, Penia (translated as poverty) loitered around the door of the hall, and eventually took advantage of the drunken, dozing god Poros (translated as resource, or way) to conceive a child, her son Eros. Having been

[42] *Symposium,* 201D
[43] *Symposium,* 202E

conceived on the birthday of Aphrodite, Eros has ever been the "attendant and servant" of beauty, by nature her lover.[44] As the son of poverty and resource, he is always poor, but always working, with intermittent success, to "trap the beautiful and the good."[45] Eros is, like the philosopher, aware of what he lacks, and motivated to gain it. In fact, Eros is himself a philosopher, insofar as his love for beauty leads him to desire wisdom, which is "one of the most beautiful things."[46] He is neither mortal nor immortal, but swings back and forth between death and life: "sometimes on the same day he flourishes and lives, whenever he has resources; and sometimes he dies, but gets to live again through the nature of the father . . ."[47] Like the Aristophanic lovers whom he motivates, Eros is stuck between extremes, perpetually pulled one way and another.

This originary myth recounted, Socrates asks Diotima what use Eros is to human beings. She responds with a series of questions. Firstly, she asks, what does one desire when he desires beautiful things? Socrates answers "That they be his." This is easily agreed upon, but when Diotima pushes further and asks what a man actually has when he gets these beautiful things, Socrates is at a loss. Diotima circumvents this aporia by abruptly switching her line of inquiry, asking instead what a man has when he gets good things. To this question, Socrates answers confidently: "He will be happy." Under Diotima's questioning, Socrates determines that this desire for happiness is universally shared among all human beings, and is manifested in sublimated form in a multitude of different desires. "In brief, eros is the whole desire of good things and of being happy."[48]

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[44] *Symposium,* 203B
[45] *Symposium,* 203D
[46] *Symposium,* 204B
[47] *Symposium,* 203E In this way, Eros' way of being fittingly mirrors the life and death pendulum of sex discussed above.
[48] *Symposium, 2*05D

This is, accordingly, the desire that lies at the core of Aristophanes' desire for wholeness – wholeness is merely one form of our desire for the good. Diotima points to "a certain account" which is clearly that of Aristophanes, "according to which those who seek their own halves are lovers. But my speech denies that eros is of a half or a whole – unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good . . ."[49] While this is clearly a critique of Aristophanic love, it is not so thorough a repudiation as it might appear. With the word "unless", Diotima explicitly leaves open the possibility that wholeness might be one way to name our erotic desideratum, if only this wholeness is good. She is only dismissive of an undiscriminating embrace of wholeness. As Warner writes, Diotima's critique "reinstates the evaluative element in the account of love which Aristophanes had ignored."[50] And in fact, Diotima has, with a wink, performed a significant sleight of hand here. Precisely in her putative critique of Aristophanes's focus on wholeness, Diotima slyly transitions from a discussion of "good things" to one of "the good," from many to one.

Diotima's speech is, in a way, an expansion on Aristophanes's: she simply sees a wider range of consequences to the problem of fragmentation, and emphasizes the temporal aspect. Firstly, Diotima says, humans don't merely love the good, they love the good "to be theirs." They want, as lovers do, to have their desideratum. But secondly, they want the good to be theirs forever. With this reference to eternity, Diotima builds on Socrates' questioning of Agathon, adding the observation that our desire to keep our desiderata has no inherent chronological telos. If I think a thing good, I will want to keep

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[49] *Symposium,* 205E

[50] Martin Warner, "Love, Self and Plato's Symposium," The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 117 (Oct., 1979), pp. 329-339), 331

it not just for this year, or this decade, but forever. And so, Diotima tells us, in her final definition that "eros is of the good's being one's own always."[51] As a result, "it is necessary to desire immortality with good . . ."[52] The true lover wants to be one with his lover, and he wants this unified existence to be whole, unbroken by death.

After presenting this definition of eros, Diotima immediately moves on to explain how it is that we pursue eternal possession of the good. The erotic act is, in her famous, cryptic formulation, "bringing to birth in beauty both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul."[53] It is here that beauty makes its reappearance. When the Diotiman speech began, Socrates believed that eros was oriented towards the beautiful, a belief that finds support in Diotima's statement that Eros "is by nature a lover in regard to the beautiful."[54] But when he was unable to say what a man would have if he had beautiful things, Diotima did not try to guide him to an answer, but instead simply substituted "good things" in place of beautiful ones. The implication is that the two are in some way so intimately connected for Diotima that one can be substituted for the other. The dialogue continued without a pause, and the reader was left to wonder what whether the discussion of beauty was to be completely abandoned.

Now, it seems, we are ready to understand what role beauty has to play in the Diotiman scheme of erotics. Humans, Diotima avers, are all pregnant in both body and soul, and upon reaching maturity,

> "their nature desires to give birth; but it is incapable of giving birth in ugliness, but only in beauty, for the being together of man and woman is a bringing to birth. This thing, pregnancy and bringing to birth, is divine, and it is immortal in the

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[51] *Symposium,* 206A
[52] *Symposium,* 206E
[53] *Symposium,* 206B
[54] *Symposium,* 203C

> animal that is mortal. It is impossible for this to happen in the unfitting; and the ugly is unfitting with everything divine, but the beautiful is fitting."[55]

The act of generation is, then, immediately provoked by beauty, and on the deepest level oriented towards the only kind of eternal life that is accessible to mortal animals. We win what immortality we can by leaving behind some part of us that will live on. It is for this reason, Diotima says, that animals of all sorts are so driven to copulate, and then to nurture and protect their young, even if these efforts should result in the death of the parent.

Diotima says that all people are pregnant, in varying proportions, in both body and soul. But in the pursuit of immortality, pregnancies "of the soul" are more important than those "of the body." The more genuinely erotic a man is, the more he will tend towards these pregnancies, and the pursuits that will bring them to fruition. Some such men, for instance, strive to perform great acts and so leave behind the "immortal remembering of their virtue."[56] Others strive to create fine laws or poems to survive them into posterity. On a sexual level, the sort of man who is more pregnant in soul than in body is drawn not to women, but to physically beautiful young men, and if among these

> "he meets a beautiful, generous and naturally gifted soul, he cleaves strongly to the two (body and soul) together. And to this human being he is at once fluent in speeches about virtue – of what sort the good man must be and what he must practice – and he tries to educate him."[57]

The virtues that are inculcated in a young man through such a practice are not only the equal of physical children, they are superior – "more beautiful and more immortal."[58]

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[55] *Symposium,* 206C
[56] *Symposium,* 208D
[57] *Symposium,* 209B-C
[58] *Symposium,* 209C

As we can see, beauty suffuses Diotima's discussion of eros and the various kinds of reproduction. It is the provocation *sine qua non* for generative acts, and is present in the best products of such acts. But apart from a rather thin comment about the "fittingness" of beauty for any act that imitates divinity, she never explains the integral role of beauty, or why she and Socrates could muster no account of what a man would have if he obtained beautiful things. I would like to suggest that these missing explanations can be pieced together from Eryximachus's commendation of artful composition as the prime function of eros, and Diotima's statement that Eros binds "the whole" together. Masterful composition is, recall, a matter of arranging parts into exceptionally harmonious wholes. Since everything in our material world is made of parts, a well-composed thing is the most unified, whole thing that can exist in our complex, contingent, fractured world. It is also, concordantly, the most beautiful. Classical theories of beauty typically focus on the proper arrangement of parts; recall that Plato's student Aristotle, for instance, listed symmetry, order and definiteness as the three leading criteria of beauty in his *Metaphysics*. Beauty is the best complex approximation of unity, even if the purest unity can only be fully realized in simplicity.

But what does composition have to do with Diotima's eternity-desiring erotic man? The connection, I think, is rooted in the fact that Diotima's reproduction-as-immortality is essentially a matter of composition. To see this, let's take a look at another of Diotima's descriptions of the phenomenon: "For in this way every mortal thing is preserved; not by being absolutely the same forever, as the divine is, but by the fact that that which is departing and growing old leaves behind another young thing that is as it

was."[59] Our immortality, such as it is, happens by generation, by the creation of a new being that shares some aspect of its parents' being – "that is as it was." I am immortal so long as my children give birth to children, who give birth to children, etc. because in some sense, a part of me survives in each generation. So my immortality is constituted by a thin thread of common identity, running through a number of discrete entities. Only in virtue of this unifying element do my individual descendants constitute immortality for me. Without it they would merely be a series of separate bodies. The generations of my descendants are thus parts knit into a whole lineage by the poetry of paternity, just as the Aristophanic lovers are knit together by their mutual love. The composition of paternity is the closest that I can get to the whole, unbroken existence of immortality.

So, then, the function of beauty: as the erotic man makes his way through this spatially and temporally fractured world, he is every now and then confronted with a truly beautiful, truly unified thing. Such a sight startles him awake as it were, and gives him hope that successful composition is possible – he instantly, instinctually "becomes glad." Beautiful things serve as a symbol of the immortality that he has so deeply and earnestly desired. This is why Diotima did not press Socrates to explain what one would have if he had beautiful things. Beauty has no independent existence. It is merely a sensible presentation of the invisible unity that the erotic man hopes to forge between himself and the good, and between the pieces of his immortal existence. Upon seeing such a sight, the erotic man, in his "rejoicing dissolves and then gives birth and produces offspring."[60] The lover dissolves. He had previously failed, in Aristophanes's speech, to enlarge his identity by truly combining himself with his other half. The problem was

[59] *Symposium,* 208A-B
[60] *Symposium,* 207D.

precisely the rigid confines of the self, the inflexibility of identity, whose utter dissolution was toyed with in the little death of orgasm. Now, we see, there is another possible meaning to le petit mort: the fruitful, productive lover disperses his identity, sending it outward into a series of other entities, enlarging himself in the best way he can. A death and resurrection oddly, even mystically, moderated by the mystery of paternal composition.

The longing for spatial or temporal wholeness is a revolt against compartmentalization, the fracturing of existence into discrete existents. Both longings express an urge to enlarge the borders of the self, either spatially or temporally. Appropriately, these urges have often been linked in both experience and reflection. Many of the deepest enactments of human communion, from sex to communal dance to reception of the Eucharist, can be experienced, and are sometimes explicitly construed, as sacraments of immortality. Saint Ignatius of Antioch called communion "the medicine of immortality." Nietzsche's Dionysian reveler first feels himself "quite literally one" with his neighbor, and then in the aftermath "feels himself to be a god", hearing "the call of the Eleusinian Mysteries", an ancient cult whose initiates expected to receive the gift of immortality.[61]

There is clearly a sensed connection, but there is also a philosophical connection between one-ness and immortality. Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of the divine attributes in the *Summa Theologiae*, first establishes the simplicity of God, and from this premise, he derives the immutability of God. He argues that a simple being must be immutable because, as Peter Weigel explains it, "a change requires that something in a

[61] BoT 19

being undergoes alternation and something else remains continuous. Yet a simple being does not have changeable components . . ."[62] Pushing this analysis a step further, Aquinas observes that "the idea of eternity follows immutability."[63] To be simple just is to be eternal. To be complex just is to be temporary – the joints between things are fungible, temporary. So the lived experience is attached to a philosophical verity: the unity of a simple thing is a guarantor of eternity. If the simple unity that Aristophanes longs for were possible, the immortality of Diotima would come along with it.

But of course, in the dialogue, none of this is to be. Aristophanic unity is impossible, and the problem of complexity is just as devastating in the temporal realm as it is in the spatial one. Diotima's composed immortality is at best a pieced-together approximation of the whole, unbroken existence that she longs for. It is also fragile, vulnerable to dissolution at the hands of fate – my descendants, whether of the physical or spiritual variety, could be at any moment struck by any number of disasters, and my "identity" erased from existence. It is true that spiritual descendants are less fractured and vulnerable than fleshly ones, but neither of them is invulnerable to annihilation. And on a more fundamental level, the whole proposition of immortality by composition is manifestly inadequate. Diotima derived the desideratum of eternity precisely from the manner in which we want to have the good – we want to have it forever, and so we must desire immortality. But her prescription accomplishes neither of these. Not only is her version of immortality a sort of pseudo-immortality, it in no sense grants the *having* that was the whole point of eternity to begin with. Even if one grants that I am in some sense

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[62] Peter Weigel, "Divine Simplicity" Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://www.iep.utm.edu/div-simp/

[63] Aquinas, ST Ia Q10 A2

immortal if my ideas, speeches, reputation or descendants live on after I die, how could I thus be said to have any good thing? My discrete existence is no more. Having requires an identity of a much more continuous, stable variety.

So Diotima's fractured sort of immortality is insufficient to support meaningful possession. But this is not the end of the bad news, because this temporal fragmentation is pervasive. It applies even to the living individual, who must long for the things he most completely possess – things like "wealth health and strength." Even the living, thriving man is little more than a bundle of fragments. Diotima observes that

> " . . .while each one of the animals is said to live and be the same (for example, one is spoken of as the same from the time one is a child until one is an old man; and though he never has the same things in himself, nevertheless, he is called the same), he is forever becoming young in some respects as he suffers losses in other respects: his hair, flesh, bones, blood, and his whole body. And this is so not only in terms of the body but also in terms of the soul: his ways, character, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, each of these things is never present as the same for each, but they are partly coming to be and partly perishing."[64]

It seems that within the temporal world, all is flux and fragment for Diotima. Real wholeness is not a possibility for us mortals. This pervasive pessimism adds poignancy to Diotima's commentary on Aristophanes. She argues, remember, that we only want to be joined with such things as "can be presumed to be really good." What, in this picture of the fractured spatio-temporal world, could qualify as being really good?

All of this adds up to one thing: the inadequacy of the material world vis a vis human desire. The truly erotic man must cast his hopes somewhere else. Humans, according to the *Symposium*, desire simplicity and eternity, and are tormented by the

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[64] 207D. Martin Warner convincingly argues that Diotima here is espousing a view of identity akin to that of the contemporary analyitic philosopher Derek Parfit. It is a view of identity radically different from that presented in the (roughly contemporaneous) Phaedo, in which temporal change is undergirded by an eternal psychic substrate.

pervasiveness of complexity and mortality. The desiccated picture of reality sketched out above serves as a sort of explanation for the existential necessity of transcendence. And indeed, the *Symposium* is not finished. After making the above arguments and observations, Diotima suddenly shifts, and offers the following: "Now perhaps, Socrates, you too might be initiated into these erotics; but as for the perfect revelations – for which the others are means, if one were to proceed correctly on the way – I do not know if you would be able to be initiated into them."[65] Thus begins the famous account of ascent.

This account makes use of several familiar themes: beauty, desire, philosophy, pedagogy, etc., now repackaged into a dizzyingly rapid series of upward steps. "Now I shall speak," she begins, "I shall not falter in my zeal; do try to follow, if you are able."[66] Diotima is right to fear that Socrates, and the reader of the *Symposium*, might have some difficulty following her. Indeed, there is a palpably esoteric tone to this climactic hortatory passage. Diotima is a teacher who commends the verbal and abstract to her listeners, to the exclusion of the sensual and particular, but at the same time, her account of ascent demonstrates an impatience with verbal description, seeming to manifest an ultimate skepticism about language's power to capture the realities towards which her words are meant to lead the seeking soul. In fact, her words scarcely lead at all – that job is left to Eros, whom Diotima calls "the guide." Diotima's descriptions are more calibrated to propel the soul on a journey which must be lived through first hand. They are a poetic itinerarium that contains only the thinnest of practical guidance. The further we progress up the ladder, the more fantastical and poetic Diotima's words become.

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[65] *Symposium,* 210A
[66] *Symposium, 210 A*

The first rung of the ladder is familiar enough: the beautiful body of one's beloved. Diotima begins: "[F]irst of all, if the guide is guiding correctly, he [the aspirant to ascent] must love one body and there generate beautiful speeches."[67] Already, at the very first stage of the ascent, the ascending lover is casting his gaze beyond the merely physical. Diotima does not even pretend to linger at the level of matter, does not dignify sexual reproduction with a mention; the only sort of giving-birth-in-beauty that genuinely contributes to Diotiman ascent is intellectual. And this makes sense. By the time that the ascent narrative begins, the reader has already been sufficiently warned against placing any real hope in the physical realm, which is the realm of inescapable disintegration and alienation.

The next step is to "realize" (katanoeisai) that the beauty seen in various discrete bodies is in fact "related."[68] This is an extremely pivotal moment. It is a small but momentous step from the particular towards the universal. It is also one that was not willfully chosen by the lover. He does not decide that the beauty in different bodies is related, or choose to believe so. He simply realizes it. But how does this realization strike him? What is the evidence that pushes him towards this conclusion? Is it accurate? Diotima apparently assumes that it is, but gives us little guidance as to how this truth manifests itself. If we were to dig for clues, we might point to the prior step, wherein the lover chose to "give birth in beauty" via language rather than bodies. The ability to abstract a universal property from its particular bearer, and recognize it elsewhere, is a natural and necessary cognitive tool in humans, but it is most certainly sharpened by language. The moment that a viewer can verbally isolate the element of "beauty" in a

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[67] *Symposium, 210 A*
[68] *Symposium,* 219B

seen object, that element comes to occupy the same linguistic slot as the element of beauty present in any number of other objects. They are now linked, at least by language, and perhaps this linking helps to motivate the intuitive move that the lover makes, to "realize" that they are "related." This is not just a matter of two things being similar or comparable. The Greek for "related" in this passage is *adelphon*, or "from the same womb." Not only is Diotima by no means a nominalist about properties, she chooses a language that points immediately towards a common origin, and indeed a common mother, an image heavily freighted with emotional content.

The next step after the ascription of a common maternity is the more extreme (and quite different) realization that "it is great folly not to believe that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same."[69] Not only does the beauty of Agathon and Alcibiades flow from the same womb, we now, suddenly, inexplicably, see that the beauty of their bodies is numerically identical. All the reader is told is that the ascender somehow knows that it would be "great folly" to think otherwise. This belief in the oneness of beauty comes bundled with the realization that the lover "must be the lover of all beautiful bodies and in contempt slacken this intensity for only one body, in the belief that it is petty."[70] There is a certain intuitive likelihood to this latter step. If there is indeed one solitary, static, universal thing called beauty, and all we see around us are fragmented reflections of that one thing, then it would seem that the central, universal core of beauty is the more perfectly realized version of the thing I am naturally attracted to. It is better, and one could see why my erotic allegiance might tend to migrate towards the better thing. But

[69] *Symposium,* 210b
[70] *Symposium,* 210b

for Diotima, this is not just a matter of tendency. It is a hypothetical imperative. If the lover is to continue his ascent, he must renounce his desire for the beloved entirely. He must come to despise that desire. In all of this, Diotima declines to give Socrates reasons why the various intellectual and erotic moves ought to be executed because they are good and noble, or because they correspond with the truth about reality. These are, rather, simply the moves that ascenders just do make – if one is going to ascend, then one will just happen to think and act accordingly. There is an almost Calvinist sense of determinism in Diotima's speech. It seems that the elect simply will see what is there and most central, and the damned will remain fixated on the low spectacle of faces, hands, colors, etc.

The next step for the elect is to realize that the beauty of souls is better than the beauty of bodies, and concomitantly, to start investing in the spiritual development of a noble-souled beloved, even if that beloved is not terribly beautiful. This investment happens, of course, via beautiful speeches. In making these speeches, the lover himself will be "compelled to behold the beautiful in pursuits and laws, and to see that all this is akin [*suggenes*] to itself, so that he may come to see that the beauty of the body is something trivial."[71] At this point, Plato has entirely assumed the position ascribed to him in Raphael's "School of Athens." He is pointing upward, with little thought of what lies below.

The final rung of the ladder is a switch from pursuits and laws to the vast beauty of the sciences. In grasping for a description of this switch, Diotima's prose turns florid. The lover makes "a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful, behold[s] it and

[71] *Symposium,* 210C

give[s] birth – in ungrudging philosophy – to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts; until, there strengthened and increased, he may discern a certain single philosophical science . . .”[72] The dialogue is reaching its crescendo here, and Diotima’s prosody rises with it. She explains to her student Socrates that the single philosophical science which is the product of all that has come before, “has as its object the following sort of beauty,” urging him to “Try to pay as close attention as [he] can”[73] to her description of it. The tone here is so important that it is worth quoting Diotima at length:

> “Whoever has been educated up to this point in erotics, beholding successively and correctly the beautiful things, in now going to the perfect end of erotics shall suddenly glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature – that very thing, Socrates, for whose sake alone all the prior labors were undertaken – something that is, first of all, always being and neither coming to be nor perishing, nor increasing nor passing away; and secondly, not beautiful in one respect and ugly in another, nor at one time so, and another time not . . . Nor in turn with the beautiful be imagined by him as a kind of face or hands or anything else in which body shares . . . but as it is alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form; while all other things that share in it do so in such a way that while it neither becomes anything more or less, nor is affected at all, the rest do come to be and perish.”[74]

Diotima seems carried away by what she’s seen, and rightly so. Here, in this vision, is contained all that is lacking in earthly experience. The erotic seeker has discovered that there does indeed exist a desideratum that corresponds to his deepest longings. It turns out that his desire for something that is simple and perfect and immutable and eternal was not misconceived – it was merely misdirected. And so, Diotima says, it is only here, in gazing upon the beautiful itself, that life “is worth living, if – for a human being – it is [worth living] at any place.”[75]

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[72] *Symposium,* 210D
[73] *Symposium,* 210E
[74] *Symposium,* 210E-211B
[75] *Symposium,* 211D

Diotima's description of beauty's impact on the viewer are similarly exalted. Something about this vision, and this vision alone, enables beholder to live a truly good life, and perhaps to do so forever:

> "Only here, in seeing in the way the beautiful is seeable, will [a human being] get to engender not phantom images of virtue – because he does not lay hold of a phantom – but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well . . ."[76]

Diotima's ecstatic tone here is rhetorically apt. It is meant, recall, as an enticement to the erotic man, the would-be ascender, who will be impelled to set out, and follow his guide all the way to the beautiful itself. And indeed, her account is movingly rendered. It is also philosophically correct. The sorts of things that Diotima claims to have seen transcend the bounds of mere rational language. For the sake of comparison, Aquinas's discussion of Divine simplicity in the *Summa Theologiae* is prefaced with the warning that "we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how he is not."[77] Ascent to the world of simple unity entails a turn to the apophatic. Diotima wisely shuns anything approaching precise description, in favor of evocative images and series of negations. Unfortunately, this strategy means that the *Symposium*'s account of ascent makes for very thin phenomenology. We are repeatedly informed of what the ascender realizes, but not why he realizes what he does. In Diotima's rush up the ladder of ascent, we are given precious little insight into the question of why earthly beauty might function as a symbol or sacrament of spiritual insight. The dialogue's account of desire, of human lack, is still one of the richest and most profound available, but its account of satiation is less

[76] *Symposium,* 212A
[77] Aquinas, ST, Ia Q3

impressive. For the purpose of understanding the way that beauty speaks, Plato's account is more Penia than Poros. For a more compelling vision of the way up the ladder, we'll have to turn to other thinkers.

Chapter 2: "Standing at The Very Edge of the Infinite"

Aristotle, Kant and Václav Havel on Natural Beauty, Sublimity and Contemplation

2.1: Introduction

Václav Havel was a Czech writer and intellectual who was active in the world of underground arts and letters in Soviet Czechoslovakia. In 1989, he helped to foment the bloodless anti-Soviet "Velvet Revolution," and subsequently became the first president of post-Soviet Czechoslovakia. Ten years prior, Havel had been arrested on charges of subversion, and sentenced to a four-year prison term. One "hot, cloudless" summer day in the courtyard of the prison at Heřmanice, he had a dramatic experience of aesthetic-cum-spiritual epiphany, which he later recounted in a detailed letter to his wife, Olga. His first-person narrative will give us occasion to examine in more detail the connections between the experience of beauty and intuitions of transcendence. It's important to note that Havel's experience was correlated to an instance of *natural* beauty, rather than a piece of art. It therefore offers us a (relatively) simple lens through which to examine some of basic aspects of the experience of beauty, which we will expand upon and complicate in subsequent discussions of art. In what follows I will present a broadly Aristotelian explanation of Havel's epiphanic experience, relying especially on Aristotle's accounts of soul, contemplation and friendship, aided by a brief appeal to Immanuel Kant's understanding of the sublime.

2.2 Aristotelian Psychology

We'll need to begin with some groundwork, in order to develop the conceptual tools we'll be using in our analysis. We begin with Aristotelian psychology. In

Aristotle's thought, form is the incorporeal principle which binds matter into a unity, that is, which allows a thing to exist. Matter, left to its own devices, disperses into non-being. It is only the form of a rock, a daisy, or a pigeon that keeps the matter of that thing integrated. The form of a living thing is its soul, or *psuche*. There are, Aristotle thinks, three sorts of souls – nutritive, sensitive and rational. The souls of plants are only nutritive, the souls of non-human animals are both nutritive and sensitive, and the souls of humans are nutritive, sensitive and rational. Every sort of soul shares as a common goal, or *telos* – the imitation of *nous,* a term which can be translated either as "mind," or "God." In *De Anima* II, Aristotle writes, "Every creature strives for this, and for the sake of this performs all its natural functions . . . they share in [the divine nature] in the only way they can, some to a greater and some to a lesser extent." [78]

This statement may seem more than a bit far-fetched until one remembers Aristotle's definition of God. In *Metaphysics* Book VII Aristotle writes: "the activity of mind is life, and God is that activity; and God's essential actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God, for this *is* God."[79] So God is pure activity, or *energeia,* and it is his activity – life and duration continuous and eternal – that every soul strives to share in, to realize in its own self. It is important to note that in the vast majority of cases, this *telos* is not explicitly recognized. Aristotle writes that the soul is "the first actuality"[80] of a living thing. The Greek word for actuality here is *entelechy,*

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[78] Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans W.S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: Loeb Classical Library, 2000), II iv. Hereafter Aristotle, *De Anima*.
[79] Quoted in Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 297.
[80] Aristotle, *De Anima* 412a28.

which means having one's end within. So the goal of divine imitation is thus implanted in the very nature of all ensouled things. Each soul, or each part of a soul, pursues this common end by a movement of gathering and unifying similar things. Once again, by some trick of instinct or deep intuition, unification bespeaks eternity; the movement of synthesis just is our mortal way of imitating eternal divinity. These unifying movements are immediately motivated by pleasure, for as Aristotle writes, "all kindred and similar things are for the most part pleasant to each other."[81]

In the case of the nutritive soul, divine imitation takes the form of a striving for survival and reproduction. Mere existence is an activity, and is thus already a rudimentary imitation of God, who is pure *energeia*. In order to survive, the nutritive soul gathers food from its surroundings, and makes that food part of itself. However, the soul of a given plant or animal can do this only insofar as there is already some common element that the potential food shares with the potential consumer. Not just any object will nourish; the human body cannot build skin, muscle and bone out of rocks or motor oil. We're built of meat, vegetables, grains, etc., and only similar things will aid the continued process of building and maintaining. The act of digestion functions as a sort of sifting, in which the body gathers and incorporates the parts of food which are already like the material of the organism. The non-like elements are discarded. Once the nutritive faculty has incorporated these common elements into itself, it must continue to hold them all together. It does this until the soul ceases to function, at which time decomposition begins to undo the soul's activity of physical unification.[82] This gathering

[81] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W.R. Roberts, in J. Barnes, 1371b12.
[82] "The soul seems . . . to hold the body together; at any rate when the soul is gone the body dissolves into air and decays." Aristotle, *De Anima* 411b9.

and synthesizing activity of the nutritive faculty can be called generative, but it is not a *creative* act. Indeed, it cannot be, because in Aristotle's view, any act of creation would require a new form, and no new form *can be* created, even by God. Therefore, in the act of reproduction the already-existing form of the parent is passed on to the offspring. Echoing Diotima, Aristotle thus sees the drive towards reproduction as a striving for immortality, and once again, an attempt to share in the divine life.

We now move on to the sensitive soul, which all animals possess. The sensitive soul is receptive to the "sensible form" of its object, which is a sort of "expression"[83] of that object's form. In keeping with his overall conception of cause and effect, Aristotle argues that when a sense organ is acted upon by an object, it *becomes,* in a way, the thing that has acted upon it. So when an iron is acted upon by fire, it becomes hot, and when my eye is acted upon by red, it becomes in some sense red. "During the process of being acted upon it is unlike, but at the end of the process it has become like that object, and shares its quality."[84] My eye receives the form of red like wax receives the form of a ring, without taking on the metal of the ring, for "the sense is that which is receptive of the form of sensible objects without the matter."[85] However, a sense organ can receive the sensible forms of external objects only insofar as it shares some common element with them. Every sense organ possesses a limited range of things that it can perceive, because every organ is material, and material things are finite. This finitude means that the eye, for instance, shares a common element with a limited range of potentially visible things.

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[83] Lear, 102
[84] Aristotle, *De Anima* 418a5
[85] Aristotle, *De Anima* 424a18

If the eye attempts to behold something with which it shares no common element, it will fail in its attempt, and it might even injure itself (as is the case with gazing at the sun).

Animals possess both nutritive and sensitive souls, and by virtue of the second, are more

able than plants to imitate *nous*. This greater ability to imitate self-contemplating *nous* comes first from the fact that sensation at its best approaches "a kind of knowledge." [86] According to Jonathan Lear, Aristotle thinks that "the highest level of actuality of sensible form occurs not in the perceptible object, but in the sense faculty of a being who is perceiving that form."[87] The perceiving animal duplicates the existence of the sensible form, and then brings that sensible form to a higher level of actuality by being aware of it. However, not all animals will possess the ability to bring sensible forms to such a high level of actuality. Aristotle thinks that only the higher animals have imagination ("the process by which an image is presented to us"[88]) so presumably only those higher animals can possess awareness in any meaningful sense of the word. For the highest non-human animals, then, a combination of the activities of nutrition, reproduction and sensation constitutes the closest possible imitation of the divine life.

For we animals who possess rational souls, however, there is still a higher level of divine imitation. This comes from our possession of mind, which Aristotle also calls *nous*. Like the highest non-human animals, humans possess imagination, and in fact cannot think without it.[89] Since Aristotle does not have a Platonic doctrine of

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[86] Aristotle, *Fragments: Protrepticus*, trans. J. Barnes and G. Lawrence, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle vol 2* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 44.26-45.3 Pistelli, p. 2412. Emphasis mine.
[87] Lear, 103
[88] Aristotle, *De Anima* 427b-428a
[89] Imagination, for Aristotle, comprehends both images in the traditional sense of the word, and also language.

recollection, the intellectual capacity of the rational animal does not exempt her from the need for empirical observation and investigation. However, unlike even the highest non-human animals, the human mind can understand the essence of a thing – the "what it is" of an object – and in doing so the mind can pierce through the raw sense data to the "reality which underlies sensory appearance."[90] The knowledge of essence is the end goal of empirical investigation for humans, "for when we are in a position to expound all or most of the attributes as presented to us, we shall also be best qualified to speak about the essence."[91] This essence that I apprehend through investigation and reflection will apply not only to the particular individual before me, but also to all individuals that share the genus of that individual, because "actual sensation is of particulars, whereas knowledge is of universals . . ."[92] The human mind can grasp, to some extent, the essence of absolutely everything. The limits of the sense organs are based on their materiality, but since the mind is immaterial, it has no limits on what intelligible forms it can cognize, and in a way, become.

This apprehension of truth, which is the natural function of the mind, is another instantiation of the soul's constant movement of gathering and unification of like things. Indeed, in Aristotle's view, being and truth are equivalent to unity. For a thing to be, or to be true, is for it to be one. In the attainment of truth, the mind gathers putatively disparate, but actually identical, things. When I come to know the essence of the laptop on which I am currently typing, what I have effectively done is to unite my linguistic image of the universal form "computer" with my figurative image of the particular item

[90] Lear, 116
[91] Aristotle, *De Anima* 402b24
[92] Aristotle, *De Anima* 417b20

in front of me. "For instance, in perceiving a beacon, a man recognizes that it *is* fire."[93] Subject and predicate are not accidentally related in a true proposition. Both the empirical statement "this is my computer," and the abstract equation E=MC2, are true because their paired referents are the same.

Like the gathering of the nutritive and sensitive souls, this gathering movement of the rational soul is accompanied by pleasure. In fact, it is accompanied by the best sort of pleasure. In one of the boldest statements in the history of philosophy, Aristotle writes of mankind, "for *in loving life they love understanding and knowing.*" [94] Aristotle has unabashedly identified human *joie de vivre* with the love of understanding, an identification which becomes more plausible when one turns to Aristotle's treatment of the highest form of understanding – *theoria*, or contemplation. Succinct definitions of *theoria* are hard to come by. Aristotle identifies contemplation as the highest form of human happiness, the closest possible approximation of the divine life, but he nowhere provides a single synoptic definition. Thus, if one desires a definition of Aristotelian contemplation, it must be assembled from several different passages, principally in the *Metaphysics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics.* Gary Gurtler summarizes Aristotle's unarticulated definition of contemplation as "that enjoyment that comes at the end of study or investigation and constitutes a free and continuous resting in the truth."[95] *Theoria* is not a discursive, inquisitive process; that sort of movement is called *dianoia* or "thinking through." Contemplation is thus an *energeia* (activity), as opposed to a *kineisis*

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[93] Aristotle, *De Anima*, 431b5-7
[94] Aristotle, *Fragments: Protrepticus* Tr. J. Barnes and G. Lawrence, in ibid., 44.26-45.3Pistelli, p. 2412. Emphasis mine.
[95] Gary M. Gurtler S.J. "The Activity of Happiness in Aristotle's Ethics" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 56 (June 2003): 801-834., p. 819.

(movement).[96] As an *energeia*, it is "complete in its very exercise . . . It is fully and perfectly achieved in the very act."[97] Of course, contemplation can continue for a very long time – longer, Aristotle speculates, than any other human action. There may be many steps, perhaps some quite strenuous and difficult, on the way to contemplation. But lacking any *telos,* the achievement of which would signal completion of the action, contemplation is complete in its every instantiation. It is important to note that the "resting" of contemplation is not static. Rather, as Aristotle writes in Book III of the *Metaphysics,* the untying of philosophical knots leads to the "subsequent free play of thought."[98] After the philosopher has thought through and untied the knots of difficulty using his developed powers of *dianoia,* he gains a vantage point which allows his mind to dart freely and even playfully from truth to truth.

This unique epistemic vantage point of the philosopher is due to the particular objects that he contemplates. Mind cognizes essences, so as a species of thought, *theoria* necessarily deals with essences. But exactly which essences act as the objects of contemplation, which Aristotle calls the "best of knowable objects"? In the fragments which remain of the early Aristotelian work *Protrepticus,* Aristotle runs through several approximations. They are: the good as a whole (B9), the whole as designed and ordered (B44), the causes & elements of things/highest realities (B45), the most exact things (B48), divine, stable laws (B49), nature & the divine, eternal & unchanging (B50) and the things most knowable in themselves (B85). In Aristotle's more mature work, the paradigmatic object of contemplation is always God. However, in X.7 of the

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[96] For this distinction see *Metaphysics* 1048b20-35
[97] Amelie Rorty, "The Place of Contemplation on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics" in *Mind.* New Series, Vol. 87, No. 347 (July 1978), pp. 343-358, p. 344.
[98] *Metaphysics* 995a25-30.

Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle states that the best part in us – intellect – "takes thought of things noble and divine." The word noble, or *eugeneis*, can refer literally to good birth, as in one who is born of a good family, but in both *Magna Moralia* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle writes that we call noble "such things as the excellences and the actions which spring from them."[99]

The attentive reader will have noticed that mere material things – trees, puppies, eyes, laptops – do not make any of Aristotle's lists. The objects of contemplation must be higher and more universal than these. If one is to achieve the vantage point of *theoria,* she must cognize not just of the essence (or soul), of *this* dog that she sees before her, but of dogs in general, or, even better, of all living beings. Once she has done this, then the leisurely free play of intellect can begin, and the contemplator can behold and enjoy the way that soul is instantiated in the center of every living thing, including the contemplator herself. In doing so, she will become aware that *all souls,* including the soul of *this* dog share a *telos* – imitation of the divine. This knowledge of the highest things is called wisdom (or *sophia)*, which is the intellectual virtue that gradually develops as a result of habitual contemplation, and makes one more likely to contemplate in the future. In his discussion of the wise man in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes "now of these characteristics, that of knowing all things must belong to him who has in the highest degree universal knowledge; for he knows in a sense all the instances that fall under the universal."[100] With these conceptual tools in hand, we turn at last to the experience of beauty, and its connection with intuitions of transcendence. We will explore the way that the harmonious arrangement of parts can propel one into an

[99] Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* in J. Barnes, 1207b29.
[100]Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* Book 1 Part 2

unplanned act of contemplation, an irruption of "things noble and divine" into the mundane world of mere material things.

2.3 Beauty and Epiphany: An Aristotelian Reading

We return, at last, to the topic of beauty, and an analysis of Havel's aesthetic cum spiritual experience. Here, to set the table, is the description that Havel sent by letter to his wife Olga:

> " . . . I call to mind that distant moment in Heřmanice when on a hot, cloudless summer day, I sat on a pile of rusty iron and gazed into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose, up and over all the fences, wires, bars and watchtowers that separated me from it. As I watched the imperceptible trembling of its leaves against an endless sky, I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state outside time in which all the beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced existed in a total "co-present"; I felt a sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced. A profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzy sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss of its mystery; an unbounded joy at being alive, at having been given the chance to live through all I have lived through, and at the fact that everything has a deep and obvious meaning – this joy formed a strange alliance in me with a vague horror at the inapprehensibility and unattainability of everything I was so close to in that moment, standing at the very "edge of the infinite"; I was flooded with a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and with myself, with that moment, with all the moments I could call up, and with everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning. I would even say that I was somehow "struck by love", though I don't know precisely for whom or what."[101]

The experience that Havel describes is remarkable – a deeper, more intense experience of beauty than the normal person regularly experiences – but it is not, for all of that, *sui generis.* Take the analogous experience related by the late Catholic Cardinal Avery

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[101] Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp 331-332. Quoted by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, pp. 728-9. Hereafter cited as Havel, *Letters.*

Dulles S.J. Dulles, then a young atheist studying at Harvard. One spring day he took a break from his studies and meandered down to the banks of the Charles River:

> "As I wandered aimlessly, something impelled me to look contemplatively at a young tree. On its frail, supple branches were young buds attending eagerly the spring which was at hand. While my eye rested on them the thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing. How could it be, I asked, that this delicate tree sprang up and developed and that all the enormous complexity of its cellular operations combined together to make it grow erectly and bring forth leaves and blossoms? The answer, the trite answer of the schools, was new to me: that its actions were ordered to an end by the only power capable of adapting means to ends—intelligence—and that the very fact that this intelligence worked toward an end implied purposiveness—in other words, a will. It was useless, then, to dismiss these phenomena by obscurantist talk about a mysterious force called "Nature." The "nature" which was responsible for these events was distinguished by the possession of intellect and will, and intellect plus will makes personality. Mind, then, not matter, was at the origin of all things. Or rather not so much the "mind" of Anaxagoras as a Person of Whom I had had no previous intuition.[102]

Dulles's experience is, of course, strikingly similar to Havel's. So much so that to examine them both would be largely redundant; we'll confine ourselves to an analysis of Havel's.

Accounts like these cry out for explanation; there is a massive leap that takes place between the sense-data input, and the metaphysical conclusions that emerge from the experience. The phenomenon might be common enough to make it into the script of a Hollywood movie, but the chain of inference that connects a tree to "everything invisible that lies behind it" is remarkably opaque. What is going on here? In our analysis of Plato's *Symposium*, we argued that beautiful things serve as a symbol of authentic wholeness in a spatio-temporal world that is inescapably marked by fragmentation, and

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[102] Avery Dulles, *A Testimonial to Grace: and Reflections on a Theological Journey*, (Sheed & Ward, 1996), 36.

that this intimation of wholeness necessarily points beyond our fragmented physical reality. At first glance, Havel's first-person account seems to harmonize well enough with Plato's ladder of ascent – the idea that beauty awakens the eternity-hungry to higher vistas – but the Aristotelian framework will allow us to flesh out Plato's skeletal narrative with some detail about how beauty might play this role.

Aristotle writes in his *Metaphysics* that "The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness."[103] In the *Ethics* we learn that "a sense which is in good condition acts most completely in relation to the most beautiful of its objects . . . And this activity will be the most complete and pleasant."[104] So my ears *want* to hear, and they are particularly able to hear sound which is beautiful. For instance, the clarity and rhythmicity of a bird's song allows me to hear, cognize, predict and confirm aspects of the bird's voice. The mathematical compatibility of harmonious notes allows me to comfortably cognize two distinct tones at one time. Similarly, my eyes are uniquely able to see a face which is well-defined and symmetrical; the parts simply hang well together, and the unity of that face makes for smooth cognition. This virtuosic activity is accompanied by pleasure, so exceptionally beautiful things have the ability to captivate, to dominate and delight my eyes, the way salt and sugar dominate and delight the taste buds. All that is required is that the relevant sense be in good condition.

Let us call the above sort of beauty "sensual beauty." We'll have more to say about it below, but first let's put it in the context of a broader understanding of beauty. One of the most remarkable things about Havel's experience is that it was occasioned by an ordinary tree. He gives us no reason to believe that this tree was possessed of

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103 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078b.
104 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1174b

exceptional symmetry, order or definiteness, so there must be a different sort of beauty at work here. Aristotle sheds some light on this different sort of beauty in his *Parts of Animals* when, defending the study of the "humbler" animals, he writes

> "For if some [animals] have no graces to charm the sense, yet nature, which fashioned them, gives amazing pleasure in their study to *all who can trace links of causation and are inclined to philosophy* . . . every realm of nature is marvelous . . . for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is *a form of the beautiful*."[105]

So what are we to make of this particular "form of the beautiful" which all animals possess, whether or not they have "graces to charm the senses"?

To begin with, it is telling that this non-sensual sort of beauty is only available to those who can "trace links of causation." Remember that for Aristotle, the cause of each living thing is its soul. Every fiber of a plant, indeed every atom and vibrating string of energy, is directed by the soul towards survival and reproduction, and ultimately towards the imitation of god, who is "life and duration continuous and eternal." Thus the "amazing pleasure" granted by the study of even the "humbler" animals comes when the viewer is able to detect this shaping, ordering, god-imitating power of soul. She is able to detect, in Havel's words, that nature has "its own great and mysterious order, its own direction."[106] Aristotle does not give a name to this "form of the beautiful," but if the above analysis is right, we might venture to call it metaphysical beauty – a beauty that is tied up with the realization that despite all surface appearances to the contrary, the center holds.

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[105] Aristotle, *Parts of Animals,* 1.5. Quoted in Lear, pp. 47-8 Emphasis mine.
[106] Havel, *Letters,* 264.

In Aristotle's language, we might say that Havel has received a flash of *Sophia*, of wisdom– and the scattered, disparate phenomena of the world suddenly become intelligible to him in the light of something loftier. Havel discovers that the tree he sees before him is connected with "everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning." He sees, as every wise man does, the intimate connection between the particulars that lay before him, and the higher, universal, invisible things that undergird them. Havel has, by ascending past the realm of physicality and particularity, gained wisdom into the entire "course of events" here in the physical world, the whole universe of particulars. This flash of wisdom grants to Havel all the pleasure that Aristotle ascribes to the act of contemplation. Havel writes that his "profound amazement at the sovereignty of Being became a dizzy sensation of tumbling endlessly into the abyss of its mystery" and that he was flooded by "a sense of ultimate happiness and harmony with the world and with myself, with that moment, with all the moments I could call up, and with everything invisible that lies behind it and has meaning."

But how, once again, does this happen? How does one go from looking at an ordinary tree to cognizing the soul of that tree, and thus enjoying the particular "form of the beautiful" which Aristotle says pervades all organic matter? Again, there are certain faces, vistas, etc., that manifest a striking sensual beauty that simply appeals to our senses and arrests our attention, but how does our attention come to fall on the metaphysical beauty of ordinary objects? Aristotle thinks it can emerge from careful study; but that is not the case in Havel's anecdote. How can the soul-contemplating pleasure of metaphysical beauty emerge from the simple observation of a tree? More broadly, how do we explain the species of contemplation that emerges from aesthetic experience?

We may begin trying to answer this question with the observation that not all acts of perception are the same, in part because not all acts of attention are the same. The species of attention employed depends on the motivation for attention; it matters very much *why* I am paying attention to the thing. Aesthetic contemplation requires for its achievement a particular sort of attention which we'll call "unbounded attention." This type of attention is by far the exception to the rule in human cognition. We will thus begin our treatment of attention by taking a brief look at a more common form of attention, which I will call "bounded attention." The two species of attention are distinguished by their scope, which is determined by the different sorts of cognition which they aim to facilitate.[107]

Let's begin with an example of what I'm calling bounded attention: in an act of attention which is motivated by practical interest, that is, an act of attention which is undertaken to make *instrumental* cognition possible, I attend only to certain specific, useful aspects of the thing, and thus I vastly circumscribe my apprehension of the object. For instance, I might look at a red maple leaf which has fallen onto my car's windshield and ask, "Is this leaf good for food?" or "Will it block my view of the road if I don't move it?" In each of these instances my attention to the leaf is partial, or *bounded.* I accept and hold the thing in my consciousness, in order to immediately zoom in on and attend to a few *particular* aspects of it, viz. the leaf's potential nutritive value, or the leaf's opacity and placement in my visual field. In any case, the aspects of the leaf to

[107] I should also note that it is far from clear that two such tidy compartments as "bounded" and "unbounded" attention constitute the entire possible range of species of attention. I do think, however, that the two species outlined here could function as poles, between which a broad and subtle gradation exists.

which I pay attention have been predetermined by the interest which occasioned the attention – I want to know what, if anything, I should *do* with the leaf.

Bounded attention is not only useful for purely instrumental cognition. It is just such attention that modern experimental science casts on the objects of its investigations.[108] Immanuel Kant, praising the nascent scientific method in his Preface to the second edition of The *Critique of Pure Reason*, writes:

> *"Reason . . . must approach nature in order to be taught by it. It must not, however, do so in the character of a pupil who listens to everything that the teacher chooses to say, but of an appointed judge who compels the witnesses to answer questions which he has himself formulated."*[109]

The sort of attention that Kant's scientist casts on her object is bounded by the particular question which she brings, like a judge, to that thing. For instance, she might ask, "How does this leaf absorb energy from the sun?" or "will the health of this leaf suffer if it is exposed to acid rain?" In any case, she will seek out and cognize particular aspects of the leaf, which have been predetermined by the questions that she is asking. The distinctive feature of bounded attention, as sketched here, is not analysis, for as we will see below, unbounded attention is no less analytical. The distinctive feature is the anterior selection of aspects on which the attention will be fixed. Bounded attention is the handmaid of a cognitive act which has a finite task, susceptible of definitive completion. Upon finding an answer to my particular question or questions – however long this might take to

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[108] Of course, one could make a case that the distinction between instrumental and modern scientific cognition is small indeed. Some, such as Hans Jonas, have plausibly argued that modern science contains manipulability at its theoretical core (Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays* (Prentiss Hall, 1978), 48). That is a thesis worth exploring, but it is a stronger one than I require for my present purposes.

[109] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), Bxiii.

achieve – this particular act of cognition is complete, and I have no need to linger. I may move on to other things. In Aristotle's terminology, such cognition is a κινησις – an activity or movement which has a result and ends with the achievement of the result.

Unlike instrumental and scientific cognition, aesthetic contemplation does not begin with the posing of particular questions. It thus demands a type of attention more like the sort described by Simone Weil in her essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God," an attention in which one's cognitive faculties are "empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in all its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it."[110] So in unbounded attention, I do not interrogate the object of my attention, in that I do not begin the attentional act with specific questions that I seek to answer. Lacking such questions, I have no anterior direction as to which aspects of the thing I will focus in on. Indeed, I do not necessarily intend to focus in on any aspects at all. I simply want to pay attention to the thing "in *all* its naked truth."[111] But even in the purest act of unbounded attention the human mind is unshakably analytical – I cannot pay loving, appreciative attention to a beautiful flower without noticing the arrangement and color of its petals, the texture of its stem, etc. But if the anterior questions of scientific and instrumental cognition are not guiding these acts of analysis, one begins to wonder whether anything at all guides the analysis that takes place in an act of unbounded attention. Put more sharply, does my mind merely flit endlessly and arbitrarily between the various aspects of a thing?

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[110] Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" in *Waiting for God,* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Collins, Perennial Classics, 2000), p. 63.

[111] Emphasis added. This desire to know the object in *all* its truth is, of course, an unrealistic goal, but it is, at least, a regulative ideal.

This "flitting" movement does indeed occur, but if the contemplative act is sustained, then eventually my mind locates and settles on some aspect or another which it attends to for some length of time. Due to the analytical nature of attention, the mind analyzes this isolated aspect, which it discovered during the initial "flitting" analysis of the whole. Unbounded attention thus involves a sort of undirected analysis, which eventually results in attention to aspects which are themselves analyzed, in a similarly undirected manner (in that still, no guiding questions have been introduced). Put more succinctly, unbounded attention consists in a succession of undirected analyses and sub-analyses.

On the surface, the undirected nature of this succession might suggest that the analytical activities of unbounded attention are merely arbitrary. And yet, I will argue in what follows that there is in some cases an experience of directionality, a sense of purposiveness, to the overall trajectory of analysis and sub-analysis that takes place in unbounded attention. In these cases, unbounded attention is, in fact, a *kineisis* – an action directed towards an end – but it is an *involuntary* kineisis, wherein the actor does not know what end he is working towards. The French poet Paul Valéry, in his essay "Philosophy of the Dance," writes of an analogous phenomenon, when in the act of dance the body "enters into a kind of life that is at once strangely unstable and strangely regulated, strangely spontaneous, but at the same time strangely contrived and, assuredly, planned."[112] So what accounts for the sense – encountered both in dance and in some acts of unbounded attention – of a "contrived" or "planned" element to an apparently spontaneous, undirected activity?

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[112]Valery, 60. The importance of this analog will come in for comment later in this paper.

The answer to this question is not immediately obvious, and will require some unpacking. The first step is the experience of being "struck." That is, as one pays unbounded attention to a thing, one is suddenly "struck" by one or another aspect of the thing. In being struck I am not aware of myself as an agent acting purposively – I may choose, for any number of reasons, to look at a thing, but in unbounded attention I have no criteria that will direct me to focus on this or that aspect of it. Thus, I do not consciously make any *choice* as to what I should focus on. By keeping my attention focused on the thing, I tacitly consent to focus on whatever aspect of the thing strikes me. There is a sense, in the moment, that I am submitting to some agency which is outside of myself – perhaps the self-revelatory agency of the leaf. We will return to this feeling of submission below.

And yet, despite the involuntary nature of the succession of analyses and sub-analyses, I am still doing the mental work of analysis. I am not entirely passive – *I* am the one cognizing the thing, the one whose eyes flit over the surface of the leaf, and linger on one or another of its parts. What we have, then, in the succession of analysis and sub-analysis, is free action without conscious choice. To make this step more concrete, let's return to our example: I sit and look at the red Maple leaf which has landed on my car's windshield. I accept the thing into my consciousness and hold it there, and my eyes flit over it, cognizing small brown speckles, green veins, papery crimson skin, sharply cut edges and points, etc. Now let's say that I am "struck" by the veins, and then by a particular vein. My attention, through no conscious decision of my own, is simply drawn to this vein. By continuing to incline my attention to the leaf I accept the vein into my consciousness and hold it there. I cognize the vein's cylindrical shape, its color, its

non-porosity, etc. Through all of this I am conscious of a certain passivity – I am, in being *struck* by an aspect of the leaf, partially the subject, and partially the object of the action. But this experience does not necessarily lead to the sense that my act of unbounded attention is in any way directed towards a goal. I wrote above that there is a particular "directionality" to the trajectory of analysis and sub-analysis. Up to this point in my cognition of the leaf, the directionality has not manifested itself. Thus, there is no apparent rhyme or reason to my settling on the leaf vein – there is no *telos* in sight.

As I pay unbounded attention to the leaf, the succession of analyses *seems* to me to be done for its own sake, without determinate end. But, I would like to argue, there is a natural point at which the analysis of unbounded attention ends, and it is towards this *telos* (in the sense of both cessation and goal) that the succession of analytical acts is directed. The sense of directionality does not emerge until the *telos* has been reached, if indeed the *telos* is reached at all. At such a point I would then recognize the *telos* for what it is, and then I see my former actions as being kinetic – directed towards the end I have reached. That *telos*, as we will see, is contemplation. Once contemplation has been achieved, one is able to see a sort of directionality to the successive analyses of unbounded attention, and one gets the feeling that each step was rationally plotted to contribute to the accomplishment of the eventual end.

We will now return to our example of the leaf, and see if we can make any of this more concrete. In the last mention of the leaf, we speculated that in paying unbounded attention to a leaf, I might be struck by a particular leaf vein, and then move on to cognize various aspects of the vein – its cylindrical shape, its flexibility, its relative non-porosity, its color. From this point, let us posit that I am particularly struck by the

cylindrical shape of the vein, and so my attention turns to it. In the moment I am unaware of any reason why I should have been struck by the shape of the vein, but this "striking" is not, in fact, arbitrary. Here's where sensual beauty re-enters the conversation: recall Aristotle's observation that "a sense which is in good condition acts most completely in relation to the most beautiful of its objects . . . And this activity will be the most complete and pleasant."[113] If Aristotle is right about this, then the human eye *just is* particularly drawn towards objects which possess these aspects, because such aspects *most activate* my eye, being most intelligible. My eyes love to see, and so they are especially attracted to the most intense, dramatic sort of seeing, because it is most complete and pleasant. This sort of seeing is activated by the forms of beauty – order, symmetry and definiteness.

In our analysis of the *Symposium,* we argued that beautiful things are simply the wholest, most unified objects that we encounter in our spatio-temporal world. The smooth, elegantly curving cylinder is remarkably whole. Its parts are so harmoniously arranged as to be invisible, and yet we know that they exist, that the vein is complex and not simple. It is not, at first glance, as strikingly, ravishingly beautiful as Michelangelo's *David*, but it is a small marvel of virtuosic composition. The eye and mind might pause here, but they do not stop, because as Aristotle explains, human intelligence naturally proceeds by way of unification, by adducing connections and shared identities that are cognizable only by the mind. The unplanned exploration of unbounded attention will naturally move on to understand how the thin, papery, mottled, subtly-veined plane of the

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[113] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Tr. By W.D. Ross in Jonathan Barnes Ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* Vol. II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1174b 15.

leaf is connected with the thicker vein – it is a connection of mutual support and sustenance, as collected light, water and minerals are silently, seamlessly exchanged between the parts. As Aristotle puts it, one comes gradually, unintentionally into confrontation with nature's "absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end."[114] To arrest this progression would require a distinct act of will – we might say of metaphysical chastity.

Before pressing on in our analysis, let's pause to reflect on what sort of emotional content has thus far accompanied the experience of unbounded attention. What I have discovered up to this point in my act of unbounded attention is a beauty which is present in the most unremarkable aspects of a rather insignificant object – a simple maple leaf. And yet, according to Aristotle, such a moment of discovery and enjoyment is not trivial, but a moment of the highest human importance,

> "For in loving life they love understanding and knowing; they value life for no other reason than for the sake of perception, and above all for the sake of sight; they evidently love this faculty in the highest degree because it is, in comparison with the other senses, simply a kind of knowledge." [115]

If this is true of sight in general, it is *a forteriori* true of the perception of beautiful objects. So according to Aristotle, the sort of process which is depicted in our story of the leaf is a central part of what makes life good. My eye is activated – awakened, called to the best part of life – by the beauty of a leaf vein. There are two important facts to note here. Firstly, we should remember that in this process I feel myself to be both subject and object. Secondly, we do not experience the shape of the leaf vein with cold

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[114] Aristotle, *Parts of Animals,* 1.5. Quoted in Lear, 47-8 Emphasis mine.
[115] Aristotle, *Fragments: Protrepticus* Tr. J. Barnes and G. Lawrence, in ibid., 44.26-45.3Pistelli, p. 2412.

detachment. The cylindrical structure of the leaf vein *is not a neutral fact for me*. It just does, for whatever reason and despite my best attempts at objectivity, delight me.

All this brings us to the cusp of contemplation. If beautiful objects are so delightful to humans, then the objects of contemplation are even more so, for Aristotle maintains that "not only is intellect the best thing in us, but the objects of intellect are the best of knowable objects."[116] What we see here is that if the transition from the *kineisis* of unbounded attention to the *energeia* of contemplation is to occur, a change in object will be necessary. That is, I will have transitioned from paying unbounded attention to my Maple leaf, to contemplating *psuche* as it is instantiated in the leaf (and elsewhere). The mechanics of this transition are far from obvious, and in practice they are not often explicit. There is something natural for humans, even reflexive, in extrapolating from the beautiful order of the leaf – the manifest "absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end" – to whatever shaping force, or form, or soul, that has gathered and held them in their rich, delicate harmony. The human intellect operates, as Aristotle tells us, via unification. The human soul longs, as Aristophanes tells us, for the same, and the intuited incorruptibility that comes along with wholeness. The wholeness of a leaf, observed just so, reads like a micro-demonstration of macro-level unity.

Diotima, in her oblique, slighting reference to Aristophanes, argues that we do not, in fact, long for wholeness *per se*. We long only for wholeness that is also *good.* As we saw above, in the activity of unbounded attention I experience a sort of mixed agency – I feel myself both subject and object in the action. We now see that the immediate motive force which propelled this process along was pleasure at the perception of beauty,

[116] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Ibid., 1177a20

and the end towards which it led was the happy activity of contemplation. We now can see, albeit in simple outline, the two main ingredients that combine to give one the intuition of some supra-physical co-actor in the achievement of aesthetically-activated contemplation. The first is the sense that I am being acted upon by some outside agent, and the second is the sense that this agent is guiding me towards deep and rich joy. The two ingredients combine to form an intuition of some deep connection with a benevolent, supra-physical agency – a good wholeness. Or so I will try to suggest. In what follows we will continue to unpack the experience of contemplation, with an eye to how these two ingredients manifest themselves.

2.4 Contemplative Surrender:

According to Arthur Schopenhauer, in the act of contemplation a person becomes a "pure will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge."[117] It is a notion that is echoed in T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton":

> *"The inner freedom from the practical desire*
> *The release from action and suffering, release from the inner*
> *And the outer compulsion"*

Why might this be? How can we make sense of the temporary death of *eros*? Firstly, recall that in the act of unbounded attention, I do not encounter the leaf with a view to its usefulness. As Schopenhauer would have it, in contemplation I encounter the thing as a "pure subject of knowing," not as an agent. Similarly, Paul Valéry writes that in dance one inhabits a world in which "there is no object to grasp, to attain, to repulse or run

[117] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Trans. E.F.J. Payne excerpted in R. Kearney and D. Rasmussen, *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 51.

away from, no object which puts a precise end to action and gives movements first an outward direction and co-ordination, then a clear and definite conclusion."[118] A contemplator, in the act of contemplation, inhabits just such a world – a world of pure *Energeia.*

Secondly, and more importantly, I would like to suggest that in contemplation, *eros* is extinguished by a sense of the fundamental unity of observed phenomena, a sweeping, salutary unity that in one sense or another comprehends even the contemplator herself. This line of argument assumes the Platonic understanding, articulated by Aristophanes, that *eros* is at base a sense of particular lack, and an inclination not just towards possession, but towards unification with the desired thing**.** The experience of one's own unity with the rest of the cosmos is a familiar aspect of aesthetic contemplation. Evelyn Underhill writes that in moments of contemplation of nature one discovers that "hints of a marvelous truth, a unity whose note is ineffable peace, shine in created things."[119] In commenting on Ruskin, Graham Hough writes

> "It is Ruskin's special distinction to show . . . how the experience of the senses can lead directly to that unified apprehension of nature, and of ourselves as part of nature, which can fairly constantly be recognized . . . not only as that which gives value to aesthetic experience but also as one of the major consolations of philosophy."[120]

Insofar as the contemplator experiences this sense of unity, acquisitive urges would seem rather moot. I can pleasurably (because as Aristotle writes, like finds pleasure in like) contemplate the vast sea of variation around me, knowing that we all participate in some higher form of unity, that our ends are not so opposed as they often appear. This

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[118] Paul Valéry "Philosophy of the Dance" in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Vol.13: Aesthetics,* Ed. Jackson Mathews, Tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 205.
[119] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, 4th ed., 1912), p. 87.
[120] Graham Hough, *Image and Experience* (London: Duckworth, 1960), p. 176.

comports perfectly with Diotima's description of the object of contemplation, which is "as it is alone by itself and with itself, always being of a single form; while all other things that share in it do so in such a way that while it neither becomes anything more or less, nor is affected at all, the rest do come to be and perish."[121] In contemplation, I cease to desire because I see myself as co-participant, brother to everything that is. Scarcity and competition are exposed as illusory. It is a good wholeness.

Such wholeness requires contact with some shared, supra-physical reality. Were there no common element to the unspeakably various phenomena of the world, then any perception of unity would be impossible. As Eliot writes elsewhere in "Burnt Norton,"

" . . . Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance."

According to Eliot, if there is to be a unified dance, rather than mere chaotic thrashing, then there must be a single, ordering still point – in Aristotle's account, there is *nous* towards which all souls incline, and in which the human mind participates. So then in contemplation I am aware, on some level, that the same soul-striving which underlies the being of the leaf underlies my own being. If contemplation is to grant the experience of unity (and of course such experience does occur) then it cannot paper over that real diversity. Recall these lines from Burnt Norton:

". . . Erhebung without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit . . ."

Aesthetic contemplation is an *erhebung* – an elevation, an uprising, a view from above – that takes place without motion, an ascent that takes place with one's feet planted firmly

[121] *Symposium* 210E-211B

on the ground. Aesthetic contemplation thus takes the transcendent as its object, but it is particularly a transcendent that is embedded in the world of individual leaves and fingernails, bacteria and brains. Aesthetic contemplation is "concentration without elimination."

And yet, again, I am not wholly responsible for the achievement of contemplation. It seems that this trajectory was, in Valery's words, "strangely spontaneous, but at the same time strangely contrived and, assuredly, planned." This sense of the contrived, planned nature of unbounded attention and contemplation lends the sense of outside volition to the process. The pleasure and happiness that come from perceiving beauty and contemplating *nous* convince the beholder that the "still point" which has been laboring to reveal itself, must be not only willful, but benevolent.

The experience of participatory unity could be described, in an Aristotelian key, as the intuition of universal friendship. Friendship, for Aristotle, is a state of mutual good will, which is mutually acknowledged. In the *Rhetoric,* he defines it as "wanting for someone [else] what one thinks good, for his sake and not for one's own, and being inclined, so far as one can, to do such things for him."[122] Aristotle thinks that true friends love each other not for what they can gain from the other, but simply because of the virtuous character that they display. In such a friendship, one loves his friend for what *he himself is*, because virtue is an excellence of the thing that possesses it, in accord with its nature. Thus a virtuous person excels at being a *person*. When I love the virtue that I see

[122] Quoted in John M. Cooper "Aristotle on Friendship" in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 302. Hereafter cited as Cooper

in my friend, I am loving an abundance of "*himness*." He is living out his essence with unusual virtuosity, and I love that essence.

Aristotle thinks that sharing common desires with another person provides an automatic entry into a friendly relationship. He writes that "necessarily one is a friend to another person if one shares the other's pleasure in good things and his distress at painful things."[123] This embryonic friendship of common goals may happen "necessarily," but complete friendship is an achievement, in which the good person is "related to his friend as he is to himself, since the friend is another himself."[124] Complete friendship, then, constitutes a major change – one might say a conversion – in the soul of the true friend. And indeed, Havel reports feeling a powerful sense of *harmony* with the world around him, which implies a straining towards a common goal. What's more, this common goal is not some peripheral desire, but like the virtue that ties true friends together, it is the very core of Havel's own being, and of the people, plants and animals around him. Not only does the experience of metaphysical beauty contain a sense that I share a common *telos* with all of the living things around me, but also that those things act towards me in a benevolent way, which helps me to better imitate god in the particularly human way – contemplation. Havel writes of

> "a feeling of joyous meaningfulness because we suddenly feel that the thing have been constantly reaching out for is almost physically within our grasp, because it is not just we who are greedily open to it; our counterpart, too, has opened itself to us . . . I feel like saying that a sort of 'mystic cooperation' occurs . . ."[125]

[123] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1381a4
[124] *Ibid.,* 1166a30
[125] Havel, *Letters,* 265, emphasis mine

In the wake of such an experience, one is struck by a sense of being "at home" in the world, situated among friends. She is pleased because she sees that the world is intelligible, but also because she sees that in the deepest possible sense, she *fits* here; she is such a creature as to be delighted by her environment, and her environment is such a place as to aid her in her progression towards this delight. It is just such a feeling of fittingness that grants Havel what he describes as a "sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced."

There is, up to this point, one aspect of Havel's experience that sets it dramatically apart from the philosophical accounts we've unpacked above. That is, his experience of contemplation was unintentional – it was the result neither of a methodical rung-by-rung ascent, or a studious scientific exploration of nature. Havel seems to have experienced an epiphany; the deep, spiritual knowledge he lays claim to simply burst upon him unawares. So what was it about Havel's experience of the tree propelled him so suddenly into an act of contemplation? I'd like to suggest that the way towards aesthetic contemplation was cleared, for Havel, by an experience of what is properly called 'sublimity.'

We have seen that according to Aristotle, the *ability* to detect the presence of soul needs to be augmented by an *inclination* to philosophy. Without this combination of ability and inclination, what Havel calls the "great and mysterious order" of nature is not evident. But what does it mean to be inclined to philosophy? Philosophy is, of course, a love of wisdom, and wisdom is knowledge of the highest principles. It is this love that motivates the philosopher to forsake more practical undertakings for the life of

contemplation. But this love has a flip-side. Aristotle famously writes that philosophy begins in wonder. We tend to associate wonder with joy, exultation, delight. However, there is an element of discontent to wonder, for as Aristotle writes, a man who wonders "thinks himself ignorant" and philosophizes to "escape" that ignorance.[126] Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, is more explicit: "Wonder is a kind of fear which results from an awareness of something which is too great for our capacity."[127] So while it is true to say that one who is inclined to philosophy simply loves wisdom, it is also true to say that such a person feels acutely a sort of fear, based on the lack of wisdom, the inability to understand. In the next few pages, I will suggest that Havel's epiphany, his unplanned, whirlwind experience of contemplation, is facilitated by an equally unplanned experience of wonder – that is, an experience of the sublime. To explore this point, we will turn to Immanuel Kant, and his justly famous treatment of sublimity.

2.5 The Sublime as Preparation for Epiphany

In Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the experience of the sublime is described as a sort of mental agitation, in contrast to the "restful contemplation" of beauty.[128] This agitation is a "vibration," or back and forth movement, between repulsion and attraction. It can be stimulated by an aesthetic experience in which the individual is confronted with a sensible phenomenon whose magnitude or might overawes his imagination. But no object, however large or powerful, is itself sublime. Rather,

> "what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be

[126] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b17
[127] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* II II 180 3 ad3, trans. Simon Tugwell, O.P. in *The Classics of Western Spirituality, Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (Paulist Press, 1988)
[128] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,* trans. Werner Pluhar (Hackett, 1987), 115

> exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility. Thus the vast ocean heaved up by storms cannot be called sublime. The sight of it is horrible; and one must already have filled one's mind with all sorts of ideas if such an intuition is to attune it to a feeling that is itself sublime, inasmuch as the mind is induced to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness."[129]

"Sublime" phenomena act as a sort of whip that drives the mind away from the sensible, to its true vocation, which lies above and beyond the material world. However, the mere sight of "sublime" nature is not enough. One's mind must be prepared by a knowledge, however rudimentary or hidden, of humanity's supersensible vocation. Utterly uncultured individuals lack such knowledge, and thus will experience "sublime" nature as merely horrible. On the other hand, cultured individuals can be prompted to the feeling of sublimity by a wide array of sensible catalysts.[130] For such people the frustration of sensible goals results in a fearful, but merely "momentary inhibition of the vital forces, followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger."[131] The enormous quantity of a "sublime" phenomenon makes the individual feel small, inadequate, even doomed. But such a feeling of deprivation is followed immediately by an invigorating restoration, a "negative pleasure." This pleasure, as we will see, coincides with a feeling of respect for the supersensible vocation of humanity. In order to see how Kant thinks the experience of the sublime can foster such respect, we will now turn to the two sub-categories of sublimity: the mathematical and the dynamical.

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[129] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 99. For convenience's sake I will refer to "sublime" objects, always bracketed by scare quotes to remind the reader that such a designation is not, for Kant, accurate.

[130] "It is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas." Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*124

[131] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*98

The mathematical sublime results from an encounter with the "absolutely large."[132] This is not a judgment of relative magnitude; the object of the mathematically sublime is judged to be large in and of itself, large "beyond all comparison." This is one important reason why Kant does not think that any sensible object can be properly called sublime – actual, physical magnitude is always relative. For any particular perception of largeness or smallness, telescopes and microscopes show us that there could always be something larger or smaller.[133] However, a thing need not be *actually* large beyond all comparison to instigate an experience of the mathematical sublime. It need only be so large as to frustrate the ability of the imagination to take it in and hold it in one single, discrete image:

> For when apprehension has reached the point where the partial presentations of sensible intuition that were first apprehended are already beginning to be extinguished in the imagination, as it proceeds to apprehend further ones, the imagination then loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other; and so there is a maximum in comprehension that it cannot exceed."[134]

In such a moment, the imagination has reached its limit. For *our* senses and imagination, this object is infinite, or, at least, it carries with it the sensation of infinity. Here there is a breakdown: I am frustrated in my attempt to cognize the world around me, and at the same time, my reason, in line with its irrevocable vocation, continues to demand "totality for all given magnitudes."[135] The imagination strains to stretch itself, but cannot finally accomplish reason's demand. This interior conflict between the demands of reason and the capacities of imagination accounts for the revulsion that one experiences in the

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[132] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*103
[133] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*106
[134] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*108
[135] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*116

mathematical sublime. It also parallels the intellectual aspect of the "distance" that we described as the "problem of space" in the previous chapter.

The attraction of the mathematical sublime comes from a secondary realization, that "to be able even to think the infinite as *a whole* indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense."[136] I am struck, at some sub-articulate level, by the fact that my mental powers *can* cognize infinity, and thus *I* am not limited to the same degree that my senses and imagination are. I have within myself a supersensible power that far exceeds the world of sense, even those parts of the sensible world which literally overwhelm my sensory capacities. I am momentarily relieved from the frustration, and this is the source of sublime pleasure – it is "not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and should be called a negative pleasure."[137] In the vibrations of the mathematical sublime I vacillate between the terror of incomprehension and the reassurance that my "pure and independent reason"[138], and thus my intellectual vocation, exceeds such incomprehensible realities. It is the "mental attunement" to this fact that may properly be called sublime.

The second category of the sublime is the "dynamical sublime." This kind of sublimity is based not on the magnitude of nature, but on its might. The purest examples of dynamically "sublime" objects are drawn from brute, lifeless nature. They include

> "thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle."[139]

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[136] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*111
[137] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,* 98
[138] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*11
[139] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*120

Such phenomena, if they are to issue in sublime feeling, must not actually threaten my survival – one does not experience the sublime while crouching in his home as it is torn to splinters by a tornado. For an experience of the dynamical sublime one must simply be reminded that there exist in nature forces so powerful that I, a slender, five-foot-tall German male in my mid-sixties, say, could not hope to resist. I am hopelessly vulnerable. All of my natural concerns: "property, health, and life"[140] could be taken from me by the nullifying force of brute nature. Thus our day-to-day projects of survival and flourishing are called into question. If *this* hurricane doesn't kill me, something (old age, if nothing else) eventually will. The project of physical survival will not, finally, be successful. This is the source of the repulsion felt when one encounters an example of dynamical sublimity. It also matches well with disintegration, the "problem of time" outlined in the previous chapter.

The attraction of dynamical sublimity is analogous to the attraction of mathematical sublimity. As I realize the definite limits of my physical agency, I am struck by the indestructibility of my moral vocation. In this way the dynamical sublime

> "reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us. This keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded, even though a human being would have to succumb to the dominance of nature."[141]

The surest and most dire threats of physical annihilation cannot force me to behave in a way that I reject as immoral. I am free to pursue, and hopefully attain, my moral vocation despite the crushing physical superiority of brute nature. Once again, the

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[140] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*121
[141] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment,*121

"inhibition" of exterior frustration is balanced by the negative pleasure of realizing one's indomitable interior vocation.

This is the basic shape of sublimity according to Kant. My account thus far has focused on Kant's archetypes of sublimity. However, Havel's aesthetic epiphany was occasioned by an encounter with an ordinary, everyday tree, so we'll now turn to an examination of the way that sublimity can be manifest in such an encounter. Mathematical and dynamical sublimity are presented *most purely* in the excesses of brute nature. However, Kant thinks that the truly cultured person can be spurred towards sublime feeling by any number of sensible objects, even, as in our case, an ordinary tree. How might this be so? Firstly, how could a tree represent *mathematical* sublimity? Not, we may assume, by sheer magnitude. Rather, let me suggest, we could posit something that I will call *interior* mathematical sublimity. Instead of stretching outward like a pyramid or vast mountain range, interior mathematical sublimity would consist in an inward bottomlessness, a sense that the innermost workings of the organism are, finally, inaccessible to us human knowers. Our sciences, and especially physics, aim to map out an explanatory basement, an account of the sub-atomic forces that finally undergird the structure of our world. But even if we embrace an account like string theory we can always wonder what accounts for the cohesion and function of these tiny vibrating strings of energy. Physical matter has depths which seem fated to remain mysterious.

How, on the other hand might a tree manifest *dynamic* sublimity? Again, the mode must be different from that of Kant's exemplars. It is hard to see how any normal tree could express a threat as overwhelming to me as a hurricane or stormy sea. But the inevitability of death need not be expressed only in relation to "horrible" dangers like

storms and cliffs. It is true that such horrible dangers threaten to finally frustrate my project of survival, but in any case, the fact is that my project *will* come to an end. My body *will* be destroyed, if not from without, then from within – it is simply not meant to hold together indefinitely. One might refer to this as a sort of interior dynamic sublime. And if we recognize that *my* vulnerability is only the most immediate and intense example of the universal fact of dissolution – the problem of time – then a tree could manifest dynamic sublimity through *its* vulnerability, by demonstrating that *this* organism and indeed *all* organisms, are doomed to disintegration.

At this point we return to Havel's description of the tree: it is "enormous," stretching out its branches with "dignified repose, up and over all the fences, wires, bars and watchtowers" as its leaves "tremble imperceptibly" against "an endless sky." I would like to suggest that this description manifests an experience of interior sublimity. First, the interior mathematical sublime: the ascription of "dignity" to the "enormous" tree suggests, in my view, a sense of the ceaseless, unfathomable virtuosity with which nature conducts its affairs, independent of human comprehension or control. In this connection, Havel remarks that, in his words, nature has "its own great and mysterious order, its own direction."[142] The precise nature of this order is fated to remain mysterious to us, and as Kant instructs, that mysteriousness is cause for pain. Thus Havel: "this joy formed a strange alliance in me with a vague horror at the inapprehensibility and unattainability of everything I was so close to in that moment, standing at the very "edge of the infinite."' This "strange alliance" between horror and joy is precisely the experience of sublimity. Havel is here confronted with the fact that the human quest for total understanding and

[142] Havel, *Letters,* 264

control is destined to remain frustrated. However, the "vague horror" is the lesser part of the experience. His gaze is cast upward in contemplation, towards a transcendent reality

This latter idea – the uncontrollability of the world, brings us to Havel's experience of the interior dynamical sublime. Recall that the tree bears leaves that "tremble imperceptibly" against an "endless sky." The beautiful, fragile drama of life takes place in an infinite universe that seems, at times, cold and indifferent to the players. Each tree, ant and person rises, trembles and falls beneath an infinite sky; we may flourish on this day or that, but the passage of time *will* see to our physical annihilation. But this intuition of disintegration seems to highlight, for Havel, something eternal. Facing the tree, he feels that he has been transported beyond the strictures of temporality. He writes,

> I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of
> state outside time in which all the beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced
> existed in a total "co-present" . . .

So Havel suddenly feels he is in the presence of something that is invulnerable to the ravages of time, that is instantiated again and again in the particular beauties of the physical, temporal world, that courses upward from invisible depths to sensible surfaces. There is, he suddenly believes, some higher, more perfect world in which the tree, and Havel himself, participate.

Thus, he describes a feeling of "gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to me now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced." And precisely in confronting the frustration of the human epistemological eros – the desire to understand – Havel experiences a humble sense of union with the world

around him, and even a responsibility to care for it. And of course, if I feel that someone or something has reached out to me in friendship, a natural reaction is to reciprocate as best I can. Recall here Aristotle's insistence that the goodwill and altruism of friendship must be reciprocal. In another letter to his wife, Havel writes that "by perceiving ourselves as part of the river, we accept our responsibility for the river as a whole . . ."[143] All of existence becomes, in Aristotle's language, "another himself" for the man who has recognized and responded to the offer of friendship that is embedded in the experience of metaphysical beauty. This "responsibility" for the surrounding world is paired with a reaction of gratitude towards God, or nature or soul, or whatever. Havel closes his account of his epiphanic experience with this: "I would even say that I was somehow "struck by love", though I don't know precisely for whom or what."

Now, Havel's sublimity is clearly not Kantian, and thus Kant would likely be unimpressed with the conclusions that Havel reaches. In confrontation with our various finitudes, Kant takes relieved refuge in the infinity of himself – his reason and moral vocation. Havel, on the other hand, is consoled by intuitions of a transcendent reality that Kant believed in, but thought undetectable by human knowers, trapped as we are in the world of phenomena. Nevertheless, the fundamental structure of the two accounts matches to a helpful degree – in both cases there are vibrations back and forth that *begin* with the terrors of personal finitude and *expose* some consoling, mitigating infinity. Vibration is a good metaphor – the movement between finitude and infinity is a quick one, too quick to be rationally controlled. The sublime is not a matter of giving oneself a pep talk in the face of steep odds, or desperately racking one's brain for some consoling

[143] Havel, *Letters,* 301

possibility. It is rather something more natural – the exposure of a reflexive, already-present tendency to believe in consoling possibilities.

The crushing, overawing first moment of the sublime serves as a clearing away of the normal boundaries we place on attention. In the case of the dynamical sublime, it is a clearing away of the boundary of instrumental thought; in the light of my ultimate physical finitude, my day to day efforts to control my environment are shown up as futile. I drop my hands in (at least temporary) surrender, and look simply, openly, nakedly at the leaf that has fallen on my windshield. In the case of the mathematical sublime, my efforts to comprehend, to bring my questions to nature and demand an answer, are similarly exposed as futile. There is far more than I could ever comprehend – what I can glean in my short life is not even a drop in the bucket. My ignorance is exposed, and I am thrown wide open in wonder – I become the kind of person who is inclined to philosophy, who can thereby trace the lines of psychic causation that animate the world around me. Both of these clearings unbind the attention, opening it to different modes of experience. In their wake, contemplation presents itself to me as low, ripe fruit.

"A temporary feeling or opinion"

This is how it went in Havel's case – his newly unbounded attention fell squarely on the metaphysical beauty of his tree, and flung him into an unexpected experience of contemplation. So why doesn't Kant find a similar thing? It is worth noting, for one, that Kant's exemplars of sublime experience involve dead matter – these would be poor material for the discovery of *psuche*. It is also true that Kant, on principle, would be resistant to the siren song of metaphysical beauty even if he were to hear it. He is firmly

tied to the mast of metaphysical abstention before the experience of beauty or sublimity might begin. He's not the only one. Herman Melville, writing in 1851 to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, writes the following:

> "In reading some of Goethe's sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across
> this, "*Live in the all.*" That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one – good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What nonsense!"

But then at the end of the letter, he adds,

> "N.B. This "all" feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must often have felt it,
> Lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion."[144]

Now, it is entirely possible that the all-feeling is "nonsense." The problem with Melville's matter of fact dismissal is that very many decisions are made on the basis of temporary feelings and opinions – questions of who to trust, who to fight, who to hire and who to marry are all underdetermined by the bodies of tidy factual data available to us. For these sorts of decisions, face to face encounters are required, and intuitions matter. The question of exactly which temporary experiences and feelings *should be* trusted cannot be flatly, rationally decided in advance – it must be answered person by person, taking into account one's whole complex of intellectual and emotional tendencies, experiences, knowledge, etc.

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[144] Herman Melville, letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1, 1851. From Herman Melville, *The Portable Melville* ed. Jay Leyda (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 433-434.

This means that we are not only unable to speak with authority about who was right about the all-feeling, we can't finally get to the bottom of why Havel accepted it as veracious, and Melville didn't. These decisions flow from our most granular, visceral sense of reality – is reality a good gift? A miracle? An accident? The muscles we use to make such determinations are as complex and inscrutable as the sensory and cognitive muscles we use to interpret and evaluate our relationship to a potential spouse, business partner, etc. Perhaps more so. In most cases we fundamentally *find* ourselves drawn in one direction or another, more than we decide which way to go. The agnostic Jurgen Habermas, echoing Max Weber, acknowledges the givenness of belief (and non-belief) when he refers to himself as simply, irrevocably "tone-deaf in the religious sphere."[145]

The idea of faith as a mysterious gift sits comfortably, of course, in the Christian tradition. The Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard argues that in our natural inclination towards trust or mistrust, our relative openness to the music of belief, we reveal who and what we fundamentally are. All of existence, for Kierkegaard, is "arranged in such a way that you do not, with the aid of a reliability of knowledge, sneak out of disclosing yourself in judging."[146] One thing that I might disclose myself as, according to Kierkegaard, is a skeptic – in the mold of a Herman Melville, say. This epistemic posture may seem safe and responsible enough, but Kierkegaard thinks it is not. He thinks that such a person slowly moves, in a way that may be imperceptible to him, from an acknowledgement of how little he can know about his neighbor, say, to the point where he believes only evil about his neighbor. Kierkegaard thinks that this choice

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[145] Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger*, The Dialectics of Secularization*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005),11.
[146] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 228

is attractive, in some subconscious way, because you can't live entirely in limbo – beliefs will have to be embraced, and humans have a strong fear of thinking *too well* of another person, and thus being a dupe.[147] Of course, the person who thinks too poorly of her neighbor is just as wrong, but this somehow does not seem as painful as mistakenly believing the best. If the skeptic hopes to achieve happiness via this defensive epistemic posture, he is sadly mistaken. For in mistrust, Kierkegaard writes, one deceives himself "out of the highest, out of the blessedness of giving oneself, the blessedness of love!"[148]

So what does this blessed state look like? How should we imagine the condition of being trusting, open to belief, having a natural ear for the music of religion, say? A condition of loving trust is precisely what emerges in the wake of Havel's experience, and not in the wake of Melville's. If we cannot say definitively why Havel or Melville in particular went the ways they did, perhaps we can start to identify some correlations, some conditions that seem to function as a seedbed for the kind of credulity Havel expresses, and the way it resonates in his life. Kierkegaard's idea of giving oneself in love deserves a bit more examination in this connection, and will dovetail nicely with the role that sublimity has played in our explorations above. It will also begin to show how and how Havel seems to have hopscotched his way past the Aristotelian labors of study, straight to the Aristotelian beatitude of contemplation. We saw above that the sublime, as sighted in the imperceptibly trembling leaves of an ordinary tree, was one of the main engines of Havel's rapid ascent. We'll see in what follows that exogenous events can transform a person's eyes prior to the encounter with whatever specific thing might then serve as the site of a sublime experience.

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[147] Ibid., 232
[148] Ibid., 235

2.6 The soft seedbed of epiphany

In the days leading up to his encounter with the tree, the agnostic Havel was explicitly wrestling with philosophical questions, as Melville himself often did. The letters reproduced in *Letters to Olga* are saturated with searching reflections on God, human identity, ethics immortality, etc. These reflections make use of terminology borrowed from philosophers like Heidegger and Levinas, though as Havel repeatedly admits, his use of these terms is imprecise. So the questions were live for him. But there is an even more concrete aspect of Havel's inclination to philosophy, as Aristotle might put it. A talented and sensitive artist and thinker, Havel had suddenly he found himself silenced and confined by the brute power of the state. As Havel describes the tree, he is sitting on a "pile of rusty iron" separated from the tree and sky by "fences, wires, bars and watchtowers." He is exhausted from the labors of the camp, and frustrated by his captivity. So Havel's awareness of his finitude, his confrontation with a world that is too great for his capacity, is reinforced by his physical confinement. It should come as no surprise to us that thinkers from Boethius and St. Thomas more to Wittgenstein, Pound, Dostoevsky and Martin Luther King Jr. have received great insight, and even penned great masterpieces while in physical captivity. For Dostoevsky in particular, the frustration of our desires often functions as a great clarifier, an epistemic tonic. A brief examination of his understanding of humiliation will help to make some more sense of why and how some people, like Havel, can be prepared for an experience of the sublime in unexpected places, to glimpse and embrace a picture of transcendence in the gritty image of every day mundanity.

Dostoevsky's magnum opus *The Brothers Karamazov*, where we will focus our attention, was written in large part to defend Christianity against its critics, and specifically to push back against the influence of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's revolutionary-utopian best seller *What is to be Done?*. The story centers around the three Karamazov brothers, each of whom embodies a way of life – Dimitry the base sensualist, Ivan the atheist intellectual and Alyosha the Christian monk. Along the way to his defense of Christianity, Dostoevsky puts in Ivan's mouth the most devastating argument against God that I have yet encountered in my many years of reading about religion. It is so searing and beautiful that there is no way that Dostoevsky did not feel its force, down to his pious bones. Ivan's argument, briefly recounted in the introductory chapter above, amounts to a moving, terrifying recital of some indisputable facts about the world: the most salient one is that here, whoever designed this place where we live, children are tortured and killed. Adults are too, to be sure, but that's easy enough for Ivan to make a peace with – he thinks we've all done enough evil that a fair minded observer could manage to find our suffering justified. The children, though, are a different matter. Any god who would build a world where innocent children are tormented deserves no fealty or love.

As Ivan recites his argument, Dostoevsky hazards no reply. Alyosha is there, but seems undone, and can marshal little beyond defeated agreement, and then a kiss on his brother's lips. The real reply comes chapters later, in the story of the life of Alyosha's spiritual advisor, Father Zosima. Zosima begins his narrative of redemption and hope precisely where Ivan's atheist sermon crescendos – in the suffering of a child, his elder brother Markel, whose adolescent attitude towards his mother's religion mirrors Melville's attitude towards the all-feeling: "It's all nonsense, there isn't any God," he

proclaims.[149] This posture of mocking dismissal continues until, during the Great Lent, Markel becomes ill. By Easter his illness has progress significantly, and he is confined to his room. Somehow, in the welter of his painful decline, Markel's view of the world changes. Zosima describes the change: "So I remember him: he sits, quiet and meek, he is sick, but his countenance is glad, joyful."[150] The young man who took pleasure in mocking and horrifying his pious mother and servants begins to participate in the religious life of the home, and to exhort his faltering mother: "do not weep, life is paradise and we are all in paradise, but we do not want to know it, and if we did want to know it, tomorrow there would be paradise the world over."[151]

Key to this paradisiacal reading of our condition, far, far removed from the hellscape that Ivan paints (with undeniably true colors) is the element of humility. We might even say that for Dostoevsky, humiliation is one of the great boons of a spiritual life. Speaking to his mother, Markel effuses: "heart of my heart, my joyful one, you must know that verily each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and everything. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel it so strongly that it pains me."[152] From this new perspective, Markel turns in humble repentance both towards the people who surround him, but also towards the broader creation:

> "Birds of God, joyful birds, you, too must forgive me, because I have also sinned before you . . . there was so much of God's glory around me: birds, trees, meadows, sky, and I alone lived in shame, I alone dishonored everything, and did not notice the beauty and glory of it all."[153]

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[149] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: FSG, 1990), 287
[150] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 288
[151] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 288
[152] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 289
[153] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 289

Shame and guilt here are polar opposites. Shame is denial, a desire to hide one's true nature from oneself and others. Guilt is the letting go, the self-generous and other-generous acknowledgement of what one truly is. The experience of humiliation is an experience of liberation from stifling falsehood, and of concomitant reunion with oneself, others and even with nature. Markel's mother tries to save him from this liberation, ensuring him that he is not so guilty as he claims, and he reproves her: "Let me be sinful before everyone, but so that everyone will forgive me, and that is paradise. Am I not in paradise now?"[154]

Markel passes away, but remains in Zosima's memory "a pointer and destination from above."[155] The rest of his reflections are composed of vignettes from his life, variations on the themes set up by Markel. They are moments of stillness and humiliation, of quiet awe at the absurd beauty of reality, that mercifully explode now and then from the drudgery of our accustomed selfish blindness. As these events progress and Zosima matures, his posture comes to rhyme remarkably well with Havel's posture that day in the prison yard. Zosima and Havel both sound like rhapsodic Aristotelian scientists, experiencing great pleasure at nature's "absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end," delighting in the humble beauty of the irrational, virtuosic striving that marks and guides organic life. Zosima exclaims:

> "For each blade of grass, each little bug, ant, golden bee, knows its way amazingly, being without reason, they witness to the divine mystery, they ceaselessly enact it . . . every little leaf is striving towards the Word, sings glory to God, weeps to Christ, unbeknownst to itself, doing so through the mystery of its sinless life."[156]

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[154] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 290
[155] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* 285
[156] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov, 295*

Humiliation prepares Zosima's eyes for interior sublimity, humble awe at the incomprehensible poetry of existence. His attention is unbound from the fixations required for masterful control and self defense, freed to range honestly and nakedly over the realities presented to him. The mixture of pleasure and pain that characterizes the sublime then melts away, in this telling, into the joy of beauty. The hopeful pole of the sublime vibration carries the day, and Zosima is drawn irresistibly to the contemplation of whoever or whatever it is that is engineering the symmetry, order and definiteness of natural beauty.

. . .

What does all of this say to the phenomenon of kalliphobia? What of the "rebels" whom we referenced in the beginning of this text? They reject beauty because they know – somehow – that beauty lies? For now we can at least say this much: the kalliphobes are right. A full, uninhibited experience of aesthetic contemplation is inescapably wrapped up with metaphysical intuitions. You can't have one without the other. We've confined ourselves in this chapter to an examination of natural beauty, but music is an instructive analog. In listening to the Moonlight Sonata, there is nothing more natural and automatic than feeling in intellectual, emotional communion with the minds (composer and performers) that placed those sounds in that order. The deep, profound, consoling pleasure are wrapped up with the intrusion of intellect and will into the realm of physicality. Those are the things I love when I truly love the Moonlight Sonata. The simple, sensual pleasures of rhythm and harmony are real enough – they make sound ideally cognizable, and thus offer a genuine pleasure to the ear – but mere cognizability is not sufficient to explain the depth of consolation that beautiful music can afford, and the

concomitant reverence with which humans handle their greatest cultural artifacts. To somehow lock one's attention merely on the sounds, and endeavor to experience them as pure, isolated aural phenomena, would require a massive, focused effort, and would drain them of their meaning, mystery and profoundest pleasures. If such an experience is even possible, it would no longer be an experience of music, but of systematically registering aural data. It is precisely in the meeting of minds through the vehicle of sound that music takes place.

Chapter 3: Metaphysics, Ethics and Art

Fusion and the Modern Break

3.1: Introduction

In preceding chapters, we've explored the human tendency to look beyond or beneath material reality, in search of a world richer – perhaps deeper, perhaps higher – than the one we normally inhabit. In Plato's account, the climb commences when we are ambushed by beauty - remarkable beauty, ideal arrangements of cheekbone, shoulder, ligament, melanin, seemingly too unified for this falling-to-pieces planet. These things provoke us to further eros, and to begin our climb, up and away from crass, vulgar things like flesh. They bear for us symbols of the true, distant beauty, functioning only as ladder rungs – for we properly love the ascent and the destination, not the tool that gets us there. Our love for physical things must be discarded as we go. Aristotle is more earthly, as he tends to be. He counsels us to become learned, in the process making ourselves sensitive to the thin whispers of metaphysical beauty threaded under the crust of tumultuous, variegated, ostensibly unlovely earth. Aristotle is not an aesthetic supercessionist. For him, the achievement of insight is not a matter of replacing one beauty with a better one, but rather a broadening of our perceptual possibilities. The end of this education will be more beauty – we will become able to perceive it where before we couldn't. It was always there, of course, in all the beetles, leaves and fingernails, but our untrained faculties simply weren't suited to see it. Havel's story adds only the element of epiphany to this Aristotelian picture – ordinary, often overlooked beauty jumps into his line of sight and announces itself. The brokenness of his condition makes his eyes naked, sensitive to the sublime that lives in ordinary things. Once sighted, the transcendent pole

of sublimity – the thing that makes our finitudes ok – announces itself in the tree it animates, and Havel is struck by love, though he can't say who or what he's loving. Aristotle would call it contemplation of *nous,* the greatest pleasure available to a human.

We attempted to unpack the ways that this might occur for us, for ordinary people, given even a few moments of perceptual-intellectual hospitality, paying genuine, receptive attention to a mere simple leaf. These are familiar enough experiences, but also uncommon; sighting some transcendent aspect of the material world is hard, and thus rare. The learning described by Aristotle requires a heedless, arduous pursuit of wisdom, when our social world and animal needs compel us towards practicality and control; there are powers to amass, competitors to overcome, goods to secure. The defenseless receptivity described by Simone Weil, on the other hand, is terrifying – you have to fight hard to release your grip, and have the strength to accept what will come. If we're not broken open by Dostoevskian humiliation, or struck by the sublime, most of us will cling to the reins of control with our last shred of strength.

Absent such vision breaking, most of us maintain an ambivalent, half-present relationship to our material surroundings. One of the milder possibilities is boredom. If our lives pass peacefully, the days roll over us like waves on the beach – morning after morning, step after step, one subpar night of sleep after another – until they peter out in brute cessation of function. *And then . . . he stopped breathing.* After the breathing, your brother, friend, parent or lover becomes, without ceremony, some foreign, inert pile of atoms, hanging together only out of habit. At least this side of the veil of Maya, life on this particular planet tilts towards grim anticlimax, a boredom that we choose to avoid confrontation with a deeper, ineradicable alienation. We are, to some degree, strangers

here. Albert Camus, in gorgeous, hungry prose, writes of the essential foreignness of material reality:

> "A step lower and strangeness creeps in perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia."[157]

Better then, perhaps, to keep our eyes trained on the next lover, professional victory, fortifying possession. In their absence, in true quiet or attention, the "primitive hostility of the world" might overwhelm us, swallow us whole spiritually before our bodies give us up to death. These fragments, as T.S. Eliot puts it, we shore against our ruin.

But we don't want this. It's a recipe for avoidance, disengagement, and half-lived life. We may embrace distraction more often than not, but it cashes out to what Thoreau calls "lives of quiet desperation." What we truly want is harmonious engagement with our surroundings, or at least a plausible promise of same. Happily, humans are the great adaptors – the philosophers we've treated in earlier chapters have offered us advice about how we might adapt our intellectual-spiritual posture, and in so doing come to experience the existing world in a new and better way, with beauty serving as catalyst, telos, etc. But adaptation runs both ways – the material world need not stay exactly as it is. We can change it a thousand ways, and of course we do. This brings us to art – the other great site of aesthetic experience – a rakish, raw, quixotic attempt to simultaneously adapt the material world to our demands, and ourselves to the material world, a slashing, preposterous swipe at reconciliation.

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[157] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* (Vintage International, 2018), 26.

Art-making is so ubiquitous as to seem obvious. *Of course* we carve, paint, compose, modify matter to reflect our inner life, deepest values, highest hopes, whatever. But it's not obvious. The other animals attempt no such feat. It's wild, almost gluttonous, if you step back and look at it; we have homes, cities, cars, clothes, antibiotics, dams and safe, comfortable airplanes, and yet we still can't leave the material world alone, can't bear to let it lay dumb, staring eyeless – daring, even, not to stare – at our fluttering feelings, our penetrating perceptions. And so we keep chasing it, wood and cloth, pigment, plastic and stone, paper, whatever else, with knives, brushes, chisels and more, to make matter look back, make it mirror the depths of desire and belief we nurse like our dearest personal deformities.

And what else could we do? Accept our aloneness, perched singly on fragile spindle-peaks of consciousness, listing in breezes, biding the time till our bodies rejoin the inanimate mud? No – it's out of the question; there's little we're *less* suited for than that. A million distractions, sins, conquests, hungers, loves, religions and philosophies come hurtling out from our innermost regions to fend off such acceptance. And so just as every civilization has priests, shamans, mystics, every civilization has artists, restless individuals who look hard at matter, and develop methods of pressing into its flesh one more earthly emblem, another record of what we've been and desired. It's hard to say, at first glance, what could possibly change at the latest pressing, except maybe now the earth around us feels a little more like a home than some alienating exile. But something important does *seem* to change; there is some alchemy here, something verging on transubstantiation when a great artist finally catches up to the piece of matter she's been

chasing. It's all out of proportion; it's insane. Colored mud smeared on canvas shouldn't matter at all – it's as small and insignificant as anything could be.

And yet we can all attest, anyone who's ever really given himself over to an aesthetic marvel, ever laid himself naked before a canvas, that if the work is good, there are depths of nuance and understanding there, spoken with the flick of a wrist, that make you wonder what else in our wide cosmos evades verbal comprehension. A simple, smooth stroke of blood-brown oil paint, and Rembrandt has somehow embodied something deep and real that you hadn't even realized laid at the beating heart of your inner life, aching towards some inchoate, unplumbed expansiveness. You see it somehow, and suddenly. You're ambushed by recognition, the shock of it – something deep, dimly felt, now openly announced in color, texture and shape. Less alone now. Possibly ok. This is more than we have any earthly right to expect. It's insane.

To quote Hegel again, "In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas, and art is often the key, and in many nations the sole key, to understanding their philosophy and religion."[158] In great music and film, poetry and painting, humans find ways to plant some deep account of truth and hope into the rough, dense matter we inhabit. A poet beholds a leaf or a hand or a broken, headless statue, and reads in them a microcosm of wisdom and beauty, calling her readers, by careful, rhythmic recitation, to a wonder-struck, contemplative engagement with the banal particularities of a regular Tuesday afternoon, and whatever lies above / beneath them. A painter makes a picture that ties the parts of a landscape together with unimaginably subtle harmony and balance, teasing some deeper, longed-for reconciliation, making

[158] Hegel, *Aesthetics,* p. 8

eschatological promises that – who knows? – might be unkeepable. The atheist Camus thought they were, and so, he said, beauty was a cruel lie.[159]

3.2: The Wild Ubiquity of Art

Up until now, our exploration has focused on natural beauty because it is simpler – the vagaries of various human intentions don't come into the picture there. If our concern is with the transcendent element of our aesthetic experience, the transcendent element can be directly implicated in natural beauty. *I* didn't make this flower develop these petals, and neither did you. Who or what did? Where did all of this come from? Art is a step removed from those existential questions, and thus seeing the connection to transcendence is a step more complicated. It's easy enough to read personality into a work of art – a bravura passage, a sly evasion, a courageous statement, an ardent overture – but what does this have to do with transcendence? Maybe it's clear enough when we look at a painting by Caravaggio, or liturgical work by J.S. Bach. These artists explicitly strove to lay out some understanding of the Divine into vibrations, colors, etc. But what about the rest of the artworks? What about the work we're making and appreciating now? We seem to be awash in art about unrequited love, the superiority of my political side, the wickedness of capitalism and racism, the vagaries of human emotion, etc. I wrote at the beginning of this text that the experience of beauty just is an experience of transcendence. How is this true of any of these more pedestrian kinds of art? How, if at all, is Hegel right when he says that works of art are often the key to understanding a people's philosophy and religion?

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[159] Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942* (Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 65

We are in an especially strange moment right now in our relation to art; we know that it's valuable, but we don't necessarily know why, we don't know what art fundamentally *is.* By some measures we've never valued it more highly – the buying and selling of fine art has never been more lucrative. The top ten largest art sales in history, all in excess of $100 million, have taken place in the past seven years. And yet we're also at a uniquely rudderless moment. Everyone seems to agree that Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son" and Picasso's "Guernica" are fine, important works of art. But we also hear true stories wherein a glove or pair of glasses is accidentally dropped in a museum, and the patrons step gingerly around, not wanting to disturb an object that might be, as far as they know, an invaluable masterpiece. The patrons are not insane; perhaps our current understanding of art is. And yet – there's nothing new under the sun. Even the wildest extremities of contemporary art participate in the ancient human longings for transcendence and reconciliation. Their attempts to outline a path to these desiderata are much of what the hedge funders and real estate tycoons are paying all of those millions to acquire. It will take some explaining to see how. We'll begin with an overview of Hegel's aesthetic theory, that last great gasp of full-bored metaphysical aesthetics, before the various solvents of modernity gained critical purchase.

Hegel's announcement of art's modern demise is well known: "Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead."[160] Hegel thinks that the chief agent of art's downfall is the ineluctable human journey towards more abstract, linguistic ways of knowing. In order to truly grasp the rationale behind this

[160] GWF Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 11. Hereafter *Aesthetics.*

announcement, we need first to understand what Hegel thought to be the end of art in the first place; that is, the goal or the purpose – we must understand art "considered in its highest vocation." In Hegel's mind, this highest vocation was entirely fulfilled in Classical Greek art, and nowhere else. True, there was at least one other major flowering of art that took place towards the end of the Christian Middle Ages, but the art of Ancient Greece remains, for Hegel, art's one *true* apotheosis. Thus, we will examine the history of Greek art, as told in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, framed by his more theoretical treatment of the purpose of art in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art.*

3.3: Hegel's Framework

We begin with a short general sketch of the purpose of art, culled from Hegel's *Lectures.* In the following quote, Hegel lays out most of the elements that we will be unpacking in this first section. Hegel thinks that art, in its highest vocation is one way

> "of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit. In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas . . . Art shares this vocation with religion and philosophy, but in a special way, namely by displaying even the highest [reality] sensuously, bringing it thereby nearer to the senses, to feeling, and to nature's mode of appearance. What is thus displayed is the depth of a supersessions world which thought pierces and sets up at first as a *beyond* in contrast with immediate consciousness and present feeling."[161]

At the end of this quote we see again the monumental human problem to which art is an initial solution. Hegel thinks that through intellectual reflection, we come to the belief that there lies behind all the disparate phenomena of the world one single life spirit which is "beyond" the rocks, ants, noses and clouds that make up the world of appearance. This is the Divine (also possibly rendered as "the absolute" or "spirit" or "mind") who is in

[161] *Aesthetics,* p. 8

essence "unity and universality."[162] But here's the problem: between these two realms there is an apparently unbridgeable gap – just one of the dualistic fissures that Hegel's generation of thinkers inherited from Kant, and sought so strenuously to overcome.

The initial illusion that the Divine spirit is *beyond* the realm of nature is mirrored by a similarly illusory appearance of bifurcation within the human subject; that of Cartesian or Kantian mind-body dualism. Hegel writes, "man as spirit *duplicates* himself, in that (i) he *is* as things in nature are, but (ii) he is just as much *for* himself; he sees himself, represents himself to himself . . .."[163] If "we" can contemplate our bodies as if they were mere objects, then what is the status of those bodies? Are they foreign to "us"? If we are to be at home in our bodies we must see ourselves as integral combinations of soul and matter – true hylomorphs. Similarly, if we are to be at home in the world, we must see it as a similarly integral combination. We can do our best to fashion some kind of tolerable existence in the cold mechanistic universe of Newtonian physics, but we can never truly be at home there.

The entire thrust of Hegel's philosophy is to acknowledge such divisions (in encyclopedic fashion) while insisting that they are ultimately reconciled in the higher unity of Spirit, which innervates all of reality, whether human, animal, plant or mineral. Thus, the fundamental human urge towards artistry is conceived as being just a part of this struggle to wrest spiritual unity from the diaspora of material diversity. What intellectual reflection has put asunder, art can join together. Art is, Hegel writes, "the first reconciling middle term between pure thought and what is merely external, sensuous,

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[162] *Aesthetics,* p. 175
[163] *Aesthetics,* p. 31

transient . . ."[164] So art helps us to see that the "beyond" of mind is not really beyond at all, but immanent in every detail of nature. The division of mind and matter is cancelled. Thus, in his work the artist really seeks to "strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself."[165] When art is fulfilling its highest vocation it allows one to become reconciled with the world around him, and indeed with his own body, which he had formerly experienced as partially alien and other. In art, religion and philosophy, we strive to be at home with ourselves, with our society, and with nature. Art must thus demonstrate for us the perfect interpenetration of spirit and matter.

Hegel thinks that fine art accomplishes this by presenting the seamless unity of (spiritual) content and (physical) form, or "meaning and shape."[166] This demand for perfect unity places substantial strictures on both content and form. Recall the lengthy quote at the beginning of this section, in which Hegel asserted that the highest vocation of art was "bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit. In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas."[167] The ideal content of fine art is the Divine, which is in itself pure unity and universality. But as such, there could never be a physical form adequate to express such content. Hegel sees this fact as attested to by both Jews and Muslims, who forbid any attempt to set the image of the Divine into physical form.[168]

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[164] *Aesthetics,* p. 8
[165] *Aesthetics,* p. 31
[166] *Aesthetics,* p. 602
[167] *Aesthetics,* p. 8
[168] *Aesthetics,* p. 171

But if this perfect fusion of form and meaning is impossible, then art in its highest vocation is, and always has been, impossible – not just "a thing of the past" for us moderns. The answer to this conundrum is found in the fact that the moral laws of human societies are themselves determinate spiritual images of the one universal divinity. These "deepest interests of mankind, and . . . most comprehensive truths of the spirit" are approximations of the one Divinity, shrunk down to a level which can be instantiated in physical form. These "interests" and "truths" are, in the case of Greek art, the moral dictates of the Greek city and household gods:

> "These interests are the essential needs of the human heart, the inherently necessary aims of action, justified and rational in themselves, and precisely therefore the universal, eternal, powers of spiritual existence; not the absolutely Divine itself, but the sons of an absolute Idea and therefore dominant and valid; children of the one universal truth, although only determinate particular factors thereof."[169]

The demands of these parochial deities are "children of the one universal truth" and as such they share in the divinity of their father, while admitting of physical instantiation in a way that their father, who is pure "unity and universality," cannot. Here we have the ultimate content of art: the "justified and rational" moral imperatives of parochial gods, microcosms of the one true Divinity.

In a reciprocal way, fine art also allows but a limited range of forms, for "not every artistic configuration is capable of expressing and displaying those interests, of absorbing and reproducing them; on the contrary, by a definite content the form appropriate to it is also made definite."[170] For art, in its highest vocation, the Divine is

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[169] *Aesthetics,* p. 220
[170] *Aesthetics,* p. 13

the necessary "definite" content. The formal correlate of this content is the human body, which is thus *the* paradigmatic form of art. Hegel thinks that this is the case because:

> "the external human form alone is capable of revealing the spiritual in a sensuous way… through the eye we look into a man's soul, just as his spiritual character is expressed by his whole demeanor in general. If therefore the bodily presence belongs to spirit as *its* existence, spirit belongs to the body as the body's inner being and is not an inwardness foreign to the external shape, so that the material aspect neither has in itself, nor hints at, some other meaning."[171]

Thus, the human body, as hylomorphic interpenetration of soul and matter, is the *best possible* corporeal form that art can adopt if it is to function as the "reconciling middle term" between universal Spirit and particular, physical things. The "material aspect" of the body springs from the soul, and the soul is made concrete and actual in the body. No other "meaning," or content, could produce this form. Form and matter, the inner and the outer, are necessarily, intimately linked. It is just this combination that Greek art alone possesses, and it is thus that art reached its apotheosis long before the birth of Christian Europe. We now turn to the story of Greek art as presented in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* to see how Greek art took shape, developed, and ultimately, died.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel aims to chart the various stages through which the Divine progressively reveals itself to itself, gradually becoming aware that it is the universal root and life force of all things, that all things are contained within it. This is the final unification into which the illusion of differentiation will eventually vanish. Hegel often uses the language of traditional religion, but the Divinity of his system is not an entity which exists prior to and apart from the physical universe. It is completely embedded in its creation. Human beings, like the rest of nature, spring from and are

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[171] *Aesthetics,* pp. 433-4

animated by this one universal spirit, but humans also have a specific role to play in Spirit's march towards self-consciousness. This is because human beings, alone among all creatures, can come to self-consciousness, and thus to the eventual realization that they, and all of their surroundings, are instantiations of the one universal Mind. Humans are thus *the* cognitive organs through which Spirit realizes its own nature. Without them Spirit would remain in blind oblivion. This realization takes shape slowly and gradually on the stage of history, and various (mostly European) civilizations play a part in the drama. Greek art is an important step along the way. Hegel enumerates three stages of Greek art, through which the Greek people come to greater self-consciousness; that is, they come to greater consciousness of their unity with universal Mind. Hegel calls the first stage the abstract work of art, the second religious cult, and the third the spiritual work of art.

3.4: The abstract work of art

In the stage the paradigmatic work of art is a statue of a parochial god in idealized human form, representing the spirit and "deepest interests" of either a particular city or household. Though this first work of art is imperfect, nevertheless "this simple shape has . . . eliminated in itself the unrest of infinite individuation."[172] In other words, from the standpoint of an individual, a given city or household can *seem* like a cacophony of individual people and things, all attending to disparate tasks. In the "motionless individuality" of the statue-god, that specter of chaotic differentiation is eliminated. The

[172] GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2019) 708. Hereafter cited as *PhG*

members of a household or city recognize in this idealized human form a concrete distillation of the "spirit" or "interest" that motivates and unites them in their various tasks, and "an admiring multitude honors [the statue-god] as the spirit which is their essence."[173] However, in order to achieve this ideal universality, the artist must, in the act of creation, empty himself of his own individuality. The artist thus recognizes his own distance from and superiority to the created thing (which is still a mere thing), and to the admiring multitude. He is at this point still alienated from them, and thus art's work of reconciliation is incomplete. The statue is, as it were, too abstract to fully perform its unitive task.

3.5: Religious Cult

But of course, we do not stop here, because Spirit's work of progressive self-revelation is constant and unstoppable. Spirit now demands a better way of manifesting itself in the material form of the statue. That way is the ceremonial rites of the religious cult. In cultic actions there is a two-fold movement. The Divine shape which was at rest in the statue and the Divine shape which was moving within the worshippers both give up their distinctive characteristics (constancy and change, respectively) and are united. The god comes down, as it were, from his pedestal of pure abstract ideality and becomes concretely actualized in the individual worshippers. The first stage of the cult is hymnody – language set to music. In this stage Spirit puts itself into the hymn, and all who join in the singing participate in spirit's self-consciousness. "As this universal self-consciousness of each and all, spirit has in *one* unity its pure inwardness as well as the

[173] *PhG,* p. 709

being for others and the being-for-self of the individuals."[174] The hymn serves as a thread which runs through the ephemeral inner life of the singing, self-conscious individual, and the solid universal individuality of the statue, bringing the two into a sort of unity. In the singing of hymns each person's individuality is united with the ideal individuality of the statue. This act begins to cancel the "abstract," distant nature of the statue-god, and the worshippers become, in a way, part of the art work. As Charles Taylor writes, "the unity of Divine form and the hymn of his worshippers make a new reality, an animate work of art."[175]

Now we move on to the second, more effective, realization of cult: sacrifice. As John Findlay puts it in his analysis of Hegel's understanding of cultic sacrifice, "In the cult natural objects . . . are given a Divine meaning and a Divine meaning is given concreteness and actuality."[176] On the one hand, in the act of sacrificing his personal possessions – livestock or crops – to the infinite Divinity, the worshipper unselfishly "sets aside his finitude," in order to merge with the infinite. On the other hand, the infinite divinity descends into the sacrificial victim, and then gives himself (in the flesh of the victim) back to the sacrificers for their consumption. Thus the Infinite Absolute "steps down from his merely universal and hence unreal existence and accepts his embodiment in finite *Geist* [or Spirit]."[177] In Hegel's words, this is "the positive actuality within which the *objective* existence of the essence is transmuted into *self-conscious* existence, and the self has consciousness of its unity with the essence."[178] At this point

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[174] *PhG ,* p. 710
[175] Charles Taylor, *Hegel,* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 204
[176] J.N. Findlay, "Analysis" section in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 717
[177] Taylor, p. 204
[178] *PhG,* p. 718

the abstractness of the god has been cancelled, and we move on the next stage, what Hegel calls "the living work of art."

The Greeks at this point in their development are what Hegel calls an "ethical" people; that is, each person is conscious of himself as being entirely united with his fellow Greeks in the state. The individual has left the cultic rite satisfied, and "the god takes up residence in self-consciousness [in other words, the self-conscious individual] as its site."[179] The artist is no longer alienated from the god and the masses, and thus the tension of the artist's individuality has been relaxed, and he is at peace. What's more, the god now inheres in the fruits of nature, which offer themselves to the individual. The Greek citizen feels himself to be unified with himself, his society and nature. Since in the cult the individual self knows himself to be one with the Divine, spirit has been revealed to spirit, but in an incomplete way. The absolute essence of Divinity, "having equally been emptied of its abstract being, has at first entered into the objective existence of the fruits of the earth, and then, surrendering itself to self-consciousness, has attained there its genuine actuality – it now roams about as a throng of madly rapturous women, the unrestrained revel of nature in a self-conscious shape."[180]

However, this revelation of spirit to spirit is still incomplete, for in the "throng of madly rapturous women" we are dealing with an immediate nature-spirit, not spirit as fully self-conscious. In other words, self-consciousness feels itself united with the Divine spirit of nature, but it has not yet realized that it, the concrete individual, just *is* the spirit of nature. At this point the Absolute in the guise of the artist seeks and obtains a more

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[179] *PhG, p.* 721
[180] *PhG,* p. 723

complete and vital embodiment in the Greek athletic festival. The triumphant athlete, a union of beauty and strength, is a more adequate embodiment of the national essence, a living, breathing statue-god. But all of these "living works of art" are insufficiently conscious of their total unity with the Divine. The Bacchic revelers too completely transcend their individual corporeality in the miasma of the drunken revel, and the athlete too completely corporealizes spirit – he is a "spiritless clarity."[181] Neither is sufficiently balanced. Only through language, we discover, can the inner and outer be held in an adequate balance. The enthusiastic language of the hymn will not do. We need the "clear and universal" language of literature, which will alert the Greeks to the "universality of their human existence."[182] So we must progress to the next stage, "the spiritual work of art," which is exemplified by literature; epic, tragic and comic.

3.6 The Spiritual Work of Art

In this stage language unites the "particular beautiful spirits of a people" into a harmonious Pantheon.[183] The Greek nation now becomes conscious of itself as universal humanity, though this consciousness is incomplete, as they still see themselves primarily as members of a *particular* state. Neither is the essential unity of the various civic and household gods apparent at this stage. In the first instantiation of the spiritual work of art, Homeric epic, only the bard (Homer himself) is individual and actual, and through the power of the muse he paints a universal picture. The individuality of the gods is ambiguous, since they only become actualized when their actions are interwoven with

[181] *PhG,* p. 726
[182] *PhG,* p. 726
[183] *PhG,* p. 727

(and thus embodied in) human action. The gods (and also the super-human heroes) of epic lack concrete reality. And yet neither are the gods fully universal – in all their futile comic squabbles they are subject to the immutable dictates of fate.[184] The necessity of fate thus hovers unembodied, with the bard, over the heads of the Divine and human actors. Both the Bard and Fate must be brought fully into the picture. This is precisely what happens in the next stage: tragedy. Firstly, the bard enters the picture, as language is now wielded by an actual human actor on stage. These characters do not speak and act unconsciously, but rather "bring the inner essence to expression, they demonstrate the right of their action."[185] One could think here of Antigone, who embodies and expresses the essence of fidelity to familial Divine law, in her determination to bury her slain brother. Conversely, Creon embodies civic law in refusing to allow Antigone to do so. The chorus of elders plays a similar role for the essence of conventional wisdom. The chorus does not express deep insight, but helplessly gives expression to fearful, pitiful resignation before the dictates of an alien fate which it wishes to appease. In tragedy the Divine "interests" are expressed as either familial divinity or civic divinity – Antigone or Creon.

The tragic hero seeks the light of truth, but even this truth (such as that given to Oedipus) is not to be trusted, for it is the tool of fate. The hero inevitably, and fatally, misses the warning signs which would alert him to this fact. Zeus mediates between the light of truth and the dark, hidden purposes of the furies, but the struggle of these two forces always ends in the death of the hero. This death is tragic because any agent (like Antigone or Creon) who is motivated by parochial principles is vulnerable to "a demise

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[184] *PhG,,* p. 731
[185] *PhG*, p. 733

with which he is unreconciled, for it signifies the negation of what he stood for, not its fulfillment."[186] If these downfalls are to be seen as anything other than annihilation, then the individual must realize that her ultimate goal is to embody a universal principle which *includes* the cycle of generation and expiration, but the hero is presently too parochial to comprehend this, so she sees her eventual destruction as the dictate of a blind and inscrutable fate.

However, by the end of the play, the agent is absolved of any crime, and the whole drama disappears into the immutable necessity of fate. Fate and Zeus, symbolizing the "spiritual unity into which everything returns"[187] become more and more central in tragedy. The chorus continues to see this unity as foreign and terrifying, but the hero is gradually coming to know that he himself *is* "the fate of the gods of the chorus, as well as that of the absolute powers themselves, and no longer separated from the chorus, from the universal consciousness."[188] Thus in tragedy the extremes of necessity (fate) and concreteness (hero) come together, when the actions of the individual bring about the will of fate so directly as to seem interwoven (as in the example of Oedipus). The parochial gods of the city and household, by contrast, are exposed as imposters. This signals the end of tragedy, and we must now move on to comedy.

With the end of tragedy, Greek society becomes disenchanted with the old claims of the parochial divinities, and the ethical principles associated with the Divine. The growth of Greek self-consciousness exposes the human face behind the curtain of Divine dictate. This disenchanting self-consciousness is embodied in the iconoclastic comedy of

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[186] Taylor, p. 205
[187] *PhG* p. 742
[188] *PhG* p. 743

Aristophanes. In comedy the common man casts aspersions on the pretense of divinity and custom, and even on his own pretensions to meaningful self-assertion. The iconoclastic move of comedy is continued by the sophists and Socrates, who denigrate custom and convention in favor of ephemeral concepts of the good and the beautiful. In comedy the individual now sees that everything is the product of human self-consciousness, and thus he knows himself as identical to the Absolute. As Taylor writes, "the religion of art thus ends in the triumph of the self-conscious whose certainty of self makes it master of all it surveys; all universality returns to it, and it recognizes no essence outside itself."[189] The content of Greek art is now exposed as fallacious, and so the form, which flowed from the content, is empty and unhinged. The stage of art-religion began when the Greek artisan saw that the most perfect symbolization of the Divine was the human form. It now ends with a (yet imperfect) realization that the two are identical. Thus, we see that the Greek reconciliation of individual, society, and nature is only partial because it is parochial, confined merely to Greek society, and to a divinity who is "not absolute subject, but just one Divine subjectivity among many."[190] The parochial god of a particular city is recognized as being less than truly universal, and the growth of universal consciousness signals the collapse of the Greek reconciliation.

This, then, is in outline Hegel's story of the rise and fall of Greek art. We now turn back to his lectures on aesthetics, to get a bit more perspective on why Hegel thinks Greek art *had* to die, and thus also on why "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past." Recall that the highest vocation of art was to "display even the highest reality sensuously," in order to act as a middle term between particular

[189] Taylor, p. 206
[190] Taylor, p. 201

physical nature and universal spirit. To do this convincingly the artist needed to achieve a perfect unity of content and form. The content was determined by this goal – it needed to be divine, and yet not so universal as to rule out instantiation in a particular physical form. For this use the only possible content was the parochial gods of the Greek city and household. These gods alone offered a content which was simultaneously divine and particular.

The various forms of Greek art flowed necessarily from this content, in a trajectory which gave the content ever more adequate physical instantiation. That is, each successive form of art made the union of form and content more and more convincing. While more adequate than all prior forms of art, the statue-god was too abstract to truly convince the Greeks that they were identical with the "spirit" which was depicted in the idealized human form. The cult of music and sacrifice was thus necessary to ritually signify a mutual interpenetration of statue-god and worshippers. The entire history of Greek art was, in Hegel's estimation, a movement towards a more and more convincing unification of the still-constant Divinity with frenetic, transitory individuals. With each step the Greek people became more and more reconciled with themselves, their society and their land, until the union of content and form collapsed in the end of tragedy, when the content was exposed as fallacious. The highest possible content for art was now exhausted, squashed under the foot of the one universal divinity, who is too universal to be instantiated in any material form. With this event, the form of art lost its anchor, since "it is the content which, as in all human work, so also in art is decisive."[191] Art in its highest vocation became, for the Greeks, impossible.

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[191] *Aesthetics*, p. 611

3.7 Art in Modernity

And so it remains for us, according to Hegel. The Absolute is still, Hegel thinks, impervious to material instantiation. And for us moderns the "interest" or "spirit" of a finite community can never function as a proximal stand-in for the universal deity. For us, only the clarity and distinctness of philosophy or science can satisfy. In Hegel's words, art "has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place."[192] Hegel thinks that under the lens of abstract, universalizing reason, every particular "interest" will be exposed as an imposter. We are permanently stuck with Aristophanes and Socrates in the stage of comedy, interrogating and exposing any aesthetic creation as a vehicle for imposter-truth. As Taylor puts it, for Hegel, art is "subordinated as the first stage of absolute spirit to the higher realizations in religion and, at the summit of clarity, in philosophy."[193] We moderns are born, live and die on that summit of clarity, for Hegel, and so art is frankly beside the point.

If this is so, if we live in the light of universal reason, why does that mean that we can't still make truly important, moving art about our local, particular "interests"? Why does the fact of locality and particularity make our interests insufficient as content for art? Hegel answers that in the age of comedy, like the one we live in now, "the artist stands above specific consecrated forms and configurations and moves freely on his own account, independent of the subject matter and mode of conception in which the holy and

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[192] *Aesthetics,* p. 11
[193] Charles Taylor, *Hegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 49*

eternal was previously made visible to human apprehension."[194] In this age of comedy, I know that I may choose to submit myself to the customs of my city, or I may choose to subvert them. They make a claim upon my allegiance, but it is a claim which I may choose to deny if it runs afoul of my own opinions or desires. No "interest" has an immutable and objective claim on me. This is an insurmountable obstacle because Hegel thinks that true artistic inspiration can strike me only when the content (or "theme") is the very foundation of my being, until I see that I flow from it as surely as its artistic depiction flows from me. Artistic inspiration consists in "being completely filled with the theme, being entirely present in the theme, and not resting until the theme has been stamped and polished into artistic shape."[195]

Until the collapse of tragedy, the individual Greek artist was able to see his own "deepest interests" instantiated as the content of a work of art. This content constituted "the substance, the inmost truth, of his consciousness and [made] his chosen mode of presentation necessary."[196] The form emerged necessarily from the content, which the artist knew to be the spring from which his every move in life flowed. It *was* his "spirit." Hegel thinks that in the modern age we maintain a critical distance from any such interests, and thus art can never fully satisfy us, for like all people, we want "to be at home in it, living and present in [our art]"[197] but this is now impossible. Thus, art's highest vocation, to reconcile humanity with the apparently foreign external world, "is and remains for us a thing of the past." The artist is no longer able to "strip the external

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[194] *Aesthetics,* p. 605
[195] *Aesthetics*, p. 288
[196] *Aesthetics,* p. 604
[197] *Aesthetics,* p. 274

world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself."[198]

This analysis is meant to be definitive, meant to apply up to the present day. So how has it worn over the subsequent decades? Have the intervening years proved him right or wrong? As we will, see, there is much that Hegel got right; in some ways he understands late modernity better than we tend to understand it ourselves. In other ways he was less prescient. First of all, I want to argue that Hegel's view of art's highest vocation is simply correct – we humans, by deep-seated instinct, look to art to discover deep, hidden truths about reality, truths that will enable us to feel at home on this planet, among these people, and in these bodies. I will try to show this by demonstrating that the modern decision to turn away from beauty – specifically after Auschwitz – is an unwitting testament to the fundamental soundness of this view. Adorno et al rejected beauty precisely because beauty tends to point beyond itself, to something like an Absolute. It was the Absolute they meant to reject. If we did not demand of art, and find in art, the things that Hegel says we do, then kalliphobia would be without rationale. Thus, after Auschwitz, *poetry* was denounced as barbaric; comfortable slippers, sex and savory food were not. Like in the case of Greek Tragedy, the Holocaust laid siege to the prevailing ethos in a bloody, undeniable manner, exposing them it the parochial interest it had long been, and the whole edifice came crashing down. Kalliphobia is an attempt to force post-Holocaust westerners to feel what they are now required, by all standards of intellectual decency, to think. The first upshot of this story is that art is not mere entertainment or pleasure-mongering. Hegel is right – it has a categorically higher aim,

[198] *Aesthetics,* p. 31

and that fact has not changed, even in the wild welter of cultural revolution that swept through the latter half of the twentieth century.

But Hegel is no perfect prophet – some of his predictions have not been borne out. Art has not, for instance, been supplanted by philosophy. While Hegel emerged from the milieu of German Romanticism, and shared many of its concerns and longings, his itinerary diverged sharply from theirs. As Taylor puts it, Hegel "could not accept the Romantic notion of an immediate unity with the universal, or the belief in intuition which aspires to a kind of ineffable encounter with God. This unity could only be brought about by Reason . . ."[199] Nothing is lost it the Hegelian system. Hegel expected – his philosophy demanded – that the growth of reason would naturally coincide with a greater sense of belonging at every level of self and society. "If Hegel had been right," Taylor explains, "then men would have recognized themselves in the structures of the rational state, and industrial society would not have taken the path it has."[200] But modern, universalizing, rationalizing societies have not gone the way Hegel expected them to.

Indeed, as Taylor has written, modern society is a distinctly bifurcated thing, "Romantic in its private and imaginative life and utilitarian or instrumentalist in its public, effective life."[201] The persistence of Romanticism, abetted by the failure of modern rationality to obtain a grip on the emotive / spiritual lives of modern people, has complicated Hegel's story. Many modern artists have found their theme by retreating into a romantic interiority, whose dictates are every bit as binding to them as the Greek artist's

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[199] Charles Taylor, *Hegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 192.*
[200] *Hegel, 543*
[201] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 71.

were to him. This depth is still available. We could easily say for Picasso or Degas or Van Gogh what Hegel says of the Greek artist: their subject is "the substance, the inmost truth, of his consciousness" and it makes "his chosen mode of presentation necessary."[202] Art made in this modern individualistic mode can often play a double game. If challenged it can retreat into mere subjectivism – who can tell Degas what to feel? – but often aspires to a great deal more, harbors secret universalizing aims, which of course German Romanticism had in spades. Joseph Conrad writes beautifully of a solitary individualism that gives birth to a soaring universalism:

> " . . . the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities – like the vulnerable body within a steel armor. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring – and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation – and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity – the dead to the living and the living to the unborn."[203]

The modern age of comic art, of standing disillusioned above any possible theme or imperative, has thus been a more variegated, gradual, partial thing than Hegel expected. And yet, Hegel's description of modern art as comic is not entirely mistaken. Indeed, the above quote was reproduced in the American writer Saul Bellow's 1976 Nobel

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[202] *Aesthetics,* p. 604
[203] Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, (Dover Thrift Editions, 2016), *iv*

acceptance speech, but presented in a tellingly defensive manner. Bellow was, he averred, part of a generation "convinced that the horrors of the 20th Century had sickened and killed humanistic beliefs with their deadly radiations. I told myself, therefore, that Conrad's rhetoric must be resisted. But I never thought him mistaken. He spoke directly to me."[204] This suspicion of humanistic beliefs, emanating from the terrible atrocities of the twentieth century, is the root of the turn against beauty that we're calling Kalliphobia. Both match nicely with Hegel's understanding of comedy, and yet, this partial triumph of comedy in our time looks different than the triumph of Greek comedy described by Hegel. Modern comic artists, having given up on the idea of an Absolute that might be turned to after the death of our parochial customs, have found a way to infuse comedy with a certain, very different, form of humanism. Even at its most acidic, modern "comedians" have understood themselves as the bearer of ethical imperatives, prophets of a uniquely modern sort. In what follows we'll explore two kinds of art-prophecy that are operative in the modern world.

3.8 Art-making as Prophecy

Hegel's treatment of Greek art is distant, in a few senses, not least because the idea that art must be about the Absolute now strikes many people as very far from obvious. Before we jump into a deep examination of modern Kalliphobia, then, let's see if we can look at our contemporary experience of art, and bring his intuitions closer to what we all know, now. To begin with, we know that an artistic masterpiece, forged by

[204] Saul Bellow, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1976/bellow/lecture/

the hand of a recognized master, is fearsomely valuable. In 2017, a not-unattractive painting of Jesus Christ which was very likely painted in large part by the master Leonardo Da Vinci, sold for almost half a billion dollars at auction. If Amsterdam were burning, it would seem sane enough for the Dutch to evacuate some sentient creatures first, and the paintings of Rembrandt and Vermeer second – before any other material goods. This is all seems perfectly intuitive to an armchair economist; Rembrandt, Vermeer and Da Vinci only made so many paintings, and when you combine limited supply with strong demand, you get high valuation, and all the reverence that goes along with it. But why, in the first place, is there such powerful demand for attractive, useless objects like paintings and sculptures? Why do we value them at all? This question leads down into a fascinating warren of spiritual longing and physical intuition, whose tunnels are simultaneously strange and intimately familiar to most of us. Here, in our ostensibly secular age, the art gallery, museum and auction house are almost religious institutions, as Hegel might have calmly predicted; the things they house are sacred to us, for very specific, rarely-specified reasons.

Tellingly, the valuation of an artwork hinges on authenticity, which matters very little for the visual appearance of the thing – especially now, in the age of digital reproduction. The knowledge that da Vinci or Picasso or even Warhol laid his own holy hand on this object transforms an interesting or beautiful thing into a priceless treasure, whereas an art student copy– one of a kind, even more visually striking than the original – would be all but worthless. The parallel with religious ritual – say, the priest's transformation of bread into God's flesh – is hard to miss. Walter Benjamin explored it in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In it,

Benjamin writes that "we know the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind," and "the unique value of the 'authentic' work has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value."[205] The idea is that if this particular thing played some effective role in the task of the priest, shaman or witch doctor, it has helped to traverse the divide between the realms of flesh and spirit, and it's not really just a thing anymore; it is an instrument of the ultimate, longed-for traversal.

As in many other cases, we may think we've outgrown religion, but religious instincts are woven into the sinews of our experience. Benjamin posits that here, in our supposedly disenchanted age, this reverent posture survives in intuitions about the unique "aura" of an original piece of art. We don't just pay a lot of money for it; we hush ourselves in its presence, let it speak to us, attempt to bring our thoughts and emotions into concord with it, and maybe, if we open ourselves nakedly enough to whatever virtuosic assemblage of wood or metal or paint or paper stands before us, we might hear something akin to what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke heard, gazing at the archaic torso of Apollo: "You must change your life" – we might glimpse a path to some state of existence that accords with what we see, transcending the striving, preening, exhausted squalor of our normal reality. We might find this path because a great artist sought it, glimpsed it and laid it out to the best of her abilities in rough, raw matter. The act of art-making, up until our very-sophisticated present day, remains an act of prophecy, and the artwork is the vehicle that crystalizes that prophecy and preserves it for future use.

There are two distinct, sometimes overlapping forms this prophecy can take. Both are present in ancient holy books, and in contemporary art galleries. The first corresponds

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[205] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt (Mariner Books, 2019), 166.

with what Hegel would call art's highest vocation. It is a seeing of the deepest, oft-hidden realities, and it is ultimately oriented towards reconciling humans with the material world they inhabit. Artists working in this mode look at trees and faces, light and shadow, color and line and texture, and see something deep and vital, that unifies and explains the chaotic flux of physical reality. It may be something redemptive like Jehovah or *nous* or world-spirit or universal empathy, but it need not be. Maybe it's universal emptiness and decay, as in the case of Lucian Freud, maybe it's brashness and filthy vitality as in the case of Willem de Kooning, maybe it's squirming sensual oblivion as in the case of Cecily Brown. In any case, looking at their paintings we gain access to realities both deeper and higher than the concrete facts of rush hour traffic and stiff new shoes and this aging body. We come to understand our existential condition, but in a visceral, intuitive, physical-cum-mental sense, and through this understanding become more able to navigate our world, and feel at home here, reconciled with our condition. Art of this kind aims to change our eyes, our posture towards reality, and then maybe, eventually, society.

3.9 Contemporary Examples of Art as Reconciliatory Prophecy

This type of reconciliatory prophecy – and the wide variety of content it can communicate – is beautifully demonstrated by a pair of films that debuted at *Cannes* in 2011: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* and Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. They are opposite and yet in some ways equal attempts to illuminate the essential nature of reality and the best way to live in it – a picture of the Absolute, and a corresponding ethos, Hegel might say. *Melancholia* argues that reality, including life, is best understood in the light of death. *The Tree of Life* argues that reality, including death, is best understood in

the light of life. In what follows we'll take a brief tour of the two films, to see some rich examples of the way that this first kind of prophetic act can be instantiated in works of art.

Before the plot of *Melancholia* begins, there is an impressionistic prologue in which, among other things, birds fall dead from the sky, and a stark blue and white planet collides with the earth, swallowing it up. The prologue is set to Wagner's *Liebestod* (or "love-death") and it sounds a note of foreboding that rings throughout what follows. The action is set in the present day, on a great country estate overlooking the ocean, location uncertain – it is everywhere and nowhere. The sky is almost always dark or overcast. The first half of the movie is titled "Justine" and takes place over the course of a long, lavish wedding reception. The bride, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), is beautiful and successful, and she has just married a handsome, successful, doting man named Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). The stone and ivy mansion belongs to Justine's sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her proud but eminently reasonable husband John (Kiefer Sutherland). The party is flawlessly arranged and the setting is tastefully opulent; the whole affair is swathed in a rich golden light. This is, von Trier seems to say, as good as life gets. And yet, Justine is ill at ease. She has a history of depression, and on her way into the great house she glances anxiously up at the stars. It's an adumbration of things to come.

Despite the bounty of her situation and the pleading of the level-headed Claire, Justine becomes increasingly tormented and erratic over the course of the evening, falling asleep, locking herself in the bathroom, evading her new husband. She seems to bear genuine affection for Michael, but some deep, destructive misery overwhelms it. She eventually refuses to consummate her marriage, opting instead for spiteful sex on the

ground with a feckless young wedding guest whom she's just met. Michael leaves in despair. It seems that the choreographed bliss of a perfect wedding is too warm and heavy a garment for Justine to wear with equanimity. She is obliquely aware of some truth that exposes such bliss as unconscionable falsehood.

The second half of the film is titled "Claire" and is set once again on Claire and John's estate. Justine arrives at the home, barely sentient, wracked with depression. Claire plays the dutiful, worried sister, doing what she can to rouse Justine from her state, but to no avail. It soon becomes apparent that Claire herself is also tormented. There is, we discover, a heretofore unknown planet, winkingly called "Melancholia," hurtling towards earth. John, the archetype of a cheerfully confident modern rationalist, assures Claire that all the scientists' projections show Melancholia narrowly missing earth. He and their elementary-school-aged son Leo (Cameron Spurr) spend the few days leading up to the near-miss fooling around with telescopes and anticipating the show. Claire, however, is haunted by the specter of apocalypse. The threat of death seems to literally hang on the horizon.

The night before Melancholia's arrival, Claire follows Justine, unseen, into the woods. There she sees her sister, naked and prone on the forest floor, bathed in the sharp, alabaster light of Melancholia. Justine languidly caresses her naked body, and it becomes clear that this is precisely the consummation that she could not achieve with her eager, good husband. She has given herself to the vision of death. The softness and warmth have been blanched from Justine's lovely body. What remains looks like porcelain; lovely to behold, but cold to touch. It's the turning point of the film – a conversion experience. Justine had previously squirmed under the cold light of truth, but she has now allowed it

to penetrate her. In so doing she has passed into a sort of adulthood, and for the rest of the film, she is strong and impassive, no longer crippled by vague mordant premonitions.

The next night, Melancholia does exactly what the scientists said it would – it passes very near to the earth, but does not touch it. The family assembles on the patio, and watches Melancholia pass. The spectacle is breathtakingly beautiful, and Claire is relieved. Death has passed them by, and John raises a toast to life. Justine, however, seems to know something that the others do not. She alone is prepared for what happens next. The following day John discovers that contrary to all predictions, Melancholia has reversed course, and his heading back to earth. Destruction is assured. Without a word – for what words do technocratic triumphalists have in the face of death? – John slips away and kills himself.

The earth's atmosphere begins to go haywire – the air thins out and strange hail falls. Claire realizes what is happening, and desperately, hysterically, grabs onto her son and tries to flee with him to a nearby village. But the cars won't work, and she ends up trudging through the hail, struggling for breath, her son's gangly, boyish legs hanging down to her shins. The air of futility is horrifying and deflating. Claire sits, demonically cool and contemptuous, watching her sister flail. "The earth is evil" she tells her, "nobody will miss it." It's a sentiment that von Trier has expressed through a number of his films. In *Antichrist*, one of the lead characters refers to nature as "Satan's church." In the end of *Melancholia*, Justine becomes von Trier's anti-heroine, uniquely able to cope with the harsh reality. Claire is weak and undone, but Justine calmly helps her nephew to build a sort of teepee out of branches, which she tells him is a "magic cave" that can protect him from any danger. Under her direction, the three family members gather in the

cave, and join hands. Claire sobs and shakes, but Claire and Leo sit calmly while Melancholia looms closer and closer, finally swallowing all of life in a white roar.

The Tree of Life, like *Melancholia*, opens with an evocation of death, this time a reference to the book of Job. God has allowed Job's ten children to be killed, and Job asks why a good and just God would sanction this. God answers with a question, which Malick uses for the film's epigraph: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" This is not so much an answer, of course, as an invitation to ruminate on the nature of existence and our place within it. Malick's film attempts to take up this invitation, and to help its viewers to do likewise.

The Tree of Life explores facts of human suffering and death in the context of the mysterious miracle of reality. Its most central theme, as the title suggests, is the crowning achievement of existence – life. After the epigraph, the screen goes black, and then is lit from the center by a shimmering, undulating figure of light, somewhere between a flame and a ghost. Over this picture we hear the sounds of seagulls and waves on sand, and the voice of Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn) speaking to God: "Brother . . . Mother . . . it was they who led me to your door . . . " These words are a dispatch from the end of Jack's journey to redemption, and the rest of the movie is a retracing of the steps he followed, through suffering and evil and everything else, to God's door.

This way is, fittingly, a complex and elliptical one. The successive scenes do hang together, but they do so in a way that is not entirely obvious upon one's first or second or even third viewing. The viewer must trust Malick that all of this is going somewhere, and yet, at the same time, she must work to make sense of the journey as it progresses. The

very next scene recalls the childhood of Jack's seraphic mother (Jessica Chastain, who is never named in the film). She is seen viewing the natural world with wonder, and recalling the instruction of "the nuns," that there are two ways through life: the way of nature and the way of grace. Grace, she says, "doesn't try to please itself. It accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked." Nature, on the other hand, "only wants to please itself," and "finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it, when love is smiling through all things." She pledges to be faithful to the way of grace, and her pledge is immediately tested – we suddenly see her in middle age, being informed by telegram that her youngest son, R.L. (Laramie Eppler) has died at the age of 19. She is now in the position of Job – unfailingly good, cruelly afflicted and questioning God's justice.

Scenes of the grieving Mrs. O'Brien are interspersed with those of Jack's own middle age. He is a rich and successful architect in Dallas, married to a beautiful woman, and utterly without hope or joy. His environs are starkly modern and antiseptic. They are filled with sleek steel and glass, but Jack sees through the glass only darkly; he is painfully blind to the beauty arrayed outside his massive windows. He is distracted and enervated, unable even to look his wife in the eye. He is haunted by the loss of his beloved brother, and all that it implies about the human condition. Over a scene of his grieving mother, Jack asks, in voiceover, "how did she bear it?" The implied subtext is Jack's own question: "How should I?"

Jack's consideration of the question begins, like God's reply to Job, on a cosmic scale. For the next half hour, Malick guides his viewer through a mostly wordless exploration of the roots of life. There are awesomely rendered simulations of the big bang, volcanic eruptions, the cellular origins of life, early sea creatures, dinosaurs, an

asteroid and an ice age. Then jumping seamlessly forward into the twentieth century, there is a series of impressionistic vignettes that present the courtship of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, the conception and birth of Jack and his two younger brothers, a mother's tenderness, the wonder of childhood exploration, the arcing spray of a garden hose in the sun, light sparkling through tree leaves, the thrill of boyhood horseplay and the first exposure to death and disease. Simple description will not do; these scenes must be seen, and also heard – they are beautifully scored with works by Berlioz, Smetana, Gorecki and others. In all of this, the camera seems to have come loose from any earthly moorings – it glides over landscapes, spins to capture rays of light and follows romping boys in tall grass.

But if life is truly the central fact of reality, it must also be able to illuminate our ordinary days and nights. Nearly an hour into the film, Jack's thoughts return to the story of his childhood in the Waco Texas of the 1950's. The 12 year-old Jack (Hunter McCracken) is the central figure of this portion. The camera follows him and his two brothers through the rough and tumble of boyhood: swimming, riding bikes, discovering girls, breaking windows for the thrill of it, attending church and school.

Malick's eye for what Mrs. O'Brien calls "grace" does not blind him to the ugliness of life, or the pervasiveness of "nature." Much of the drama of the family story comes from the fraught relationship between Jack and his father. Mr. O'Brien (Brad Pitt) is a stern but affectionate father. He had once dreamed of being a great musician, but gave it up in favor of a more practical engineering career. His disappointment with himself comes out in severity towards his boys. Early in the movie, after learning of R.L.'s death, Mr. O'Brien laments, "I made him feel shame. My shame." Both Jack and

Mr. O'Brien complicated figures, but they tilt towards the way of nature. They are hungry. They wrestle and claw to get what they want. They frequently butt heads, as Mr. O'Brien attempts to impose his will on an equally willful Jack, who asks God, at one point, to kill his father. By contrast, Mrs. O'Brien and R.L. are exemplars of artless grace and unconditional love. They are almost too good, in fact, to be real. They seem at times like walking foils for the troubled humanity of Jack and Mr. O'Brien.

Jack's recollection of his childhood culminates after Mr. O'Brien is laid off, and the family is forced to move. The boys mourn like they're being expelled from Eden, and for Jack that makes sense. He no longer belongs there – the pure wonder of childhood has become adulterated by grownup sin. Jack has no illusions about who he is. He whispers in a voiceover, "Father . . . mother . . . always you wrestle inside me. Always you will." Mr. O'Brien, shaken by the trauma of losing job and home, confesses to Jack that he has been too hard on him, but explains that he only meant to make his boys strong. Jack answers, "I'm as bad as you are. I'm more like you than her." The two men – and Jack seems like a man now – embrace with real tenderness and regret. The whole scene is a masterpiece. Both actors express genuine vulnerability, while carefully preserving the hard masculine shell that is their armor. They are no longer at odds, but cobelligerents, reluctantly, helplessly, waging war on the world. As Jack says, channeling the Apostle Paul, "I do what I hate." As the family drives away from their home, Mrs. O'Brien is granted one last word of instruction, again in voiceover: "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love your life will flash by."

But Jack's trajectory is predictable, and we jump back to the present, approximately thirty years later. We can easily imagine the professional victories that

have been won, and the quantity of life that has flashed by in the interim. Jack is a hard, successful man whose core is consumed by spiritual hunger. Happily, his reflections have not been without fruit. We see him one moment riding up a glass-encased elevator shaft, and in the next, he is in an arid, rocky desert, deciding, with some hesitation, to step through a free-standing wooden door frame, and follow the 12 year-old version of himself over a rocky hill. Images of death and resurrection flash before the viewer's sight, and then Jack emerges onto a paradisiacal beach. The horizon is wide and luminous. The score turns exultant.

Jack, still dressed for the boardroom, drops to his knees in the wet sand, surrounded by his young brothers, his parents, children from his old neighborhood, his young self, and many others. Seagulls sing overhead, and the waves lap the sand – the same sounds that played behind the movie's opening scene. This is the arrival we've been waiting for. As the sun sets over the water, the various characters walk languidly, embracing, smiling, gazing at each other. It's meant to be a crescendo of reconciliation. Mrs. O'Brien caresses R.L.'s young face, and then peacefully releases him from her care. This is, I think, meant to be reality viewed through the eyes of grace. After the beach scene, Jack finds himself again in the city, but his eyes, it seems, have been opened. The sun and sky are painted on the glassy surfaces of sky scrapers, and Jack looks around in wonderment. He can finally see that all the world is, ultimately, shining.

Hegel's understanding of the tripartite chain of metaphysics, ethics and art acquits itself well here. Certainly ethics and metaphysics are front and center in both of these works. The plotlines of both stories are unabashedly didactic; events progress, outcomes are achieved, in ways that vindicate the respective artists' metaphysical-moral visions. In

The Tree of Life, the ethic of "nature" is both a cause and a result of blindness. Jack fought and grasped because he couldn't see reality as the loving, luminous gift that it is, and his belligerent posture further clouded his sight. For Malick, living well makes you see rightly, and seeing rightly makes you live well.

But even further, Malick aims to express his ethics, and ultimately his metaphysics, via aesthetics. The tone and the source of light in *The Tree of Life* is vital to Malick's philosophical vision. He is a rhapsode of the Emersonian order, plainly enchanted with the stuff of existence. His world is a translucent one. Rich, clear light suffuses leaves, grass, fabric, hair, water, even skin.

Figure 1: Jessica Chastain as Mrs. O'Brien in Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*

The warm, gentle, hyper-feminine beauty of Jessica Chastain, lily-pure and ringed in golden light, steadfast, meek and accepting, stands as visible symbol of a particular ethos: willing self-donation, patient attention, openness and gratitude. This ethos, in turn, is both symbol and human response to a Catholic metaphysic – a universe given as gratuitous gift by an all-loving, self-emptying God. The lovely, if sometimes flickering, radiance of earthly life echoes a deeper, more enduring light. Mrs. O'Brien's way of being throws her into deep harmony with this light. For Malick, the world is back-lit; we simply need eyes

naked and patient enough to see them as they are. The journey of the movie, from Jack's conjuring of the big bang onwards, is an effort to shake the scales from his eyes.

In *Melancholia*, by contrast, things in themselves don't shine. Life has nothing to say for itself. Illumination always comes from without, whether it is cast by the comforting artifice of human technology, the very occasional glimmer of sunlight, or by the sharp white light of death. Only one of these light sources has the power to reveal the truth. For von Trier, to bathe in the stark, blanching light of death is simply to become reconciled with reality – death is the one star that illuminates everything. The warm, hospitable light of the first half of the movie is eventually exposed as a comforting illusion, barely painting over the underlying fact of our condition. When this illusory paint begins to flake in the second half, only the death-illuminated Justine is calm and self-possessed enough to smooth over the last moments of her young nephew's life.

Dunst's beauty (in the character of Justine) is razor sharp and cool, platinum hair washed in silver light, a ruthless, dull, knowing stare directed upward at death. All indifference and disenchantment.

Figure 2: Kirsten Dunst as Justine in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*

This too incarnates an ethos – ascetic, anerotic acceptance, steely pessimism, and concomitant disgust at humans whose untamed wills struggle against the inevitable. It's a Schopenhauerian ethic that emerges as the only harmonious response to a Schopenhauerian metaphysics – a godless cosmos heedlessly cruel and meaningless. Von Trier's is an idiosyncratically tragic vision. Hegel writes that the tragic hero is "unreconciled" to his demise because he is attached to some parochial ethos or another, some set of civic or personal imperatives, which means that death "signifies the negation of what he stood for, not its fulfillment."[206] Von Trier has made a film in which his heroine willingly drops her parochial ethos, and aligns herself to the cruel ethos of fate. She achieves friendship with reality by adopting reality's deepest orientation.

Both of the women who personify the ethos of their respective films, are remarkably, unusually beautiful. This is not the humble, missable beauty of Aristotle's lower animals or Havel's tree. In fact, both movies are strikingly beautiful. It's not an accident. Both filmmakers are virtuosic adaptors; they adapt the physical world – they move people from place to place, toy with lighting, costume, architecture, etc. – in an effort to adapt their way of seeing so that it locks on a particular vision of the world. In an act of attempted prophecy they squint their eyes, endeavoring to understand reality more deeply, clearly, honestly than most of us do day to day. This act of prophecy is deeply engaged with the material world – actor by actor, shot by shot, they knit a discrete, artificial unity between a metaphysics and an ethics, and then beckon us to embrace it by showing how beautiful that unity is, they call us to a particular vision, and an ethos that meshes naturally with that vision.

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[206] Taylor, 205

Chastain and Dunst are thus attractive emblems, inducements to the metaphysics and ethics that Malick and Von Trier have themselves embraced. The exemplary unity (which is what beauty is, recall) of their faces, bodies, manner, etc. represent the unity of world and life that is available to those whose ethos is in perfect harmony with the cosmos. Warm and soft, cold and hard, whatever. The directors' job is to make their preferred form of beauty unmissable – they pare away the distractions and arrange the parts just so; they forcefully foreground the deep kinds of beauty that Plato is climbing, Aristotle is studying and Havel is suffering to experience. They make the deep reality they mean to treat *vivid* – that is, especially present to our senses. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes vividness as "a special quality of description and narration such that we see 'before us,' so to speak, what is not as such seen, but is only told."[207] Gadamer is writing of poetic language specifically, but we might paraphrase that in a visual medium such as film, vividness is a special quality of depiction such that we see 'before us' what is not as such seen, but is only symbolized. The intensity with which a symbol presents its deep referent is a function of its vividness in this sense.

In either case vividness is, as Gadamer puts it, "nothing but an invitation to intuition."[208] The intuition presented in art is necessarily a large one, concerned with our relation to the world as a whole. Gadamer writes:

> "In art, intuition is not a secondary moment. Art is rather to be characterized as an intuition, indeed, as a world-view, *Welt-Anschauung* – literally, an intuition of the world. This does not simply mean that art justifies its own claim to truth over and against scientific knowledge, insofar as the free play of imagination tends towards 'knowledge in general.' It also means that the 'inner intuition' in play here brings the world – and not just the objects in it – to intuition. . . . Thus prior to all

[207] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Intuition and Vividness" trans. Dan Tate, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays,* ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 158.
[208] Ibid., 161

> conceptual-scientific knowledge, the way in which we look upon the world, and upon our whole being-in-the-world, takes shape in art."[209]

This is astonishing. Miraculously, strangely enough, artists like Malick and Von Trier are able to shape some little quantity of earth into a unique pile, and in so doing, in so precisely arranging the grains and stones, present a whole *weltanschauung,* elucidated via the very stuff we're longing to understand in the first place. The alluring beauty of these creations is constructed of formal excellence (balance, proportion, rhythm, etc.) and elegantly suffused with some synoptic view of the world and our relation to it. There's deep beauty in the webs of interconnection that tie all of these parts into a single whole, beauty in the intelligence that ties them there. This compounded beauty leaps off the screen, page, chord, stage at us, and rhapsodically tells whatever story it has to tell. As Gadamer puts it, beauty marks art "as something that stands out from everything that is purposively established and utilized" – it is *sui generis* amongst created things.[210]

3. Art as Ethi-comical Prophecy

This is all very rich, Romantic stuff. It's extremely easy to imagine a similar analysis of a Bach Mass or a Fra Angelico painting. The next type of prophecy is less obvious as prophecy, and the art it produces provokes much of the befuddlement that is common when non-specialists tour a contemporary gallery or museum. It is the denunciation of injustice, and concomitant call to moral purification – prophecy in the mode of Jeremiah or Ezekiel, recalibrated for a post-theistic age. In the contemporary

[209] Ibid., 164.
[210] Ibid., 161

iteration of this prophetic mode, artists are compelled by dint of their vocation to "upend traditional notions" of masculinity or narrative or authorship or orgasm or commodification, or whatever. Art-making in this mode is a more or less simple matter of finding the right target, and assailing it with sufficient incisiveness and novelty, often by denouncing, flouting or playfully remixing traditional aesthetic standards. The studio-level guiding assumption here is that the contemporary regnant ethos is bad, and so to make peace with it would be craven capitulation. The imagined world that we might create, however, by overturning current power structures (especially those related to identity categories like race, gender and sexuality) will be good. This negation is the deep ethos that pulses through the veins of much “serious” contemporary art, and for the past couple of decades there has been something like consensus amongst elite art schools, galleries, museums and critics that this is the vital, responsible kind of hope. It is often said to have its roots in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and his thoughts on how we might thrive in a post-theistic universe, one that emphatically does not care for us, was not made for us, offers icy silence in response to our pleas for solace and succor.

Jeremiah, in his calls to reform society, understood himself to be calling his hearers back to deep, full communion with Jehovah, the world’s deepest origin and desideratum. Nietzsche neither expects nor desires communion. He does not imagine that reality will answer to one’s tenderest hopes and affections – these are merely parochial – so he argues that we must rise to reality’s level, becoming not just its equal, but its master. Great men must impose their unabashedly parochial values on a recalcitrant reality. This is not von Trier’s ethos; there is no cool Schopenhauerian *askeisis* for the mature Nietzsche. He thinks that the best life for us is one of rebellion – raw,

unapologetic, unwavering self-assertion, willfully building a good and affirmative life on the coldest, cruelest plane imaginable, a life of perpetual war and victory.

This kind of prophet agrees with the Nietzschean metaphysic, insofar as he thinks about metaphysics, and revels in Nietzsche's idea of self-created values. As English professor Eric Bennett puts it, there is a reigning assumption that "our capacity to shape our protean selves is the capacity most worth exercising, the thing to be defended at all costs, and the good that a literary inclination best serves."[211] But Nietzsche's is an unapologetically non-egalitarian vision. It presumes that strength varies widely between individuals, that heroic strength is vanishingly rare, and that not everyone is willing or able to confront the full picture of a meaningless reality. Some will be better off with orders to follow. As Ronald Beiner describes it,

> "Nietzsche was interested in how, for a very few rare individuals, the debunking of morality and universal reason could liberate them to refashion their selves with much greater freedom and creativity. But Nietzsche also believed that the vast majority of the inhabitants of modernity were sunken far too deeply in mediocrity for this project of self-creation to be of any relevance to them. Contrary to what is supposed by countless Left-Nietzscheans, Nietzsche, of course, *wasn't* interested in promoting greater openness, tolerance or inclusion for the marginalized."[212]

Or, more succinctly, Beiner writes, "This guy is not a liberal!" He's not, no, and more radical pretensions aside, postwar Liberalism is exactly the ethos that animates this kind of putatively Nietzschean art-prophecy. We'll have much more to say about the connections between political liberalism and this Nietzsche-inspired mode of art-making below.

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[211] Eric Bennett https://www.chronicle.com/article/Dear-Humanities-Profs-We-Are/243100
[212] Ronald Beiner, *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger and the Return of the Far Right* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), p. 30.

This kind of prophecy is a perpetual rebellion against some version of the *ancien regime,* announcing again and again that that old ethic has been shown up as not universal, not tied to the essential nature of reality, but instead deeply, self-servingly parochial. Old fashioned, beautiful artworks were intended to be beautiful because they posited a seamless unity between cosmos, ethos and aesthetic. That unity undone, the current program is one of intentionally ugly subversion, of reminding the bourgeoisie that its comforting ethical idols are parochial imposters. The art inspired by this wrecking ball ethic is, at first glance, what Hegel would call comical – it relentlessly mocks and undresses the status quo, the preferred idols of self-satisfied citizens. It is often intentionally ugly, puzzling or childlike. The ugliness is a death warrant, and also an opening to a new kind of reality. It can look like (or even *be)* just about anything, provided it can make some claim to subversiveness. I recall seeing a smallish pile of blue glitter on the floor of a prestigious Chelsea art gallery, priced at $30,000. The artist had dumped the glitter herself, I learned, and spread it with her foot. According to the gallery press release, the work was calibrated to "challenge viewers' perceptions" by creating "gradient zones between light and shadow, and opacity and transparency."[213] Challenge. Subvert. Question. Problematize. These are the watchwords of this kind of prophecy, and its prima facie desire is the cancellation of old forms of authority. And yet, as we will see below, this form of comedy, now several decades old, is not mere nihilistic negation. It carries at its core a deep ethical imperative. We'll examine this in what follows.

3.10 Art as ethi-comical prophecy

[213] http://bortolamigallery.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/AVJ_Press-Release-2016.pdf?300821

This is by no means the first time that art has been employed to critique or subvert. Matter will take whatever form our skill will let us give, so art has always been able to curse as well as bless, cupping earth into weapons flung by angry hands. Our contemporary vision of art – unsettling, incoherent, unbeautiful, essentially designed to negate, was first propagated to wide reception by the Dadaists, who in the second decade of the twentieth century put their heads together at the Cabaret Voltaire, and conspired to aim their rough ugly "art" at the broad, medaled chests of the dignified, respectable aristocrats who'd thrust their generation into the filth of War. Noise-music, vandalized old masterpieces, poems randomly assembled from newspaper cuttings, a "ready-made" urinal by "R. Mutt." Anything to poke a stick in the eye of the comfortable, war-abetting bourgeoisie.

Humans prefer beauty and comity, all things being equal; the rise of Dada bespeaks a deep, emphatic break, a nauseated reaction against an evil of monstrous proportions. And so the Great War was. It thrust the Dada generation into a vile, unspeakable kind of filth: blood-mud trenches, suffused with cold, foolish futility. Imagine it: a whole generation of normal, everyday European men with infirm thoughts and unvoiced feelings, suddenly sunk – like animals in quicksand, bewildered necks straining – in the simple, sad trenches of callous stupidity, pawns of some mustachioed archdukes, drunk on tight-woven bloodlines and national glory, warm and full, their aristocratic drawing rooms incalculably far from these midnight-frigid soldiers with humble, hairy bellies, quietly missing the taste of beer and wife-made suppers, mediocre and easy to lose. Imagine being one of them, entirely expendable. The Great Nation can drop you, and ten million more, like wheat stalks in a combine. Easy.

So yes – unless you break or dissociate, you emerge from this filth as any sentient, blood-bearing man would, aching to punish and declare your freedom, peeled clean as you've been of civilized, humane illusion. You might want to destroy. It might feel like time to clear the boards and start from scratch. This is the tone of French poet and provocateur Tristan Tzara's seminal Dada manifestos: "Every man must shout: there is great, destructive work to be done. To sweep, to clean."[214] As his comrade Marcel Janco succinctly recalled: "We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the *tabula rasa*."[215]

Dada was founded in Zurich during the Great War, and Tzara published his seven foundational manifestos between 1916 and 1921. His writings are openly, violently scornful of conventional morality, all attempts at system, order, unity, truth, etc. – anything that had been used to justify the socio-political order that led his co-generationists to the trenches of no man's land: "I hate," he writes, "slimy objectivity, and harmony, the science that considers that everything is always in order."[216] Tzara is especially contemptuous of Christianity, the de jure governing system of pre-war Europe:

> "Do people imagine they have found the psychic basis common to all humanity? The attempt of Jesus, and the Bible, conceal, under their ample, benevolent wings: shit, animals and days. How can anyone hope to order the chaos that constitutes that infinite, formless variation, man? The principle 'Love thy neighbor' is hypocrisy. 'Know thyself' is utopian, but more acceptable because it includes malice. No pity. After the carnage we are left with the hope of a purified humanity."[217]

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[214] Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries,* trans Barbara Wright, (New York, Calder publications, 1992), 12
[215] Marcel Janco, "Dada at Two Speeds," trans. in Lucy R. Lippard, *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), p. 36.
[216] Tzara, p. 9
[217] Tzara, p. 5

This was an important breaking point, and the breaking was violent, at least in rhetoric. If dove-gentle Christianity had been exposed as hiding frantic violence at its core, then perhaps sentimental humanism – nice talk about treating the weak with kindness--was be to discarded entirely.

The explicit charge of the Dada prophets is that the *ancien regime* culture was built on the foundation of a fallacious, self-serving construal of reality:

> "If I shout
> Ideal, Ideal, Ideal
> Knowledge, Knowledge, Knowledge
> Boomboom, Boomboom, Boomboom
> I have recorded fairly accurately Progress, Law, Morals, and all the other magnificent qualities that various very intelligent people have discussed in so many books in order, finally, to say that even so everyone has danced according to his own personal boomboom."[218]

The leaders of the *ancien regime,* whom Tzara calls "bandits who have demolished and destroyed the centuries,"[219] have perpetrated their crimes via pious-sounding subterfuge. They posed as possessors of universal knowledge and ideals, but were only protecting and promoting their own personal interests, their private desires – each his own personal boomboom.

The devastations of the first World War did not create this disillusionment – that had begun years before. An interest in slate-clearing violence had been articulated in the 1909 manifesto of the Italian Futurists, penned by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. The document called for a ruthless, wholesale destruction of everything that had gone before, a hands-washed rejection of the past. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the manifesto "revealed Marinetti's penchant for the Nietzschean superman . . . He extolled power,

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[218] Tzara, p. 8
[219] Tzara, p. 12

aggression, fighting, war ('the world's only hygiene'), virility (leading to 'contempt for woman') and injustice."[220] The movement captured something lurking in young fin de siècle hearts, one hard ripple of the Darwinian-Nietzschean revolution of the late 19th century, but its impact was limited. Dada, however, had the scandal of the Great War at its disposal – a death of God for the masses – and so Tzara's calls for cultural revolution found much wider adoption than Marinetti's – soon after its founding, Dada had a significant presence in the art-making communities of Germany, the U.S., Holland, Italy, France, Yugoslavia, Japan, Russia and elsewhere.

The rebellion that gained momentum in Zurich has never dissipated entirely. After the end of the war, the Western world enjoyed a few years of restive, feverish peace, and then erupted again, this time igniting a conflagration of even greater destructiveness, including, as discussed above, the horrifying specter of mechanized, heartless genocide. After Auschwitz the revolt took on greater strength – the old ethic seemed then decisively broken – and a hundred years after Tzara, it is all but regnant in the worlds of contemporary art and academic humanities. The words *status quo* are summarily understood as derogatory, the words subversive and revolutionary as benedictory. Now, it's true that humans have never been perfectly satisfied with their social arrangements, but since Auschwitz we have been living through a long, intense period when our cultural elites assume, at least in their public pronouncements, that our contemporary ethos is broken, propped up by filthy subterfuge and dull inertia. Key to this slow moving philosophical revolution has been the widespread embrace of Tzara's Boomboom pronouncement, a direct predecessor to this recent assertion from the contemporary

[220] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Limits of Art: Two Essays* (New York: Seagull Books, 2010), p. 11.

literary critic Jane Tompkins: "Works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position."[221] We must destroy their hegemony. This is the critical arm of the contemporary ethi-comic prophecy, R. Mutt in conceptual form.

But the Nietzschean parochialization of all values is only part of the story. There is an ethical urgency here, an earnestness, that is not at all in keeping with Nietzsche's laughing delight in his own power. This art meant to afflict the comfortable, and in so doing, goad us towards a world where the afflicted will be comforted. What we encounter in the art galleries and seminar rooms is not a naked will to power, prizing strength over weakness, but almost the opposite: an egalitarian assault on power. It is a Frankensteinian combination of Nietzschean thought with a vague residue of Christian ethics. It does not see itself as mere directionless vandal, reveling in simple destruction, but as an agent for emancipation, enactor of a certain sort of moral / cultural hygiene. Hence the designator "ethi-comical" – it is art meant both to unmask and take down, and also to liberate. It issues a call for the powerful to engage in a sort of post-Christian *kenosis,* willfully (or not) making room at the table for the weak and marginalized.

In the contemporary art world, there are few better examples of the ethi-comical approach than Kara Walker, easily one of the most lauded artists of the twenty first century, and the youngest ever recipient of the MacArthur Genius Grant (at 27 years of age). Walker's most famous works are large-scale black and white murals, constructed of monochrome cut-paper silhouettes. Her work employs imagery from the era of slavery,

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[221] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*

trading in exaggerated archetypes – “mammies, tar babies, demonic masters and their apathetic wives” – bitterly reveling in cruelty, sexual exploitation, torture and murder. Walker’s compositions are caustic and arbitrary, playful in their encyclopedic imagination of possible cruelties, theme with a thousand senseless variations.

Figure 3. Kara Walker, "The Jubilant Martyrs of Obsolescence and Ruin"2015, Cut Paper on Wall

Writing in *The New Yorker,* Hilton Als explains, “Her white characters are often creatures of fashion, morally bankrupt beneath their silken folds, while her black characters wear the uniform of the oppressed: head rags, aprons, or tattered britches.”[222] Prim Caucasian figures – parodies of southern gentility – enact every kind of trussed up violence against the bodies of African slaves. It’s a shrill, sharp, Manichean world, painted in the starkest, flattest black and white terms. And who could object? No human situation is quite so simple, but the institution of chattel slavery is an undeniable moral catastrophe – uncountable black bodies ground up in the cotton gin of commerce and cruelty, families blithely torn apart, selling one son to one plantation, another to another, the brute transformation of humanity into beast of burden, skin sliced up as warning and

[222] https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/08/the-shadow-act

plaything. It is indeed a gross, despicable crime, and Walker is right to hate it, and make art that turns a blanching light on its evil.

And yet her work is not a simple indictment of an evil history. Walker is emphatic that her art is more than mere historiography; it is also present-day social commentary. In the three decades of her illustrious career so far, Walker has trod her imagined antebellum ground into hard flatness, not as a way of remembering, but as a way of seeing. "In Walker's work" Doreen St. Felix writes, "slavery is a nightmare from which no American has yet awakened: bondage, ownership, the selling of bodies for power and cash have made twisted figures of blacks and whites alike, leaving us all scarred, hateful, hated, and diminished."[223] This evil – the combination of racial enmity and oppression – is, in Walker's work, the defining characteristic of life in America, past and present. It slinks like a poison vapor through the most anodyne interactions, often undetected, but powerful and decisive nonetheless.

David Wall writes that Walker's work is perennially germane because it traces, from the Middle Passage to the present day, "the full-blown pathological fascination with, fear of, and reliance upon, the black body as a structuring element of Western cultural and moral registers."[224] Western society, in this view, is built upon, *needs* the savage, wild, defeated black other as a foil against which to understand the civilized, dominant modern self. Walker's work interrogates, complicates, ultimately subverts this simple, self-congratulatory binary. Wall's analysis is worth quoting at length here,

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[223] Doreen St. Felix, "Kara Walker's Next Act" *Vulture ht*tp://www.vulture.com/2017/04/kara-walker-after-a-subtlety.html

[224] Wall, David. "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker." *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 279-99. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.bc.edu/stable/40983288.

because it encapsulates nicely the high-theory response to Walker's work in particular, and ethi-comical art in general.

> Displaying the visual registers of disgust and desire that permeate primitivist discourses, this pairing articulates the intimate relations between the erotic surplus of colonial representation and the 'logics of power' that constantly struggles to demarcate the boundaries between civilisation and savagery. Paired as a series of synchronous encounters between black /white, savage/ civilised, nature /culture, and dominance /submission, the figures' frantic and livid encounter reveals their profound dependence on those very categories. But this is also a site of resistance, subversion, and category collapse. The silhouette as a form determines that though we might identify two individually racially coded bodies, we are at the same time looking at one being. This hybridity is deeply unsettling, not only because it involves a series of transgressive acts of phallic violence, but also because it violates the categorical structures of bourgeois individuation. As the somatic, social, and sexual boundaries collapse, what we see, then, is no longer two beings struggling with each other, but one grotesque and hybrid creature in the perverse self- cannibalising process of both fucking and feeding upon its own body.[225]

Acts of physical enslavement and violence may be on the wane in the modern West, but the psychic orientations that both produced and resulted from those acts linger. Walker's art, in this reading, demonstrates the fallacious nature of neat Western habits of mind, which symbolically store negative aspects of embodied life in the Black other, allowing white Western civilization to imagine itself transcendently clean. Walker puts the lie to this easy bifurcation, and forces Western viewers to recognize the filth, cruelty, abjection that lie at the heart of their own civilization, and self.

This kind of analysis is, in a way, the beating heart of Walker's work. Art historians and theorists always read visual works hard, sometimes harder than the artists do, sometimes harder than the works themselves especially merit. But in the ethi-comical milieu, aesthetics are decentered, and theory takes an increasingly central role. Since ethi-

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[225] Wall, David. "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker", 282

comical artists are concerned primarily with an ethos, rather than sighting the faint tinges of a metaphysic in paint or wood, the fundamental, fine-grained nature of material reality is not a pressing concern. The ethi-comical artist typically dashes into matter just long enough to make a point about the regnant ethos, and it falls to theorists, or voluminous curatorial wall labels, to verbally chart the nuance and significance of the work. Hence the multiplying importance of artist statements and catalogue essays. Walker's work is shocking and jarring and unsettling to see. To truly comprehend just how much she's unsettled, though, requires ponderous theorizing like that above.

Figure 4. Auntie Walker's Wall Sampler for Civilians, 2013 Cut paper on wall 132 × 276 inches

Walker's dark, angry, righteous oeuvre has clearly found wide and deep resonance in the art world and beyond. She is part of a generation of black avant garde artists who've felt "liberated (by postmodernism, among other things) from the shallower agendas of affirmative art"[226] and have used their liberation to imbue their art with an ethi-comic prophetic force that gives their work weight and power. These are important works, the critics and curators agree, because they see the "black hole at the core of Western culture"[227] an evil that often escapes our glance, and in denouncing it, call us to move past it. Agendas of affirmation, this school of thought holds, are shallow, self-soothing, benighted. The images of shallowness is telling, since it is precisely depth that reconciliatory prophecy boasts of – the idea that in this work of art, we see from aesthetics, through ethics, down to the deepest reaches of metaphysical truth, an unbroken, quasi-mystical sightline. But if that line is broken, as the liberating arrival of "postmodernism" definitively announces, if acts of worldly affirmation are cut off from authentic deep sources, then reconciliatory work is necessarily shallow, kitschy, unpersuasive.

In this situation, this orphaned state, artists might struggle to do anything with matter that really might *matter*. If they can't achieve a genuine, deep affirmation, and can't call their viewers to reconciliation, they at least need to find some evil to combat, whose defeat would signal a reconciliation of as yet indefinite shape, a hazy utopian horizon. Walker seems to recognize the need for some significant battle to fight. "The

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[226] Doreen St. Felix, "Kara Walker's Next Act"

[227] Robert Storr, 'Spooked', in Philippe Vergne, Sander Gilman, Thomas McEvilley, and Robert Storr (eds*), Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Walker Art Centre: Minneapolis, 2007), p. 65.

whole problem with racism and its continuing legacy in this country is that we simply love it," Walker has remarked. "Who would we be without it, and without the 'struggle'? . . . In its absence, in the middle-class black America I grew up in, I guess I was overcome by the need to feel a certain amount of pain."[228] This pain, once located and incarnated, ushers Walker and her viewers into the "struggle," politics with a metaphysical accent. The stated goals of the struggle are simple and unassailable – to ferret out and combat injustice. But there is a distinctly spiritual resonance to this incompletable struggle. The art historian Jessica Bell Brown, reflecting on Walker's work, sums up guiding theme of Walker's work thusly:

> "Racism will remain inseparable from America's history, its present, and its future. It penetrates every crevice and corner of our institutions, and pervades every fiber of our collective being. Walker's work does not signal an impending culture war; it is a reminder that the previous ones never ended.[229]

Every crevice, every fiber. Every interaction, relationship, endeavor, is irrevocably marked by racial enmity and oppression, the lacerating evil of the slave master's whip, omnipresent. Our only option – the only humane course – is perpetual culture war, which will bind the co-belligerents together into a unified people, and take the battle, forever and in every moment, to the places where the enemy sleeps. Perhaps the literal ropes, chains and laws have passed by the wayside, but their spiritual essence survives in attitudes, lifestyles, unconscious biases, discriminatory practices, socio-economic disadvantage, modes of self-understanding, etc. These too must be fought, even as the

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[228] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2004/04/15/kara-walker-wins-smithsonian-artist-award/57aefda6-dbe7-4f52-9de1-2e8b92142d4d/?utm_term=.c39a647ea746

[229] Jessica Bell Brown, "Kara Walker's Show is a Painful, Necessary Reminder that US Culture Wars Never Ended" *Hyperallergic,* https://hyperallergic.com/404818/kara-walkers-show-is-a-painful-necessary-reminder-that-us-culture-wars-never-ended/

Civil Rights generation fought firehoses and German Shepherds. The fight never ends, it must never. As Martin Berger warns, "the longstanding white need for black others should make us skeptical of claims that [even] well-meaning whites can transcend their race's investment in depictions of non-whites."[230] Racism, like original sin or some inherited sickness, lurks in the DNA of Western / white people, always corrupting, always calling the good to battle. Ethi-comical art is the aesthetic crystallization of this eternal war, which rises from political imperative to civilizational calling. Perhaps ugliness, disorientation, livid critique constitute a reasonable aesthetic grammar – or perhaps the *only* reasonable aesthetic grammar – with which to issue such a calling.

And yet, as always, we make artwork to make our lives better. It's an act of desperate hope – there's no other reason to meddle so painstakingly with little bits of paper or clay. Jarring, offensive and hostile as Dada artworks were, there was a utopian element to their efforts, and there is now as well, in the work of Kara Walker and thousands of like-minded artists and theorists. As Tzara himself remarks, "after the carnage we are left with the hope of a purified humanity."[231] The utopian vision of our contemporary ethi-comical artists is implicitly eschatological – never to be realized on this mortal coil. As we will see in what follows, art of this kind is very much of the moment. It is inescapably enmeshed with the post WWII Liberal ethos, evolving as ethic and aesthetic have reacted in tandem to the various depredations of modernity, most especially mass warfare and genocide. We might go so far as to say that artists like

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[230] Martin Berger, Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2005), p. 4

[231] Tzara, 5

Walker, who take some regnant evil as their topic, but dare not articulate an affirmative vision, have been all but *forced* into this position by the dictates of the postwar zeitgeist. The natural hunger for transcendence that we examined in Plato, and the natural tendency to find it that we saw in Aristotle and Havel, have been pushed into a corner.

All of this is contingent, none of it necessary. In making this case, we part ways definitively with Hegel. In Hegel's story of Greek art, the nation moved organically and necessarily through various stages, as each attempt to capture the Absolute via an ethic embedded in matter exposed its own limitations. The age of comedy arrived when it became clear that the Absolute itself had no real truck with the local ethos. Hegel believes that modern people live in a comic age because no credible ethos remains – we know at the outset that our local ways of life are only local. We can therefore find no suitable subject matter for art. This part of Hegel's analysis seems to have been misguided; as discussed above, the triumph of the rational has been partial, largely relegated to the public sphere. By means of a half-articulate popular Romanticism, the private lives of many modern people have remained suitable seedbeds for content robust enough to form an aesthetic around. Art in its highest vocation has remained a possibility. It is still so, as we can see in the examination of *Melancholia* and *The Tree of Life.*

However, these are increasingly isolated examples. The two world wars enacted a world-shaking rupture that gradually, but definitively, forced such substantive visions indoors, and by now only the bravest and most idiosyncratic artists would think or dare to make art that could be described as reconciliatory prophecy. In the following chapter we will examine the ways that these modern catastrophes have functioned in Western political life. We will see that there have been an analogous reactions in the worlds of

politics and art – in both arenas, attempts to articulate the nature of the Absolute and how we ought to respond to it have been pushed out of public life, into the private sphere. This has been done from a combination of metaphysical despair, and a residual attachment to Christian ethics. It is far from obvious that this is a stable combination. Exploring this sibling relationship between Liberalism in politics and ethi-comical prophecy in art will help us to think about the prospects for art moving forward. To that end, we will argue that as Liberalism in the 21st century is showing itself exhausted, and there is every reason to think that ethi-comical art will experience a similar fate to that of its sister.

Chapter IV: The Liberal Ethos and Ethi-comical art

The ethics and aesthetics of evasion

4.1 Early Modern Roots

Ethi-comic art has a deep, strong philosophical pedigree that has given birth both to it and its sister-ethos, known as Liberalism. Since their fates are intertwined, it'll be worth spending some time examining the origins and development of Liberalism, with special emphasis on the massive changes it underwent in the wake of the two World Wars. Long before the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, many important European thinkers were sounding the alarm that all knowledge and values were perspectival. In various pre-modern dispensations, hierarchies of various kinds had long been propped up on the basis of privileged epistemic access – the idea that priests and kings were uniquely able to understand key truths about reality, and spearhead a public ethos in harmony with these truths. The result was (at least in theory) a fully integrated, stratified culture, whose aspirations flowed from the deepest realities, all the way to the minute details of interpersonal manners, and the niceties of applying paint to canvas and chapel ceilings. A few centuries before Nietzsche, the Reformation and subsequent Wars of Religion had put the lie to any lingering suggestion that understanding metaphysics, and designing a concomitant ethics, was an unproblematic matter, one upon which the experts might reach easy unanimity. As Christianity fractured further and further, claims to metaphysical-ethical knowledge began to strike many people as a combination of dangerous, self-serving dishonesty and pathetic, self-soothing sentimentality – better on both counts to replace these authorities with hard-headed rationalists. As Charles Taylor

writes, "From the modern point of view, these earlier visions betrayed a deplorable if understandable weakness of men, a self-indulgence wherein they projected on things the forms which they most desire to find, in which they feel fulfilled or at home."[232] The disenchantment of the world, and concomitant undressing of pretensions to special metaphysical knowledge, became, increasingly, an ethical imperative.

This disenchantment would dovetail with the realization of another core early-modern desideratum: universal fraternity. This was to be accomplished via a strenuous process of de-tribalization. We would no longer take our deepest bearings from traditions or creeds that could be sensibly doubted by intelligent, well-meaning interlocutors. Instead we would reach above and beyond those tribal totems, to something like reason, science, undogmatic deism, etc. Descartes and other early modernists followed what paths they did in an effort to find something – anything – that might be compellingly true for all of us. Thus, it was that for Descartes the ability of a truth-claim to compel the assent of a skeptic became the gold standard of veracity. Diversity of opinion was a sign of epistemological chaos, and a possible breeding ground for war; we simply need everyone to agree. In his *Discourse on Method,* Descartes' first rule of intellectual exploration is

> "never to accept anything as true if I did not know clearly that it was so; that is, carefully to avoid prejudice and jumping to conclusions, and to include nothing in my judgments apart from whatever appeared so clearly and distinctly to my mind that I
> had *no opportunity to cast doubt on it*."[233]

[232] Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 4.
[233] Rene Descartes *Discourse on Method* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 16. Emphasis mine.

The skeptic's inability to doubt a proposition establishes the truth of that proposition; only if he has no choice but to assent to it can it be regarded as truly true. This criterion of incorrigibility - that a true belief is only that which one could not fail to believe – is Descartes's main contribution to the history of philosophy.

Of course, that's not what Descartes thought his main contribution would be. Building on the incorrigible truth of his own existence, he thought that he also incorrigibly proved that God exists, and based on the proved existence of a benevolent God, Descartes argued that one's clear and distinct ideas of the world could be absolutely trusted. And so, Descartes believed he had won the world back from the precipice of epistemological oblivion. Alas, he overestimated the force of his argument for God's existence, and the majority of skeptics from his day until our own have found that it does *not* compel their assent. With the ongoing (and never quite finished) "death of God," those truths which a benevolent God had safeguarded for Descartes – other minds, causality, objective standards of good, the past, etc. – were now vulnerable to the axe of skepticism.

Descartes had hoped to follow reason to the publicly accessible, innermost realities of the cosmos, and build out from there. In so doing, he would have opened the door to a less divided society, and also one that would be less stratified, because the denial of privileged access to the truth would necessarily weaken the hold of various tribal authorities and attachments. Once privileged access was discarded, the rationale for inequality and domination would go along with it; universal liberty, fraternity and equality come as a package deal, at least in theory. Descartes had wanted to create a new, non-hierarchical, integral culture, based on the incontrovertible truth, but he failed. What

now? How are we to live together without a shared understanding of the deepest things? What will knit us into a whole, functioning, peaceable community, if Descartes's skeptical standards cannot be satisfied, if we are not all compelled by force of bare reason to reach the same conclusions about metaphysical and ethical matters?

4.2 Millian Contention

In the wake of this failure, Liberalism was born, a system which yearns for the early modern desiderata of liberty, equality and fraternity, but whose yearning is chastened (to varying degrees) by Descartes' failure to secure a universal consensus. One of the most influential early statements of Liberalism is John Stuart Mill's seminal text *On Liberty.* In it, Mill maintains that it is the "privilege and proper condition" of each human adult to "use and interpret experience in his own way."[234] Chemists may confidently tell us about the chemical makeup of water, but no churchman or ivory tower metaphysician has any right to tell us how we must understand our life and actions. Mill thinks there are several reasons why individual liberty is superior to the heteronomy of authority-following. Firstly, the deliverances of authority could be damagingly narrow, holding only for a small swath of human experience, or they could be simply mistaken. Mill is intensely conscious of the fallibility of the human mind, and even of entire "ages." He writes that "ages are no more infallible than individuals; every age having held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd."[235] This

[234] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* in William Buckler, ed. *Prose of the Victorian Period,* (USA: Riverside editions, 1958), p. 274.
[235] Ibid., p. 253

fallibility does not apply only to the common people - even the best thinkers from a given age are often discovered to be gravely misled by thinkers of subsequent ages, so we have reason to be cautious about submitting blindly to the dictates of our age. There is simply no unproblematic leash tying them to deep, enduring facts about reality.

Secondly, one's own character or circumstances might be so unique that conventional wisdom, though in some sense truly wisdom, does not shed light on his particular path. Mill countenances the possibility that there might indeed be something – or someone – new under the sun, so new in fact that the best collected wisdom of humanity might fail to comprehend it. Thirdly, Mill accords a high educative value to the practice of choosing for oneself. If after long, hard deliberation I choose to accept the judgments and norms passed to me by my forebears, I am much better off than if I had simply accepted them without testing. Mill thinks that "the human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice."[236] Mill sees these mental faculties as analogous to muscles – they must be used if they are to be improved, or even maintained. One becomes better at judging by, well, judging. It is good for me to choose, to actively participate in the process of creating myself.

But despite Mill's deep opposition to this "despotism of custom," he is not a very thorough-going comedian – he is also something of a traditionalist. He acknowledges, for instance, that children must be educated in accord with the customs that their parents' generation have tested and endorsed. This patrimony is the best estimate that the older

[236] Ibid., p. 275.

generation has of what it is to live a good human life. As such it should not be brazenly sloughed off. Mill is indeed prone to sweeping statements about the superiority of individual spontaneity over custom, but in some places he acknowledges and even approves a dialectic give-and-take between one's unique natural inclinations on the one hand, and one's culture on the other. He writes that "a person whose desires and impulses are his own – are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture – is said to have a character."[237] In Mill's vision every person arrives at developmental maturity with a set of customary beliefs and feelings about the world that have a certain amount of *prima facie* credibility, but which the mature person can and should test throughout his life, modifying or discarding these beliefs in accordance with his experience and reason, in dialogue with the culture around him. He scoffs at the "absurd" suggestion that "people ought to live as if nothing whatsoever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience had as of yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another."[238]

The last portion of the above quote is worth emphasizing. Mill does not just write that some people prefer certain modes of life – this would be nothing more than an assertion about the inclinations of certain individuals. Rather, it is a statement about the ways of life themselves – some are just objectively superior to others. Mill also asserts that all humans share a common, if vaguely defined, *telos*. He asks rhetorically, "for what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings

[237] Ibid., p. 276
[238] Ibid., p. 274 Emphasis mine.

human beings nearer to the best thing they can be?"[239] A common goal exists, even if it is something as generic as "self-actualization," in which case the attainment of the goal could look very different for different people. In any case, human beings are not meant to simply do any old thing. So despite his emphasis on fallibility, Mill does not deny that the good for humans can be known, but he does think that due to the "present low state of the human mind"[240] we are not currently able to agree on what it is.

Because of this present condition, for now, "unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth."[241] Humans simply cannot be expected to agree, at least not right now, as to what finally constitutes the best for human beings. Mill thinks that "there should be different experiments in living,"[242] and that society should make room for an almost limitless variety of lifestyles, as long as these lifestyles do not harm other people.

On first reading this set of injunctions might seem to spring from some species of Nietzschean moral relativism and call for self-creation. But Mill's discussion of lifestyle experiments does not proceed very far before he begins to refer to the possibility of objectively measuring and judging between different non-maleficent lifestyles. He asserts "that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when anyone

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[239] Ibid., p. 279
[240] Ibid., p. 281
[241] Ibid., p. 273
[242] Ibid., p. 273

thinks fit to try them."[243] This "proving of worth" is initially puzzling, coming as it does, from a thinker who emphasizes human fallibilism, until one takes into account Mill's confidence in the so-called "marketplace of ideas." In the face of a possibly paralyzing fallibilism, Mill counsels free and liberal debate as a purifying mechanism. Ultimately Mill has confidence that "wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument"[244] when those opinions and practices are subjected to free public scrutiny. In this way he simultaneously acknowledges the culture-bound nature of human reason, and yet maintains that humans can transcend their cultures to access objective moral truths. This is *not* a moral relativism that rejects the idea of moral truths, objective human values. Mill believes in allowing a broad array of experiments in living, because what moral truths and objectives values there are, are very difficult to access. Mill is, perhaps, in harmony with Hegel on this point. *Our* ethos, here and now, might be somewhat parochial, but the universal lies somewhere out there, and we can and should strive towards it.

Mill's thought might be sufficient to undergird a certain turn towards comedy, in the Hegelian sense. Certainly, a Millian society would contain some mistrust of metaphysical-ethical certainty, and a tendency to see at least some moral pronouncements as parochial, expressive of little more than the expresser's own personal preferences. But the Millian parochialization is not a radical, final one. It is provisional, based on mere human fallibility, and open to a modest hope that together, we might be able to find something universally true and good. We are each free to advocate for our preferred worldview in the marketplace of ideas, and win as many converts as we are able through

[243] Ibid., p. 273 Emphasis mine
[244] Ibid., p. 255

good faith persuasion. The door is wide open to big stories of whatever kind, and Mill is cautiously confident that the process of discourse will allow us to winnow our way towards truth.

But Mill's modest hope is not the final form that Liberalism would take. Modern history, in its ongoing dialogue with modern thought, raised its voice to a shocking volume in the first half of the twentieth century, and put to flight certain streams of modern though, elevating others to indubitable conventional wisdom. In short, the species of Liberalism that suggested we carefully, humbly, hopefully grasp our way towards universal ethical truths through discourse and experimentation ran headlong into Treblinka and Auschwitz, and the result has been perhaps the most thoroughgoing philosophical revolution in Western history. Seventy-five years after V-J Day, the metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic ramifications of World War II constitute the public world we share. The triumph of ethi-comical art is a contingent, historical thing.

4.3 The Great Disruption

In Hegel's story of Greek art, the crucial parochialization comes in the vehicle of tragedy, wherein the hero's ethical action is discovered to be at odds with the dictates of fate. Olympus, we learn, does not take Antigone's side. But how did this parochialization happen in the context of 20th century Europe, where Zeus and his willed actions are nowhere to be seen? Our main guide to the real-life tragedy of the Holocaust, and the revolution that came in its wake, will be Hannah Arendt. Arendt was born in 1906 to a German Jewish family. A talented student, she began to read Greek poetry and existential philosophy by her mid-teens. In 1933 she finished her first dissertation, on

Augustine's concept of love, under the direction of Karl Jaspers. But, prevented from completing her *Habilitation* in Germany by the anti-Jewish rules of the nascent Nazi government, she fled to Paris, where she stayed until 1941, when the German advances forced her to escape to the United States. In the space of her lifetime, Arendt's immediate ethnic community – German Jewry – was systematically decimated by her countrymen, using the most efficient human-extermination machine in history.

This trauma – trauma hardly begins to capture it – did much to shape her thinking. The Holocaust radically unsettled not just her understanding of the Jewish predicament in Europe, but much, much more. It threw her headlong into what we will call, borrowing a phrase from Alasdair MacIntyre, an epistemological crisis, a failure of one's existing categories to adequately account for some new piece of information. MacIntyre's work on such crises – in his 1998 book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and elsewhere – will provide some additional theoretical scaffolding to augment Arendt's deeply personal, visceral reflections. Together, they will help to put concrete color to the process by which a culture – one culture at least – may realize that its ethos is merely parochial. At issue here is something fundamental and fine-grained about human experience, and the successful interface between reality and our intellectual categories: what Arendt calls "understanding" and MacIntyre calls "intelligibility."

The mind of any human being with basically functional sense and cognitive faculties is, in the normal course of life, constantly bombarded with informational input; one becomes aware of persons, books, emotions, smells, cars, ideologies. And yet even when I am becoming aware of each of these specific phenomena –*that* car, *this* economic theory, *that* grocery store clerk – for the first time, they do not normally strike me as

something entirely novel or unfamiliar. As my ability to recognize and subsume these phenomena under concepts increases over time, the world becomes more intelligible to me. But intelligibility is not just a one-way street – always accruing along with life experience. It is true that in the process of learning, one gains the ability to make the subject matter at hand more intelligible to oneself, and that this applies to the student of Latin, the deer hunter, and the aspiring wine connoisseur. But it is also possible for a person to possess, and then lose, the ability to adequately categorize a given group of phenomena.

It is this situation that Alasdair MacIntyre calls an "epistemological crisis." So how does one go from the normal state of ascending intelligibility to a state of epistemological crisis? And what, precisely, is such a crisis? Most basically, he writes, it is the "dissolution of historically founded certainties."[245] This dissolution of certainty can come about in a few ways, but in any case, what is exposed is the more or less debilitating inadequacy of one's former standards of judgment – the standards by which one places specific phenomena in more general categories. In one type of breakdown,

> "It may indeed happen that the use of the methods of enquiry and of the forms of argument, by means of which rational progress had been achieved so far, begins to have the effect of increasingly disclosing new inadequacies, [and] hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems for the solution of which there seem to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief."[246]

In this scenario, a person or group's standards are increasingly seen to be inadequate because they will no longer yield progress towards greater intelligibility. For example, say I judge the veracity of truth-claims based on my ability to verify them through scientific experiment. The only claims I will categorize as "true' are those which can be

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[245] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?...*, p. 362.
[246] Ibid., 362.

verified in a lab. That is my "method of enquiry." If someone tells me that Nickel becomes a gas when heated, I can test, and correctly categorize that claim as either true or false. But eventually I will realize that there is very much in the world that I am permanently, by my standards, unable to adequately categorize. What is the status of my mother's claim that she loves me? Within my scientific frame, this claim is unintelligible.

In his 1977 article "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," MacIntyre offers a brief but telling treatment of such a crisis, "the approach to breakdown in the life of one great philosopher," David Hume. According to MacIntyre, a particular weakness in Hume's epistemology led him to the verge of epistemological crisis. His radical skepticism showed itself unable to make progress towards the goal of making the world intelligible. In a striking passage, Hume writes,

> "the understanding, when it acts alone, and according to its most general principles, entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life . . .. The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me, and on whom have I any influence? I am confronted with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty."[247]

According to MacIntyre, Hume's problem is that "like Descartes, he has set a standard for the foundations of his beliefs which could not be met; hence all beliefs founder

[247] Quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science" *The Monist* Volume 60. Number 4, October 1977: 462.

equally."[248] Hume's system is, in MacIntyre's analysis, shown to be inadequate by its inability to make the world intelligible to Hume. The standards which allow Hume to categorize a belief as true are too high, and the world is thus unintelligible to him.

But Hume did not react to this crisis by altering his standards. Rather, he remained, as a philosopher, in an unintelligible world. But when the pressure (described above) of this unintelligibility mounted, Hume would temporarily drop his standards, and live as "other people" did. Hume writes,

> "Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live and talk and act like other people in the common affairs of life . . . my natural propensity and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this redolent belief in the general maxims of the world."[249]

So Hume was able to weather a long-term epistemological crisis by a sort of radical compartmentalization. His "method of enquiry" was deeply inadequate to the task of understanding the world, but he was able to maintain his sanity by retreating into games of backgammon, conducting himself like "other people."

An inadequate system of judgment does not always just crumble from within like Hume's. The other type of breakdown occurs when "confrontation by new situations, engendering new questions . . . reveal within established practices and beliefs a lack of resources for offering or for justifying answers to these new questions."[250] In this case, new phenomena arise which cannot be subsumed using formerly accepted judgment standards. Attempts to resolve epistemological crises are, according to MacIntyre, "informed by two ideals, truth and intelligibility, and the pursuit of both is not always

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[248] Ibid., 462
[249] David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature,* eds. D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p. 175
[250] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?...,* p. 354

easily coherent. The discovery of an hitherto unsuspected truth is just what may disrupt an hitherto intelligible account."[251] When and if a person finds that some new phenomenon has shown his judgment standards to be inadequate for making some phenomena intelligible, he might initially indict the new phenomenon as impossible, or nonsense. It will seem to him absurd. But the second, and more lasting, step will be to reexamine his previous judgment standards and adjust them to meet the demands made by the new facts.

Hannah Arendt describes a similar characteristic of human experience, labeling it "understanding." It is the ongoing process by which humans make the world and other persons intelligible to themselves. Understanding is, she writes,

> "so closely related to and inter-related with judging that one must describe both as the subsumption (of something particular under a universal rule) which according to Kant is the very definition of judgment, whose absence he so magnificently defined as 'stupidity,' an 'infirmity beyond remedy.'"[252]

So understanding strives for intelligibility – the state in which my tools of perception and cognition are up to the task of correctly receiving and organizing the data yielded by my environment. In an evocative turn of phrase, Arendt writes that understanding is "an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world."[253] The condition of being "at home in the world" is resultant on my judgment that in general, my judgment-categories are appropriate to my environment. In the shadow of twentieth century totalitarianism, Arendt was left with a crisis of understanding – she suddenly found that

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[251] MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises": 455.
[252] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, (Knopf Doubleday, 2005), p. 313
[253] Ibid., 308

she could not feel at home in this world. She found that her judgment-categories were inappropriate to her environment.

I will argue below that Arendt's feeling of alienation from "the world" is resultant on two new beliefs which present themselves to her: (1) Many seemingly "normal" humans make intensely important moral judgments which are implausible to me. (2) My ethical judgments do not harmonize with the fabric of reality; they are not subjective apprehensions of some deep, objective Organizing Principle –whether History, Progress, Reason, God or whatever. Point (1) is almost unremarkable; humans are skilled enough at writing off this or that serial killer, terrorist, dictator, etc. as beyond the pale of humanity – seemingly normal, perhaps, but actually unwell on a deeper level. What makes Nazi Germany so hard for Arendt to understand is the scale and banality of the complicity. Point (2) recalls Hegel's analysis of tragedy – the way it exposes purportedly universal ethics as actually parochial and flimsy. The precise mechanisms of this "exposure" will need to be unpacked below.

Remember that, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, "the discovery of an hitherto unsuspected truth is just what may disrupt an hitherto intelligible account."[254] An unsuspected truth is precisely what confronts Hannah Arendt as she surveys the machinations of 20th century totalitarianism, and most especially of the Nazi Final Solution. This new set of facts disrupts her hitherto intelligible account of the world, and precipitates an epistemological crisis of a particular kind. Where Hume has adopted a standard of epistemology that precludes confidence in any connection between his

[254] MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises,": 455.

judgments and the world, Hannah Arendt's crisis is prompted from without. Her system of judging had, up until the time of the *Shoah,* been perfectly adequate.

A keen observer of totalitarianism in general, Arendt, as a German Jew, writes with particular power of the unique horror of the Holocaust. The crimes of totalitarianism, she writes, "constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment."[255] How is this so? For one thing, the emotionally-loaded categories of "guilt" and "murder" seem subtly off-key when applied to the rational, systematic death machines of the Final Solution. This sounds precisely like the epistemological crisis MacIntyre describes; Arendt's ethical categories, under which she is accustomed to subsuming particular actions, suddenly seem inadequate to the task of understanding the world around her. We might be able to understand, while still condemning, the murderer who kills in rage, jealousy or desperation. The judgments which led to his actions, while despicable, are in a certain way plausible. We can look to many points of fellowship – "Yes. I have believed myself betrayed. I have felt helpless and trapped. It has seemed as though the world was against me, and I have wanted to lash out." The judgment "that person's death would be salutary" is not wholly foreign to many people. But despite my partial fellowship with the murderer, I cannot concur in his judgment that the above beliefs warranted the murderous actions that he thought appropriate. There is some point at which the judgment of the murderer parts company with the judgments I find plausible, and this is just the point where the ascription of "guilt" begins.

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[255] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," p. 310.

Arendt writes with passionate outrage about the dehumanization of those Jews who perished in the gas chambers:

> "they all died together, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; not as people, not as men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, not as good and bad, beautiful and ugly – but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal."[256]

This is not a crime we can understand. The concentration camp guard is not the jealous, spurned lover, who in exacting revenge recognizes the moral agenthood of his wayward lover. We could partially understand, and yet still condemn such an action. No. *"Beyond the capacities of human comprehension* is the deformed wickedness of those who established such equality."[257] In their methods of extermination the Nazis did not merely demonstrate the judgment that the Jews were evil, or foul or a plague on the German people. This in itself would be an outrageous judgment, but the gas chamber demonstrates an even more implausible judgment: either that the Jews simply are not human – they are mere organic matter, which can be destroyed without the imputation of guilt or desert, unmourned, or that the Jews remain human, and it is acceptable to treat humans like mere matter. In either case, the operative judgment is wildly, irreducibly implausible to Arendt, and the Germans who explicitly or implicitly embraced it are marked by a deformed wickedness that is beyond her capacities of comprehension.

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[256] Hannah Arendt "The Image of Hell" in *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism* ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 198.
[257] Ibid., p. 198.

With the Holocaust, Arendt sees that her moral categories can no longer accommodate the full range of actions undertaken by psychologically normal human beings. That is, Arendt cannot subsume the phenomenon of the gas chamber under any of her normal moral categories – the Nazis are more than guilty, the Jews are more than innocent.[258] "The originality of totalitarianism is horrible . . . because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment."

It is abundantly clear what event has thrown Arendt into a crisis of understanding – arguably the single largest crime in human history, perpetrated on her people, by her countrymen. But Arendt, curiously, does not write of her crisis as a simple lack of fellowship between her and the German people. Rather, "to the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to *a world* in which such things are possible at all."[259] In what way has "the world" become unintelligible? How has the phenomenon of totalitarianism made obsolete the standards of judgment which Arendt previously categorized the world in which she lives? Here are the two propositions which Arendt cannot seem to harmonize.

(2) Humans should be treated as more than mere biological matter.
(2b) Some humans treat other humans like mere biological matter.

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[258] "The gas chamber was more than anyone could have deserved, and in the face of it the worst criminal [among the victims] was as innocent as the new-born babe." Arendt, "The Image of Hell," in "Understanding and Politics" 198.
[259] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," p. 308. Emphasis mine

There is no obvious logical incompatibility between these two statements. One could coherently hold them together. And yet the introduction of (2b) has ruined Arendt's ability to feel at home in world where this fact can obtain. So this sense of alienation from the world needs further exploration. Here, then, another attempt at a set of mutually exclusive beliefs, which warrant Arendt's need for reconciliation with the world:

> Set 3:
> (3) The judgments of "normal" humans are intelligible, even if incorrect
> (3b) The judgments of many "normal" human beings were, in this large-scale case, unintelligible

The realization of (3b) understandably gives one a feeling of vertigo. The assumption that my fellow humans generally act for intelligible reasons is key to the peaceful ordering of any life in society. But now it seems that I was mistaken about that assumption. If (3b) has obtained, (3) is destroyed, and the normal ordering of human relationships is thrown into doubt.

But even this catastrophic vertigo still does not entirely explain why Arendt feels divorced from "the world" at large. Why not just collaborating Germans? Recall that above, I quoted Arendt as saying that the quest to understand totalitarianism is an attempt "to reconcile ourselves to *a world* in which such things are *possible at all*."[260] So in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Arendt finds herself living among non-humans, or at least among the same type of "normal" people who, much to her horror, became non-humans under the influence of totalitarianism. How, she asks, can this be *possible*? We can infer that Arendt had previously thought such a situation *impossible.*

[260] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," p. 308. Emphasis mine

Here I would like to suggest that the inhuman crimes of the Nazis have thrown into doubt Arendt's judgment that inhuman crimes are "wrong," in much the same way that I might consider my car a non-living thing, or my friend a human. Arendt's previous belief that "inhuman crimes are wrong" was more than a statement of her preference – for such a preference surely remains after the Holocaust; this much has not been thrown into question. Rather, the prior judgment that "inhuman crimes are wrong" was also a statement about the world, and the principles which determine how things will go there. There is, it seems, an instinct to read from *ought* back to *is*, from ethics to metaphysics. So what principle has been shown not to exist in the case of the Holocaust?

I would like to suggest that contained in the statement "humans must not be treated like mere organic matter" is a belief in a principle analogous to the principle that "objects at rest tend to stay at rest." A violation of either of these principles seems wrong – seems not to fit in the world as we have come to understand it. The distinction between is and ought is a post-hoc philosophical one, not native to human experience. So Arendt, quite in excess of what her explicit metaphysics could afford (she was an atheist), seems to have been dealing with a gut-level assumption that there exists some guiding principle – be it History, Progress, Modernity, Civilization or whatever – guaranteeing that clinically normal, civilized humans will not, en masse, treat innocent humans as mere organic matter. There was, it would seem, some metaphysical residue woven into the fabric of Arendt's ethical thinking. In the Holocaust, that residue was exposed for what it was – many "normal" people not only became murderers, but they are easily capable of becoming inexplicably inhuman murderers. To make matters more extreme, there's a case to be made that the Germans were more than "normal" – they were arguably the

most modern, the most refined, the most enlightened ethnos in the world, seedbed of the *Aufklärung,* Mozart, Goethe, Schiller, Kant, etc., etc. If the civilizing dictates of Reason or Progress were to obtain anywhere, they should have obtained most fully in Germany. Their failure to do so seems to amount to a catastrophic, widespread refutation of the judgment that "humans must not be treated like mere objects." Arendt still finds such actions intolerable, but they apparently "fit" in the world. The ordering principle that Arendt expected to keep humanity on its tracks has been shown up as nonexistent. The Nazis have carried the Absolute along with them – the event of their actions strikes Arendt as either the ethical embodiment of a dark, evil Absolute, or as evidence that the world, whatever that may mean, is indifferent to the comings and goings, sufferings and flourishings of humanity. In Hegel's terms, Arendt's ethos has been parochialized. In Aristotle's, she has fallen out of friendship with the world. *Nous* is not to be trusted.

Why can't Arendt simply readjust her ethical judgments, and once again feel at home in the world? Here we come to an important point: core moral judgments are particularly durable. They are, for one thing, tied up with my fundamental self-understanding. Such an adjustment would throw into question not merely the workings of the world, but my fundamental understanding of my own actions – of myself. Judgments about how one should live serve as a compass, providing a vital sense of orientation in the world. They also, if regularly practiced, issue in habits – as Aristotle explains, by acting generously, I come to *love* generosity, I *become* generous. I am attached to my moral judgments in a way that exceeds my attachment to judgments about mere matters of fact. So it may become suddenly, gruesomely apparent that the world does not support the judgment that "humans are not mere objects" but *I do,* and the

process of doing otherwise will be long and painful, if it is possible at all. The prohibition on genocide still seems right to Arendt, but it is now orphaned, cut off from any deep metaphysical well spring. After Auschwitz, Arendt finds herself the defender of a culture that can no longer "give an account of its categories of understanding and standards of judgment when they [are] seriously challenged."[261] We love them, and they are *ours,* but we can say little more than this. They have been comprehensively parochialized by a real world tragedy.

Hume experienced a searing angst in the wake of his epistemological crisis; unable to make sense of himself or his fellow humans, he asks in desperation "Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me, and on whom have I any influence?"[262] Faced with these unanswerable questions, Hume begins "to fancy [himself] in the most deplorable condition imaginable." This "cry of pain" as MacIntyre calls it, emerges, I suggest, from the same state of bewilderment into which the horrors of totalitarianism have thrown Hannah Arendt. I may be able to reconcile myself to a world where causality cannot be proved, but it will be much more difficult to reconcile myself to a world where my most fundamental moral judgments are not rooted in any objective fact about the world – where mechanized mass murder is a simple, mundane possibility, and human decency is a parochial preference. Arendt's language, like Hume's, reflects this difficulty. She speaks the language of "reconciliation" – normally reserved for situations where some sort of a divorce has

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[261] Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), *p.* 95
[262] MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises": 462

obtained between allies, and she speaks of "being at home," the converse of homelessness and alienation. Her frustrated longings resonate with the German Romantics' desire for a soul-deep "sympathy for all life"[263] and the sense of Aristotelian friendship achieved in contemplation.

For Hegel, this parochialization of an ethos simply means that the next step in the dialectic is upon us. In particular (for our purposes) it means that art has lost its ability to communicate the highest truths to us, but has neatly handed that baton to science and philosophy. But as we discussed above, the turn towards a clean, clear rationality hasn't been nearly as complete as Hegel expected. But why not? Science and philosophy may indeed bear the prestige of being the preeminent truth-tellers in our late-modern society, but in a different way than Hegel envisioned. They do not, with minor exceptions, aim to outline for us the true nature of the Divine. On the rare occasion that a scientist or philosopher takes up such a large and encompassing question, she most often does it in order to remark upon – or perhaps to mourn, with Hannah Arendt – the absence of any such ordering principle, or benevolent being. The highest truth now is that there are no high truths in Hegel's sense, or if there are high truths, they are cruel – a biologically programmed war of all against all. We dare not harmonize our ethos with such an Absolute – this would make us monsters. If we cannot stop everyone from making such an attempt, we can at least prevent them from doing so in public.

4.4 Public Life After the Disruption

[263] Taylor, *Hegel, 25*

The progressing history of Liberalism has been an attempt to cope with the increasing undeniability of this turn away from metaphysics. We can see this in the thought of John Rawls, far and away the most influential 20th century theorist of Liberalism, whose 1971 Book *A Theory of Justice* has been widely praised as the most important philosophical explication of Liberalism since Mill. This explication is a distinctly, definitively *postwar* vision, marked deep down by the disillusionment and terror of Arendt's engagement with the *shoah.* Upon graduation from Princeton, a young John Rawls enlisted in the army, and served three years of active duty, fighting in the Pacific Theater of WWII. He had left America a quietly believing Christian, one who even entertained thoughts of entering the priesthood, but his experiences in war belied the easy faith of his childhood, and by the time he returned to pursue graduate studies at Princeton, he was an atheist.

Three particular wartime experiences stood out. The first was the death of a close friend. The second was a sermon he heard on the front, in which an American clergyman confidently asserted that God was on the side of the Americans, and would aid them to victory. The third was Rawls's growing awareness of the Holocaust. Here's how Rawls describes the impact of these events:

> "These incidents, and especially the third as it became widely known affected me in the same way. This took the form of questioning whether prayer was possible. How could I pray and ask God to help me, or my family, or my country, or any other cherished thing I cared about, when God would not save millions of Jews from Hitler? When Lincoln interprets the Civil War as God's punishment for the sin of slavery, deserved equally by North and South, God is seen as acting justly. But the Holocaust can't be interpreted in that way, and all attempts to do so that I have read are hideous and evil. To interpret history as expressing God's will, God's will must accord with the most basic ideas of justice as we know them. For

> what else can the most basic justice be? Thus, I soon came to reject the idea of the supremacy of the divine will as also hideous and evil."[264]

Again, still, the fact of the Holocaust shows up good, decent western ethics as parochial, and again, this is not a matter of simple intellectual adjustment. It is also simultaneously an outrage, a disaster, a reason for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Rawls rose to international prominence in 1971, with the publication of *A Theory of Justice,* in which he unpacks his idea of justice as fairness, "a procedural interpretation of Kant's conception of autonomy, understood as reason giving a law to itself."[265] In *Theory*, rational self-legislation, free from heteronomous interference, is posited as the highest good. As rational beings, humans desire to order their lives for themselves, in accordance with their rationality. JAF seeks to provide a theory of how these facts should be dealt with in the real circumstances of social life. As the expression of what Rawls calls a "comprehensive doctrine" about human nature and flourishing, JAF has ramifications for how a human life is to be lived and lived well. It's not quite a metaphysic (Kant would never abet such a thing) but it does aim to anchor its ethos in deep, universal truths about the human person. It's a rather kindred vision to that expounded by Mill; It takes some key features of human nature, extracts a *telos* from same, and commends some certain political arrangements that seem conducive to those ends.

Rawls's 1993 book *Political Liberalism,* veers sharply away from such philosophical ambition. This work aims merely to set out a theoretical framework for the

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[264] John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, Joshua Cohen, and Robert Merrihew Adams. *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: With 'on My Religion'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 262-263

[265] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 26

basic structures –governmental, economic and social – appropriate to liberal societies. Rawls seeks to engage all reasonable citizens of liberal constitutional democracies, and thus he refrains from presenting any comprehensive moral, religious or philosophical basis for society, which would necessarily be controversial, and thus, he argues, unstable and illiberal. Rather, Rawls merely wants to suggest the parameters for the type of framework that could be built on the common moral/political opinions of liberal democratic citizens *qua* citizens, and which would cohere with the various reasonable comprehensive doctrines of those citizens *qua* complete persons. In this attempt, Rawls presents his theory of justice as fairness as one tenable system for deriving political principles from the common liberal milieu. In attempting to (a) confine his explorations to the framework of basic structures rather than the moral life as a whole and (b) derive these structures from the merely *political* opinions of citizens, Rawls purports to have built a system which is solely political, not comprehensive.

Rawls so circumscribes this second project because in the twenty-two years which intervened between the two works, he came to believe that any theory built on such a comprehensive account of the human person and the good is inappropriate for a Liberal society. This is because it is (a) unstable, and (b) illiberal. The distinctly comprehensive Kantian treatment of JAF in *Theory* could never be stable, because the "burdens of judgement" make such comprehensive accounts necessarily uncertain, and reasonable people can reasonably disagree about them. This remarkably tidy phrase – "the burdens of judgment" – does a tremendous amount of work. It indicates a probably unavoidable incommensurability between different citizens' readings of the deepest realities. There are matters of fact about molecules, GDP, and medicinal side effects, so we can bravely

bring our beliefs about same into the public sphere, and hope that discussion will lead to consensus, but in matters of deepest significance, no consensus is to be expected. In the face of this almost certain disagreement – which he also calls the fact of reasonable pluralism – coercive governmental enforcement of laws must not be explained in terms of comprehensive anthropological or ethical doctrines. To do so would be to taint the public sphere with arguments that will almost certainly remain unresolved, and which thus cannot provide Liberal citizens "with justifying reasons for the use of coercive force that all can reasonably accept."[266]

Some version of the argument from stability could dovetail comfortably with Mill's pragmatic arguments for liberty. Let's all chase the capital-T Truth, Mill might say, but in the meantime, government ought not justify the seizure of our property or curtailment of our liberty based on deep principles that we are likely to reject, be they Kantian, Christian, Muslim, etc. However, as should be clear, Rawls is not merely being pragmatic, attempting to build a stable *modus vivendi,* prudently sidelining intractable moral questions. Rawls's theory is unabashedly built on Liberal *moral* foundations. As his students Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel write, Rawls's postwar "rejection of orthodox Christianity went hand in hand with his rejection of its long history of using political power to establish its hegemony and to oppress other religions."[267] Rawls's rejection of the doctrinal truth claims of Christianity are bound up with Christians' history of claiming to know the truth, and leveraging that knowledge in a way that disadvantages non-knowers. Rawls's good Liberal allergy to oppression is strong, and a

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[266] Samuel Freeman *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls,* p. 35.
[267] Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, "John Rawls: on my Religion" *Times Literary Supplement,* March 18, 2009

central tenet of his moral/ spiritual/ intellectual life. Political liberalism will therefore not merely eschew sweeping statements about the nature of being, or the path to happiness, on the sole grounds that this might make for an unstable society, but also because given the fact of reasonable pluralism, such statements would be *oppressive*. To justify your tax policy based on economic utility is fine. To do so based on your understanding of Divine kenosis is to violate the "full freedom of conscience of citizens."[268] If a government begins to impose laws on its citizens which are grounded in conceptions that they could reasonably reject, it will have ceased to be Liberal. It will have become an autocracy, and thus illegitimate.

Rawls feels comfortable employing this distinctly moral principle because he believes it is part of a common political conception, and thus part of public reason. Disagreements about tax policy and foreign intervention have shown themselves difficult to resolve, but in principle they *could* be susceptible to consensus-building. Something different seems to obtain when we turn our attention to Rawls's "comprehensive doctrines." These are dangerous. Even to employ them while advocating for uncontroversial policies is to engage in oppression. They must be excluded from that realm in which we reason together about the life that we share. As a good Liberal citizen, Lars von Trier would be welcome to argue, in public, that doctors be more hesitant to prescribe mood-altering drugs to individuals suffering from depression. This much Rawls could sanction. But if Von Trier went on to explain that we should refrain from prescribing such medications because untreated depression gives us access to the deepest truths of reality, not only would he look ridiculous, in the mere act of explaining he

[268] Freeman, p. 35

would have done violence to his fellow citizens' freedom of conscience. The Liberal ethic, as developed in Rawls, is purely political, building an ethos on a rejection of oppression, a commitment to liberty and equality that we just happen to all share. It is also deeply suspicious of metaphysics, attuned to the possibility that my claimed metaphysical knowledge could be itself a tool of oppression. Postwar Rawlsian Liberalism is thus a groundless ethos, one of whose central tenets is opposition to the public invocation of metaphysical grounds.

In Rawls's telling of it, "epistemic abstinence," the insistence on accepting our political maxims without inquiring about what sort of deeper metaphysical-moral commitments might undergird them, is only required in the political sphere. In our churches and art galleries, of course we can and will dive as deep as we like, do our best to plumb the depths of cosmic reality. This much is good and healthy. But humans are not so good at compartmentalization as philosophers might sometimes wish they were. Rawls himself, of course, had strong opinions about metaphysical explanation. He never renounced his wartime conclusion that the idea of the supremacy of divine will, the attempt to find some thread of benevolent purpose behind the welter of war and cruelty, was "hideous and evil." Rawls's argument in *Political Liberalism* can be evaluated on the basis of its argumentative merits, but we need not forget that its author felt and thought the way he did about larger, metaphysical arguments. We also need not pretend that these sorts of arguments have only the precise impact that they explicitly avow. The lines of influence between ethics and metaphysics runs both ways. Our lived ethos has a way of bleeding backwards, into our deepest perceptions of reality.

Rawls became the phenomenon he did because his work found wide resonance; it asked questions that struck the academic establishment as germane, and proffered answers that establishment found plausible. In the wake of Auschwitz, metaphysical doctrines just do feel dangerous to quite a lot of people. Rawls may not be echoing Diderot in his eagerness to see the last king strangled with the entrails of the last priest, but a domesticated version of that same Manichean energy provides a large part of the motivation for the embrace of Liberalism. If we don't know what sort of life we're *for,* we'd better at least agree about what we're against.

. . .

Postwar Liberalism is a bafflingly original kind of ethos, self-consciously eschewing any sort of substantive *telos* – it offers no vision of the good life for humans beyond, in the American formulation, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And of course, these things are good, prerequisites, perhaps, to a life well lived. But the Liberal fetishization of freedom, crowning it the proper telos of our common life, is strange, analogous to the 20th-century Italian ideology of Futurism, which worshipped at the altar of force. The Futurists' written hysterics fed the rise of fascism, because what is force? What is it used for? When is it good or wicked? The futurists abjured these questions in their adolescent fever: mere force was simply good. Theirs is rightly now seen as a dangerous ideology. The fact that patriotic freedom-lovers are not similarly dangerous does not result from the superiority of their ideology: the mere love of undifferentiated, abstract freedom is every bit as immature and suspect as the love of force. Because what is freedom? What is it used for? When is it good or wicked? Postwar Liberalism refuses

to answer. All it calls for is an end to imbalance, to coercion, a bursting open of possibilities, an even distribution of what Bennett calls our "capacity to shape our protean selves."

The parallel with ethi-comical art should be evident enough. We might even go so far as to describe it as the Liberal aesthetic, the cultural wing of the postwar Rawlsian settlement. In both cases, attempts to see deeply into reality, and to forge an ethos in response to those deep things, are seen as potentially dangerous, courting oppression the moment they begin. In both cases the real sap, the motivational power that makes political action or art seem worthwhile, is the disruption of hierarchy. Within this world, privileged knowledge, such as that sought by priests, philosophers and artists working in the vein we've described as reconciliatory prophecy, are all suspect. To claim to see deeply is to claim authority. But after Auschwitz we've learned to mistrust authority, because every substantive ethos is merely parochial.

4.5 An Aesthetic Itinerary?

So then where is this permutation of Liberalism taking us? Nowhere? Anywhere at all? Are we all to be Nietzschean great men, creating our values from scratch and living them out in a single, shared city? Apartment buildings with a thousand self-creators, each angelically tolerant of the value-creator next door? Yes. Well, that's the plan, at least on paper; society as a kind, anti-hierarchical Nietzschean melange, each of us released to anarchic gentleness, each designing our own worlds, day by day. It's a wild and unpredictable plan, but directionless rebellion seems like the only humane path to

follow for many learned people these days, at least when they try to figure these things out in the vehicles of art and intellectual reflection: we must disarm the unduly armed, spread the power thin, and let a thousand dervishes spin out their own unique, original systems of value. It's an ambitious task, and a heavy burden to lay at the feet of your neighbors. Nietzsche was not always sure that he was up to it – in a darker mood he was prone to thrash against himself as a "mere fool!" and "mere poet!"[269] But it seems that the cultural elite is, by professional necessity if nothing else, a herd of comic rebels now, standing in bold defiance of any larger order, prophetically counseling rebellion, *en route* to prestigious faculty positions and gallery representation. The appreciative viewer or well-heeled purchaser of a piece of ethi-comic art is blessed by his participation in this prophetic act of denunciation, and, let us say, sincere in his veneration of the prophet who saw the flaw, and called us with creative brio to reject it. If the work is ugly, his appreciation of it further confirms his membership in the elite tribe of Liberal metaphysics-resisters, and is bolstered by the club's exclusivity.

An ethos without a *telos* has, however, a limited shelf life. Its ability to galvanize passionate support, except as an alternative to other, less pleasant arrangements, is finite. Such a vacuum cannot long endure. But Manichean religion is attractive both for what it calls the supplicant *to*, and also for giving her a comprehensive foe, to which she can attribute all of the misery and stupidity that characterize our condition. If we have no true, deep *telos,* we can fashion a temporal substitute – a villain to fight against. For both postwar Liberalism and ethi-comical art, the enemy is domination, the ruling of some

[269] Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Harcourt Brace, 1974), 175

over others. In both forums the powerful are, in theory, called out, called to accountability, commanded to lay down their privilege on pain of seizure.[270]

Post WWII versions of ethi-comical prophecy have increasingly focused their ire on particular demographic groups within society. Where Tzara denounced the Boomboom of "various very intelligent people," Jane Tompkins is interested in demoting those works of art that are lauded as classics, but "are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position."[271] It's an important shift, from people to "parties or factions." As ethi-comical art has evolved from WWII to the present, it has increasingly focused on power imbalances between different identity groups, organized around race or sex or sexual orientation, etc.; achieving power-parity between them is taken to be among the highest goals that art and politics can aim at. The power-bearers, chiefly straight white cis men, are seen as the chief creators and beneficiaries of older forms of culture, especially works that could be described as reconciliatory prophecy. These hierarchies and art forms are seen as complicit in the oppression of the underprivileged, and in urgent need of sweeping away. Once this sweeping is achieved, once we are all emancipated and set down on even ground, then finally the task of living well can begin.

This crypto-eschatology, this covert method of investing some vague, always-unarrived liberation with profound spiritual resonance, is found not just in ethi-comic art,

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[270] In both political Liberalism and ethi-comical art, exceptions are tacitly made for the privilege of wealth; against the advisements of theorists like Rawls, the former has become a uniquely hospitable ground for the wild concentration of wealth, and the economy of contemporary art is directly dependent on the ultra-rich for its patronage.

[271] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*

but also in political Liberalism. Rawls's students Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel write that for Rawls, one of the cardinal constituents of political philosophy is

> "a reasonable faith in the possibility of a just constitutional democracy; he says that the recognition of this possibility shapes our attitude "toward the world as a whole"; he suggests that if a reasonably just society is not possible, one might appropriately wonder whether "it is worthwhile for human beings to live on earth"; and he concludes *A Theory of Justice* with powerfully moving remarks about how the original position enables us to see the social world and our place in it sub specie aeternitatis."[272]

So faith in the mere *possibility* of a just constitutional democracy, with a fair allocation of resources and power, shapes our entire *weltanschauung.* Were we to abandon this hope, we might very well conclude that it is not worthwhile for humans to live on earth. In order for the struggle to feel rich and deep enough to play such a massive psychic role, and thus be eligible to serve as fodder for art, it can't be a mere matter of legal or economic fairness. These may be the very furthest reaches of what Liberalism can actually accomplish, but they are not what gives sap to the system, in its political or artistic expressions. The sap comes from the promise of a perfect, eternally deferred end to injustice, achieved by the apocalyptic defeat of a common enemy. The struggle against him makes us one. By locating this enemy deeper and deeper in the souls of dominant demographic groups (and / or "Western culture"), as Kara Walker does, ethi-comical prophets deepen the sense that this is a *spiritual* battle, not a mere competition for resources, and in so doing ensure that the struggle can continue indefinitely, along with the sense of purpose and belonging that come along with war.

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[272] Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, "John Rawls: On My Religion" *Times Literary Supplement,* March 18, 2009

Picking our Prophecies

Different as they often are in execution, reconciliatory prophecy and ethi-comical prophecy – Malick and von Trier on one side, Duchamp and Walker on the other – share an analogous *modus operandi*. Both aim to embody in mere, humble matter, some glint of a reality desired but too rarely seen – one because it is threaded only thinly through the coarse, bulky fabric of existence, the other because it is held in abeyance by strong, power-hungry men. On this canvas, or in the pulp of this wood or clay or metal, or perhaps this LED screen or pile of glitter or discarded sneaker, the prophet finds and crystalizes a glint, and if it's a glint of what we too desire, we might be mightily moved – we might think this thing one of the most momentous objects we could ever encounter. We might hush in its presence, or pay an exorbitant price to take it home, we might read in its form an imperative to change our lives. In any case, we understand that this is not a simple object among objects. It has been party to something of the deepest significance. It may not be beautiful, per se, but it is in some deep sense good and valuable.

That said, there's no collapsing the difference between these two types of prophecy – not only in execution, but even more so in desired impact. One is meant to inculcate a kind of edifying understanding, through an experience that is pleasurable, clarifying and galvanizing. We might build a life, or a community, or even a society around the truths we find there, or we might just become happier, more realistic, more hopeful, etc. The other is meant to challenge, by means of unmasking, structures of power, without reference to any deeper truths about the cosmos, or any richly fleshed out vision of what a better world might look like. Change is the end game. If the status quo stays in place, this kind of prophecy has, ostensibly, been a failure, but at the same time,

the status quo *must* stay in place, because the struggle is the point – only inside the struggle can we imagine cessation of struggle as utopia.

James Joyce explores something like this dichotomy in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where Stephen, the protagonist, argues that true art is "static" – it moves the viewer to stillness, to contemplative satisfaction with the thing she beholds. Bad art, on the other hand he calls "kinetic" – it provokes the viewer to action by exciting either desire or loathing – it is either pornographic or didactic.

> "The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I used the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing."[273]

This description of static aesthetic experience recalls Havel's experience of the tree, recounted in chapter two, his "sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed to [him] now, and this combined with a carefree determination to face what had to be faced."[274] Havel finds himself in harmony with reality, needing only to play his proper role, to face what needs to be faced. He has work to do, but he is where he belongs. Havel is not drawn by his experience to a quietistic withdrawal, indeed he was, in the wake of this experience, to become the president of the nascent Czech Republic. He is instead drawn to a sort of stoical,

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[273] James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* (Bantam Classic, 2005), 185
[274] Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp 331-332. Quoted by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, 728-9. Hereafter cited as Havel, *Letters.*

contented activism: “by perceiving ourselves as part of the river,” he writes, “we accept our responsibility for the river as a whole . . .”[275]

One need not follow Stephen Daedalus or Vaclav Havel all the way in order to see something enduringly valuable in aesthetic experiences that don’t immediately attempt to provoke political outrage or action, that allow us to stand still and silent in peaceful appreciation, to let ourselves be drawn slowly into friendship with the deep realities they gesture towards. If we were to achieve a perfectly just world, motivated by the proddings of a million works of political art, actualized via Twitter shamings and callouts, policed with perfect pronoun-parsing diligence, death and decay would still be with us. Relationships would still be prone to fracture and dissolution. Life would still be terribly, horribly difficult for the human animal, which wants so much more than it can have. When all the hierarchies have been toppled, and all the paradigms subverted, what will we do then? How will each of us live on this ridiculous planet, among these ridiculous people?

The answer is with great difficulty, and, let’s hope, also with some humility, gratitude, and joy. And this is where the first kind of prophecy—the attempt to help us see better, to love what we see every day—is so desirable. Because in fact, none of us will live to see the promised land. Oppression and immiseration are stains on the fabric of our world and should be addressed whenever we have the wherewithal. But they will reappear roughly as many times as we scrub them out. If we are to have any kind of peace, we will have to locate it here, in this imperfect world. There’s plenty of room for

[275] Havel, *Letters,* p. 301

art that aims to change things for the better. Make it; show it; let's talk together about what has to be done. But let's also make a lot more space for art that helps us understand how this world, unfinished and filthy as it is, peopled by hapless creatures like ourselves is, well, ok. And maybe even beautiful, in some deep, mysterious, partially hidden way.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chasing Deep Reality After Auschwitz?

5.1 Introduction

In a certain sense, we don't have a choice – or we do, but the alternative is wildly unacceptable. Liberalism and ethi-comical art have grown old together. Throughout the developed world, voting populations are electing leaders who blithely eschew the flat, open, thinned out landscape of the postwar Liberal order; rafts of books and article have been printed about the coming (or already present) illiberal storm. The impeccably liberal former U.S. President Barack Obama, in the year he was succeeded by the most openly illiberal president in the postwar era, named Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* as one of his favorite books of the year. He praised Deneen's anti-Liberal pamphlet for offering "cogent insights into the loss of meaning and community that many in the West feel, issues that liberal democracies ignore at their own peril."[276] The many are right to feel this loss of meaning – Liberalism, in both its political and cultural instantiations, is intentionally empty of constructive content. It has been the regnant consensus of American high culture for several decades, but now it's entered its frantic denouement. The culture of critique has aged into soulless kitsch, as each rising cohort of edgy, important scholars and artists gropes around for new, ever more arcane giants to slay. The arts and humanities are hemorrhaging money-scared students to Business and Economics

[276] Clare Foran, "Here's What's on Barack Obama's Reading List" https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/16/politics/barack-obama-reading-list-mitch-landrieu/index.html

departments, students who might stay if anyone on faculty had the temerity to argue that art can be a site for deep, profound, enduring wisdom about the nature of reality and how we should live in it.

We need such temerity because with or without it the human heart remains hungry, and demagogues, advertisers, tech gurus, televangelists, and reality tv stars rush in like locusts where angels fear to tread. In lucky cases like ours, a wisdom-starved society might simply devolve to an atomized herd of helpless, craven worker-consumers, trading long, deadened hours for plastic products in a desperate attempt to feel like their lives are full. But this is a flimsy kind of fullness, and it requires the injection of various spiritual anesthetics - junk food, ubiquitous porn, social media, video games, smartphone addiction, online outrage, opioids. Who knows how long this unhappy *modus vivendi* will last? If the smartest, most careful and sensitive builders of art, ideas and scholarship continue to insist that only critique is licit now, the thirst for deeper meanings will still be sated, but by whom, and how? It's time for the sophisticated to become brave, to risk being wrong in order to build something ambitious and genuinely humane – genuinely beautiful. As we've seen in previous chapters, there's no authentic experience of beauty that doesn't (at least implicitly) plumb the depths of reality and suggest an appropriate ethos in response to those depths. But in the upper reaches of Western culture, the allergy to this kind of inquiry is, alas, deep-seated, and will take some time to unseat.

This is all assuming, of course, that such a return to reality is tenable for Western civilization, that we can safely fashion some metaphysic-ethic-aesthetic without falling into the competing dangers of gross despair or gross dishonesty. Recall that for Hegel, a

comic era like ours is proceeded by tragedy, the exposure of a deep reality completely at odds with the ethical preferences of a given culture, "the negation of what [it] stood for, not its fulfillment."[277] We have tried above to interpret the two world wars as real-life tragedies in the Hegelian sense – the announcement of hostile truth, destroyers of pleasant fantasy. After these events, the western high brow have remained convinced that the truth is tragic – we cannot reconcile with deep reality – and so a kind of frenetic comedy is the only decent alternative. We may not know where comedy taking us, but as Rawls says, we're able to go on, to feel some sense of acceptable progress, because we have faith that the tearing down of oppression is taking us to a good new place. And indeed, it is hard to live in tragedy, hard to build a civilization in permanent enmity with the real, so perhaps it truly is best to focus our attention on something better in the future, whatever the chances are of actually realizing that future. Joycean stasis seems not to be a practical option. The hard, steely beauty of von Trier's Justine is a beauty, to be sure, but a hard, hard one to love and live in. It is intensely, defiantly unalluring.

And perhaps this is right. Perhaps those are our choices, because tragedy really is the only honest description of the deepest reality – cosmic chance allied with natural selection, a play of accident, advantage, struggle and death. It certainly seems to many of us, including Tzara, Adorno and their respective colleagues, that the meek, hospitable beauty personified by Jessica Chastain in *The Tree of Life* is exhausted, a heap of broken, discredited images. If so, beauty's exile makes perfect sense; it is on this assumption that Kalliphobia has come to be, in Arthur Danto's words, "epidemic in avant garde circles

[277] Taylor, p. 205

since the early twentieth century."[278] But before we simply grant this most momentous assertion, it makes sense to take a serious look. The argument goes like this – a mature, credible look at reality, at least under current conditions, will reveal a world evil at the core, a world in which, as Arendt says, we live unreconciled, struggling to feel at home. Where cruelty and death have the last words. Any truthful art would have to reflect such a dire diagnosis.

5.2 Lucian Freud: "Reality" Without Transcendence

But is this so? As a parting salvo, let us examine, briefly, a distinguished body of work that specifically attempts to plumb the truth about the world, and finds there no trace of beauty or transcendence. In so doing, we will gain reason to question the truism that deep, honest art about our condition must be tragic. Lucian Freud, grandson of the famous psychologist, was one of the most singular artists of the twentieth century. For several decades, until his death in 2011, the English painter stuck stubbornly to his program of stark, severe portraiture, ignoring the oceans of trend-waves that washed over the art world in that time. While so many of his fellow artists dashed around in a comic frenzy between happenings and video installations and formaldehyde tanks, subverting and problematizing like mad, Freud stood in his studio, squinting and scowling at splayed naked bodies, piling his gritty canvases with sagging jowls, curled toes and pubic hair. For this he was called a conservative, too concerned with the world as it is to pretend he

[278] Arthur Danto, "Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art" *Art Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer, 2004): 24.

was changing it by globbing paint onto canvas. Freud was a self-proclaimed admirer of Courbet's anti-sentimental "shamelessness" and his paintings (allegedly) trade in a gruesome sort of candor. Freud was relentlessly resistant to any type of deeper vision, any prophetic content to his work. He was also, as his career advanced, increasingly allergic to beauty. This is no coincidence, of course. His path is a third way, and one that has been little taken. He is a defiant opponent of any kind of prophecy, aiming to simply document the status quo as it is, offering no commentary whatsoever.

In 1987 the critic Robert Hughes called Freud the "greatest living realist painter," and since then his judgment has become a commonplace. Freud's own words lend credence to the label; he has said, for instance, that his only goal is to paint his sitters "how they happen to be."[279] Hughes' instinct for superlative is sound – Freud's work is indeed in a class by itself. But if Lucian Freud was the twentieth century's greatest realist, this fact says less about the courage and clarity of his vision than it does about the small amount of reality that that Liberal highbrow culture has been willing and able to countenance after Auschwitz. In order to unpack this, we'll briefly examine a few key watersheds in Freud's artistic development.

Freud was born in 1922, and began painting and drawing as an adolescent. After several years of student-like experiments with still-lifes, grotesquery, and the occasional surrealist whimsy-piece, Freud turned in the late forties to the painting of portraits, a task that occupied him until his death. One of his finest early portraits is called *Girl with a White Dog*.

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[279] William Feaver, *Lucian Freud* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), p. 373.

Figure 5. Lucian Freud, *Girl With a White Dog*

The painting depicts his then-wife Kathleen Garman seated on a striped couch, wearing a yellow robe, her right breast exposed, the eponymous white dog on her lap. Like much of Freud's work from this initial stage, individual brush strokes are nearly invisible; the skin texture is soft, milky and smooth, with just a hint of fleshly warmth and energy. Much of the painting's magnetism rests in the subject's large eyes, which stare listlessly, and perhaps desperately, past and beneath the viewer's gaze. Despite his not-inconsiderable successes during this period, Freud has said that during this time he felt "more

discontented than daring."[280] He wanted his painting to be more than it was, but was unsure of how to proceed.

This new sought-for direction came, ultimately, through Freud's association with Francis Bacon, another great English figurative painter. To Freud's somewhat jejune manner, Bacon juxtaposed a paint-flinging brashness, both in art and in life. Inspired to inject his own painting with a greater vitality, Freud began standing at his easel rather than sitting, and traded in his fine sable brushes for coarser ones made of hogs' hair. His brush strokes became riskier, and the smooth surface of skin began to show tinges of sub-epidermal energy, beautifully manifest in 1961's *Pregnant Girl*

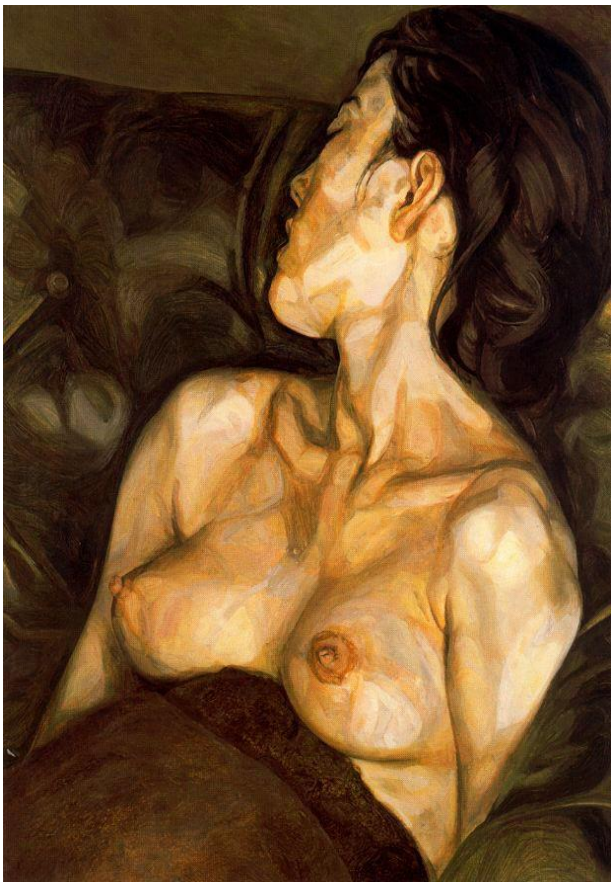

Figure 6. Lucien Freud, *Pregnant Girl*

[280] Feaver, p. 321

Pregnant Girl brings the viewer into intimate proximity with a young woman sleeping, her breasts and shoulders exposed, head lolled to the right, face in profile. The painting, for its subject matter, is remarkably lively; the young woman's skin courses with cool vitality, even as she rests peacefully, neck and jaw relaxed, eyes closed. Freud uses his new-found painterly freedom to touch her flesh with gray and ochre shadings that, while not strictly literal, suggest a deep, mysterious fecundity – she is quietly bursting with life. But while *something* is happening in this picture, it's not clear who or what is making it happen. The painting is, among other things, a virtuosic exploration of what Freud has called "the mystery of whatever bodies themselves might be," and calls to mind what we referred to above as interior sublimity. The viewer is invited to glimpse, but never to exhaust, what lies beneath the surface.

Not many of Freud's pictures at this stage were so classically beautiful as *Pregnant Girl*, and in his fully mature stage, none come close to approaching it. In the stage of Freud's career that runs from the early seventies until his death, the lively tension between surface and depth increasingly gives way to bitter, vain warfare, with inner vitality ultimately yielding to outer disintegration. In 1970 Lucian's father, father, Ernst Ludwig Freud, passed away, and shortly thereafter his mother, Lucie, fell into a deep depression and unsuccessfully attempted suicide. According to Lucian, his mother never fully recovered from the suicidal depression, and for the rest of her life convinced herself that she was perpetually and seriously ill.[281] For the next fifteen years Lucie sat for a series of portraits, the first of which were completed in 1972.

[281] Sebastian Smee, *Lucian Freud* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007), p. 43.

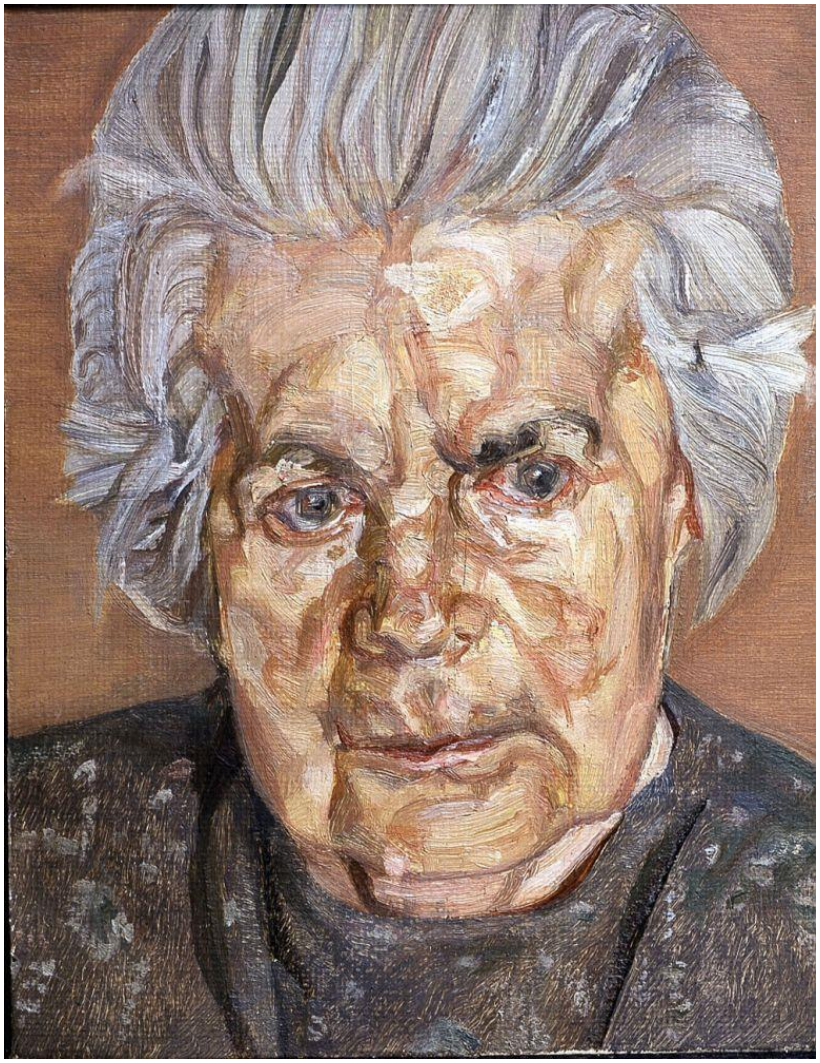

Figure 7. Lucien Freud, *The Painter's Mother II*

One of these, *The Painter's Mother II,* zooms in tight on Lucie's fierce, earnest face, her brow pinched, her lips pursed tight. As might be expected given the painting's back story, the earnestness on display is not hopeful and energetic; it looks weary, embattled, confused, even doomed. The most important element to note, however, is Freud's changing treatment of skin. Like *Pregnant Girl,* Lucie's skin is variegated by dashes of color – in this case tans, browns and grays. However, unlike *Pregnant Girl*, the skin in this portrait not only glows with energy, but seems to be almost *tortured* by that energy –

her face looks like it is struggling to bear up under the interior and exterior pressure. In *Pregnant Girl* colors pulsed beneath the skin, but the texture of the skin itself remained intact. From the early seventies until now, however, Freud has increasingly painted portraits in which things fall apart.

These mature portraits foreground, as the critic Sebastian Smee puts it, "the wear and tear of occupying a body."[282] This wear and tear is nowhere more obvious than in the Freud's 1993 self-portrait, *Painter Working, Reflection*.

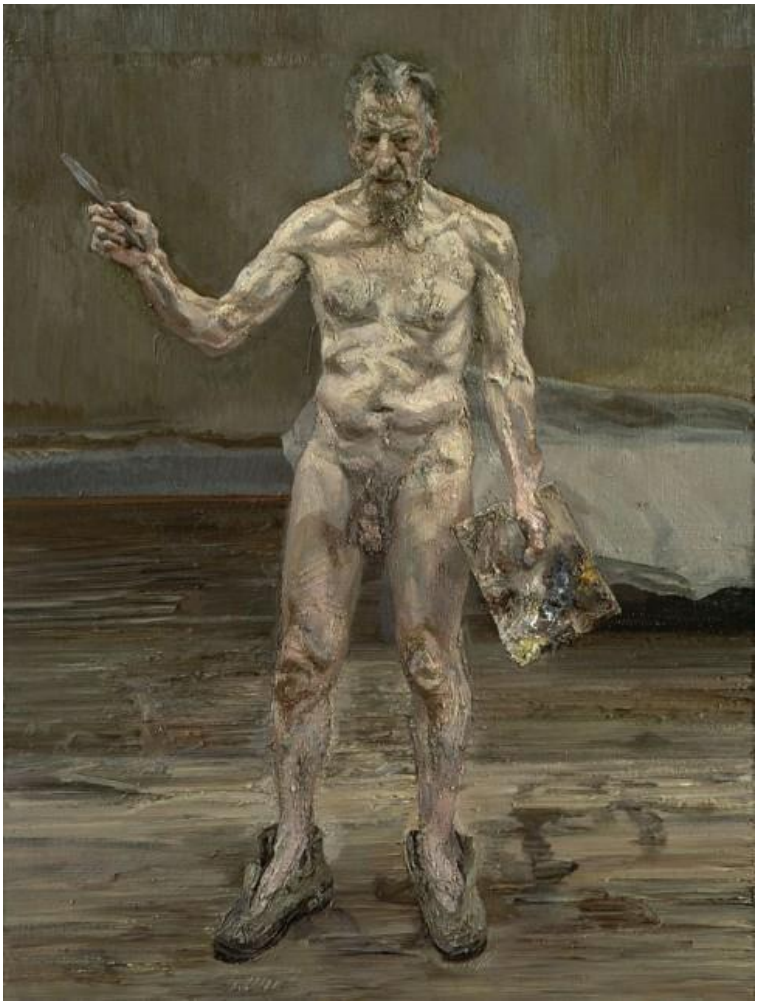

Figure 8. Lucien Freud, *Painter Working, Reflection*

[282] Smee, p. 55

The viewer is confronted here with a corpse-like figure, barely holding together, brandishing a palette knife like a weapon, a shield-like palette dangling at his side. The sense of physical disintegration is emphatic. And yet, the painting's mood is not one of melodramatic lament; the painter looks exhausted, but stubbornly determined. Confronted with his own disintegration, the painter stands grim, resolute and singular. He knows that against this foe no weapon can be effectively brandished – the palette knife is extended aimlessly into the air, the palette-shield hangs limply next to his ashily unvirile penis – but he will not simply surrender. The effect is bracing, and it represents the apogee of Freud's mature genius, which lies in his refusal to flinch before the darker parts of our common story. It's an aesthetic that captures an ethos, to be sure. But like comic art, it embodies an ethos in distinct rebellion against whatever metaphysic is vaguely sighted. It is tragic – which we might describe as a sort of crippled sublimity, with the normal pole of consolation removed. There is no vibration between hope and pain – just dull, aching depth.

Freud takes this ethic and aesthetic to be a matter of closer, more honest engagement with reality, but his increasing concern with disintegration and death actually comes to undermine Freud's own stated desire to paint people "how they happen to be." The failure is two-fold, because the ambitious portraitist, who wants to capture his sitters as they are, has a two-fold task: he must be both a biologist and a psychologist. As it happens, Freud has long described himself as one and not the other, a "biologist," fascinated with the animal physicality of his human sitters. But since the early 1970's, Freud's interest in flesh increasingly seems to apply *only* to the way that flesh disintegrates. This is a very narrow vision, and a tendentious one; what about flesh's

cohesiveness, its elasticity, its warmth and luminosity? As the art critic James Panero has written, "There may be truths in [Freud's] unflattering figures, but photographs reveal how Freud packed on the pounds and roughed up the flesh."[283] Freud, the self-described realist, painted a humanity more abject than the one actually sprawled on the couch before him. This is not realism. The fact that the beautiful vitality of flesh doesn't ultimately last, that things eventually fall apart, gives no warrant for studiously excluding beauty and vitality from a forty-year stretch of intensely-worked portraiture. This exclusion makes for a very strange sort of biology, a discipline which is, after all, focused on *bios* – life.

In fact, Freud's mature work is scarcely biology at all. As disintegration has come to dominate Freud's art, his art-as-biology increasingly collapsed into a stark, beguiling art-as-thanatology – an aesthetic study of death. If Freud's failure as a biologist is striking, his failure as a psychologist is even more so, since it is a task that he explicitly disavows – he is on record saying that he has no interest at all in depicting the "inner life" of his sitters. So while Freud is, in theory at least, deeply committed to capturing the flesh of his subjects, at those points where flesh meets consciousness he treads lightly, if at all. Now, the intellectual, emotional, social elements of human existence are, to be sure, built on the platform of biology, and are profoundly shaped by it, but if one is to really depict any particular person, these more ephemeral, one might say *spiritual,* realities must be included. Leaving these out, in what sense are you painting humans at all? At this point, Freud has utterly forsaken his own task. This is not how any of his sitters "happen to be." Freud has transformed himself into a genre painter, albeit a great one. His achievement is

[283] James Panero, "Gallery Chronicle: June 2019, *The New Criterion*. https://jamespanero.com/writing/2019/5/gallery-chronicle-june-2019.html

analogous to that of the great neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David, whose iron-spined, hypermasculine heroes served well the needs of the nascent French Republic but fail the test of simple human reality. They are much too grand for life. Freud's figures are much too abject.

And yet, according to Smee, this abdication, this combination of physical shamelessness and psychological timidity, is one of the principal markers, and indeed, one of the principal virtues of Freud's corpus:

> "Although his portraits take candour to new levels, and although he scrutinizes his models with unflinching intensity, he does not presume to know his subjects definitively. Instead, by showing his models asleep or with closed eyes, by rejecting symbols and story-telling, by keenly observing their self-modulating presence over hours and hours of sitting, he powerfully registers their unknowability."[284]

Smee is here ascribing to Freud what is perhaps the chief ethical-cum-intellectual virtue recognized by postmodern thought – a humble willingness to let the other stay other, to reject pretensions of total comprehension. As we saw above, humility *can* be precisely what prepares one for epiphany, clearing the normal daily blinkers from our line of sight, making our attention broader, looser, more hospitable. But Freud is making art for the postwar age, when such airy notions as essence, soul, eternity, human nature, God, etc. have come to seem self-indulgent and sentimental, and possibly even dangerous. Not to be admitted to the public sphere.

The aforementioned Søren Kierkegaard is a particularly passionate advocate of epistemological humility. He writes that "only superficial, impetuous, passionate people, who do not know themselves and for that reason naturally are unaware that they do not

[284] Smee, p. 4

know others, judge precipitously. Those with insight, those who know, never do this."[285] Kierkegaard is quite right, but note the adverb. There is an important difference between guarding against *precipitous* judgment, and fleeing the field of judgment altogether. It may be easy enough to make a post-metaphysical anti-war video installation, or to have your assistants suspend a post-metaphysical shark in formaldehyde, but portraiture is trickier, because any really sensitive rendering of a human likeness just does run the risk of drifting into the realm of transcendence. In order to mitigate this risk, Freud has had to take drastic measures, measures that one might fairly describe as not just humble, but even, we might say, cowardly. That is, while Freud may scrutinize every hair and varicose vein on a sitter's leg, he has precious little interest in his sitters' *eyes*. In fact, as Smee points out, he makes a point of *not* painting them.

This seemingly small omission is deeply significant, because the eyes are not, for a portraitist, simply one bodily organ among many. They are the location, *sine qua non*, where the *psyche*, or soul, seems to be most visible. In the most abject moments of a human being's life, when she seems most like the crumbling animal that Freud depicts, *something,* sometimes, seems to glimmer in the depth of her eyes – something that seems to transcend the purely material element of human life. In those juxtapositions true sublimity takes place. Freud is not the first painter to deal with the reality of death, even as it is manifested in the disintegration of human skin – think of Rembrandt's late self-portraits. But then, and here's the rub, think of the soulful, meditative, penetrating eyes that glint from Rembrandt's pocked face.

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[285] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 229.

Figure 9. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait*

Certainly, we see here a man whose life will soon end, but is it *the* end? Does he tilt on the precipice of total annihilation? This is far from clear – Rembrandt does not decide for us. It is precisely his ability and willingness to limn these deep human ambiguities, or tensions, or maybe even contradictions, that mark Rembrandt out as a truly great portraitist, a realist in the fullest sense of the word, a cartographer of the wide, dappled fields of human existence.

Little intimations of transcendence may in the end be misleading, they may be intimations of nothing at all, but they are a real, enduring part of the human experience. Freud's preemptive truncation of this ambiguous reality makes him, perhaps, the best Rembrandt our zeitgeist can bear, but it also cripples his avowed pursuit of truth, transforms him from the great artist he could have been, into an ideologue hamstrung by cowardice. Czeslaw Miloscz describes the artist's life as a "chase with the hounds for the unattainable meaning of the world." A truly great artist need not, indeed ought not, try to provide a water tight, fully-realized answer to the deepest questions of human life. But neither should he be unduly restrained by a prudish metaphysical chastity. For Lucian Freud, the burden of painting brave, unsentimental, anti-metaphysical portraits was heavy. It has forced him to spend the better part of a long, productive career with his searching, incisive eyes at least part of the way shut.

5.3 Conclusion: A Plea For Rebuilding

The assumption that reality, for us now, just is drab and dim, unlovely and unlovable is a lie, or at the very least a radical truncation that needs to be argued for, just as much as any trite, treacly overprettified Thomas Kinkade disaster, hung for sale at your local mall. Ugliness and oppression *don't* pervade every fiber of existence. It is true that injustice and death will reassert themselves again and again in the human story, but so will hope. Beauty is real, and no honest look at the world will fail to see this – this means that glimmers of transcendence are real, whether or not they speak truly. The human landscape is endlessly variegated, and monochrome depictions, useful, perhaps

for the winning of an election or hocking of a product, are warped, disfigured, dangerous. Many modern people, like Melville, see the glimmers of beauty and hope, feel monetarily united with something deep and good, and then sweep it away as childish fantasy, unsupportable in the age of science, genocide, information. The reasons for such a sweeping are many, and many of those are intimately personal. But there *is* something ineradicable to sweep – as we said on the first page of this book, beauty speaks of transcendence, and we can't shut it up, generation after generation, epoch after epoch. To brush the glimmers away is a sort of choice for abstinence, to deny them is a lie. If you want to capture reality, you'll need beauty.

But if it is true that there is something incomplete, even potentially dishonest, about art that lacks any transcendent aspect, that rules out in principle any reconciliation with reality as it is, and therefore eschews beauty, it is still possible that beauty ought to be avoided. Perhaps the Third Reich really was the last gasp of a fully integrated culture, where beauty made sense. Maybe the Nazi ethos was actually the one that mates up best with the metaphysics of a godless, accidental universe, a world where, as Darwin tells us simply enough, "the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply."[286] Perhaps ours is, at the core, a world where the strong triumph and the weak are crushed, mercilessly, *en masse*, using whatever tools and strategies our cognitive and technological capacities allow. The most authentic beauty we have is health and vitality. Victory and domination. Eradicating the maladaptive, disabled and degenerate.

And indeed, this was the pitch presented by the culture-makers of Nazi Germany. They forged a heroic aesthetic that foregrounded purity, strength and resolve, that pitched

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[286] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection* (Dover Publications, 2006), 50.

all of existence as a contest in which the strong lord over the weak, in which strength is domination is beauty. If they are right, then beauty is dangerous, and we should indeed embrace an ethi-comical culture, make our homes in the struggle, defer the hope of happiness to some indeterminate revolutionary future. Just pass our time hacking away at the bad guys, until death claims us and a new cohort of hackers takes up the axe. But once again, we need to do at least the bare minimum, and look before we decide.

Figure 10. Arno Breker, *die Partei*

If we do, what we'll see is this: the supposedly integral culture of the Third Reich was every bit as incomplete and kitschy and ridiculous as the Lucien Freud's most unflattering exaggeration. It forged a beauty bereft of the sublime, bullying matter into shapes and textures not at home in reality. The beauty presented by the Third Reich was,

in fact, no beauty at all. It was childish propaganda. For, most plainly, the narrative of German history and destiny that the Nazis presented to the German people was false. The image of the German people as an Aryan master-race was not true to the being of real German women, men, boys and girls. The figures presented – smooth-skinned, strong-jawed and straight-nosed – are perhaps the polar opposite of Freud's disintegrators, but just as far from reality. They look like total triumph, an end to fragility and softness. These figures exist nowhere but in propaganda. They are not real. No sensitive viewer could fail to realize this, unless she had some endogenous reason to squint.

This is, perhaps, not reassuring, the confidence that sensitive viewers can see through fascistic propaganda. The stakes are monumentally high, and humans can tend to disappoint, so perhaps we'd better not throw our fate into the hands of mere human discernment. Perhaps absolute prohibitions are safer. But again, a wholesale turn from beauty is neither sustainable nor desirable. Humans just do want it, they flock to it unless trained to avert their eyes. Even given such training, the old thirsts reassert themselves. The French have a saying, *Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop*, "banish the natural, and it comes galloping back." This applies well to our experience of beauty, the deep desire to forge and preserve bonds of friendship with the universe we find ourselves in. As Plato shows us, through good or bad luck, plan or accident, human desire finds itself naturally at odds with the limits time and space impose upon us. As Aristotle and Havel show us, intuiting some reality above and beyond those limits is natural for us – we can find it through careful study, or we can find it bubbling up from beneath the surface of our experience, when we weren't looking for it. I've argued here that the tendency to be

astonished, and delighted, at the mystery of existence is so natural that the main thing needed to activate it is a clearing away. That clearing can be effected by a process of humiliation, understood in a particular way. In this kind of humiliation, my native obsession with controlling my environment is displaced, and I suddenly encounter the world nakedly. I don't know what I'm looking for, so I see whatever is in front of me. In this sort of attention, realities higher and deeper than mundane employment of material resources glimmer. These glimmers may be lies, but the only way to test them is to keep looking.

I write this in 2019, a moment of subterranean upheaval. Developed societies are feeling dispirited and empty. If the free market has taught us anything, it's that supply never lags far behind demand, so long as there is power and wealth to be gained by satisfying it. It's no easy thing to call for new metaphysical-ethical-aesthetic experiments, as if these are easily, simply produced. And yes – the pursuit of such integral visions come with dangers attached. But we can be careful, even as we're being audacious. If we can't supply properly modern rules, categorical imperatives or litmus tests to divide decency and truth from decadence and lies, that doesn't mean we are left blind and helpless. As Alexandr Solzhenitsyn writes in his Nobel acceptance speech:

> "a work of art bears within itself its own verification: conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force – they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them . . . So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and

> Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth?"[287]

This promise that we will recognize true and false beauty when we see them perhaps is not so reassuring to our post-Auschwitz generation. We want rules, strong rules, because we can't let those evils happen again. But again, this fear is largely a matter of hearsay. It rarely goes to artworks themselves, and examines them to see if Solzhenitsyn is right, that "beauties" based on lies will out themselves automatically, if we look close enough. The music critic Alex Ross writes of contemporary German music: "After Auschwitz, the thinking goes, the comfort of C major is taboo. The entire classical and Romantic tradition remains roped off, like a crime scene under investigation."[288] This roping means that the engagement itself is verboten. We can't even begin to ask the questions. But if this is your approach, you will not propel a populace into the austere, scolding arms of atonality – you'll send them instead into the arms of cheaper, stupider "beauty" which will never fully satisfy because it is dishonest, and they will be left vulnerable to other, less benign promises of reconciliation. As Adorno himself, the lover of strident atonality who studied with Alban Berg, laments, modern music "has taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world. All its happiness comes in the perception of misery; all its beauty comes in the rejection of beauty's illusion. Neither the individual nor the collective wants to have any part of it. It dies away unheard, without echo."[289] Treacly pop and spiky tragic modernism share the same disease – both have an element of truth to

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[287] Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Acceptance Speech https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/

[288] Alex Ross, "Ghost Sonata: What Happened to German Music?" *The New Yorker,* March 16, 2003. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/03/24/ghost-sonata

[289] Quoted in Alex Ross, "Ghost Sonata"

them, and both fail to take in a broad enough scope of reality to forge any genuine reconciliation between humans, and their fraught condition.

One helpful guideline can be drawn from the various discussions of sublimity above. All authentic beauty, beginning with the beauty of a simple leaf, contains both desolation and consolation. In seeing any material thing clearly, we see how little we can know or control. Our finitude is pervasive, and undeniable, if we can look clearly at even one small thing. But the great enduring mystery is that honest contemplation of any such thing, taking fully into view how limited our vision is, tends to give rise to an instinctual, even pre-rational, sense that the precinct of mystery, whatever lies beyond our comprehension and control, just is *good.* Something we can befriend, some element of existence that makes us at home here. We blind ourselves to this complex tableau at our own deep peril. The smart, sophisticated gatekeepers who demand that we look away from reality as it is, to reality as it might be in some distant future, are doing unwitting damage to the people they aim to help. As Alex Ross says of the Hitler-phobic kalliphobes of German music, "this overweening self-denial has become absurd." It has also, as the postwar settlement of Liberalism continues to deteriorate, become dangerous. Natural beauty will continue to speak a better word, but nature can imitate art too, and the failure of art to take reality seriously can wound and blinker our eyes, turn us into pinched, unhappy Melville's, who see the glimmers and the ambiguity and mystery and the complexity, but know that these are childish fantasy, to be scoffingly dismissed. This moment of cultural change is an opportunity, if we seize it; the way is open for a rediscovery of beauty, reconciliation, culture in a proper sense. I don't know whether we will walk that way, but we should, and I hope we will.

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