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Heidegger on Hölderlin, Adorno on Schönberg.  
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**Why would a philosopher take an artist seriously?  
Nietzsche on Wagner, Heidegger on Hölderlin, Adorno on Schönberg**

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

The centrality to philosophy of the relation between philosophers and artists is as old as philosophy itself. Regardless of whether one accepts Arthur C. Danto's claim that 'philosophy down the ages has consisted in placing codicils to the platonic testament', it is difficult to ignore the challenge the ancient Greek thinker posed when he excluded artists from his Republic. My thesis takes up this challenge head-on, critically asking why a philosopher would take an artist seriously, why addressing artists is so essential to engaging with society and even the world.

As it turns out, this question itself involves several queries. The first wants to understand what it means to take someone seriously at all, to understand that to take seriously is to run the risk of taking *too* seriously, and thereby to fall into ridicule. The second links these insights into seriousness' non-seriousness to the particular case of philosophers and artists. This is to recognize that for a philosopher the recourse to the artist is a claim about the seriousness, not just of the artist, but also of the world itself. It is the claim that our conception of the world is at stake, is serious. Thirdly, we must account for the model of art and artists in this conception, and grasp that the exemplarity of artists is simultaneously their counter-exemplarity. As such, the exemplarity of the artist is indeed his inappropriateness to the Republic, but also the basis for there being any Republic at all.

In order to address these queries, the thesis focuses on three prototypical examples: Friedrich Nietzsche on Richard Wagner, Martin Heidegger on Friedrich Hölderlin, and Theodor Adorno on Arnold Schönberg. In all three cases, the recourse to the artist is central to the philosopher's greater philosophical project, and for each, the artist stands as a potential model for our necessary engagement with the world.

for  
**Anne Majastina and Fredrik Peter**



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## Introduction

In his essay 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', Arthur C. Danto grapples with the often contradictory and sometimes even conflictual relation between philosophy and art. Very much inspired by the thinking of Hegel on the end of art, he notes how often art falls short in its political aspirations, how little a work of art like *Guernica* is able to ward off the suffering it represents, to what extent works of art constitute 'a kind of cenotaph to house the fading memories'<sup>1</sup> of historical events. But as he himself subsequently questions, 'if the sole political role of poetry is this deflected, consolatory, ceremonial—not to say, reliquary—office, why is it so widely subscribed a political attitude that *art is dangerous*?' And he goes on:

'The history of art is the history of the suppression of art, itself a kind of futility if that which one seeks to cast in chains has no effectiveness whatever, and one confers upon art the illusion of competence by treating as dangerous what would make nothing happen if it were allowed to be free. Where... does the belief in the dangerousness of art come from? My own view... is that it does not come from historical knowledge, but rather from a philosophical belief... the history of philosophy itself might almost be regarded as a massive collaborative effort to neutralize an activity'.<sup>2</sup>

One does not have to share in the conspiratorial attitude of this passage to see that Danto's question is well-placed. It is, indeed, a bit odd at times the lengths to which philosophy has gone to sideline art—one need only think of the much maligned artists of the *Republic*. However, perhaps we should be less concerned with saving art from philosophy, as seems to be Danto's project,<sup>3</sup> than simply trying to understand why philosophy takes art so seriously in the first place.

In this spirit, we can take a recent example, and look at what happens when a philosopher—and incidentally, a philosopher not generally known for his engagement

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<sup>1</sup> Danto, Arthur C. 'The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art', p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> As we will see in the first chapter, a separation of art and philosophy is also Alain Badiou's aspiration. However, in his view a 'desuturing' of art and philosophy would first and foremost be of benefit to the latter.

with art—namely Donald Davidson, is challenged by an artist, namely Robert Morris, to take art seriously. The way in which Morris frames this challenge is to cite Davidson's philosophical writings in the context of a series of drawings made with the eyes closed entitled *Blind Time Drawings*. Why, we must ask, does Davidson not simply ignore the drawings, just shrug off their gesture as irrelevant to his philosophy? Why, in other words, does he overcome his misgivings and respond to the drawings in his essay 'The Third Man'? That he himself struggles with these questions seems evident from his initial query: 'What am I doing here?'<sup>4</sup>

His answer, moreover, does nothing to dispel the ambiguity of his position. What he says is as follows: 'what is my work doing here? I hazard this answer: it expands the background against which we encounter Morris' "actions"'.<sup>5</sup> Such an answer just begs the question. It refuses to address the paradox of how philosophy can be both part of art—as an element of Morris' drawings<sup>6</sup>—and the background against which we understand this art. Referring to the marks in the drawings, Davidson describes these 'actions' as illustrations of philosophical texts. But why are they illustrative of philosophical texts rather than the activity of the artist himself? Or if they are illustrative of both, what does it say about the relation between the philosophy and art involved? Davidson does not address these questions, because he never acknowledges the way in which his philosophical texts—including the very text he writes in response to the drawings—lose their independence, and become part of the art they are supposedly commenting upon. This happens moreover, because, in writing 'The Third Man', Davidson assumes that Morris takes his philosophy wholly seriously. He assumes that there is some meaning invested in the appearance of his philosophy in *Blind Time Drawings*. Just the same, it may indeed be that the artist's seriousness actually *depends* upon the philosopher's response, and that because Davidson ignores this irony, he himself paradoxically risks taking Morris too seriously.

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<sup>4</sup> Davidson, Donald. 'The Third Man', p. 607.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 614.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson himself underscores the degree to which his words are part of the drawings, when he enumerates the 'four clearly distinguished elements' of these pictures, and names the 'fragments of a philosophical discussion of the general nature of action' as the fourth (p. 613).

Why this might be so is due to the paradox of taking seriously, which is the following: that we can never know why we take something seriously unless we are already taking it seriously, but because we are already taking it seriously, we cannot get the perspective needed in order to know why we took it seriously in the first place. In other words, we are blind in the moment we first take something seriously, and yet it is only this moment that can explain our engagement. This is what makes Davidson's dilemma so poignant: by his acknowledgement of the appearance of his texts in Morris' drawings, he is already engaged in art, already taking it seriously, before he even has a chance to pose the question why. Such a temporal disjunction leaves the philosopher trying to justify a *fait accompli*, and as such it is no wonder that he decides to make necessity of need and ignore the possibilities for self-parody lurking in the gestures of both himself and the artist.

And yet, this ironic potential is necessary if philosophy is not going to degrade to the level of captions. If Davidson is indeed reasonable in hoping that the citations from his writings 'hint at [a] larger canvas' of 'communal assumptions and ideas',<sup>7</sup> then he is also committed to philosophy's own implication in this 'larger canvas', its own submission to the demands of this greater community. Philosophy very often assumes an authoritarian position vis-à-vis its objects, and yet for it to have any significance at all, it must share their fate. For this reason, Davidson will never be able to definitively decide to what extent Morris' blind drawings are serious, and to what extent they are tongue in cheek, and as such, he will remain in the risible position of never really knowing where he stands in relation to works he is already a part of. As a philosopher, he must continue to ask why he takes an artist seriously, even though, and of course also *because*, he will never have the comfort of a definitive response.

Perhaps it is the open-ended nature of such a situation that has drawn so many philosophers and thinkers to the question of the relation between philosophy and art, or then again, perhaps it is something quite different—the chance to showcase one's own artistic talents, or even the opportunity to engage in a little irony and humour—but whatever the individual motivations, the resulting literature is both substantial and strangely divided. The division follows precisely that which distinguishes the two

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 615.

texts we have just outlined: whereas, Danto purports to deal with the relation between philosophy and art as a whole, Davidson offers a very particular example of a philosopher taking an artist seriously. Both of these approaches will be addressed in the dissertation.

The first of these approaches focuses upon the degree to which art and philosophy are locked in an inextricable embrace. As such a view often points out, it is not simply the case that philosophy is indebted to art, it is also the case that art needs philosophy. Walter Biemel, for example, emphasizes this duality in his contribution to the literature:

‘By way of brief elucidation I should like to add some remarks concerning the significance of art for philosophy. The philosopher seeks to grasp the specific engagement of man which upholds his contact with the world. In taking note of art he is able to see how openness is experienced by the artist. In this way he can avoid the construction of an openness that is not there at all. On the other hand, philosophizing is important for art as well, since it must seek to make explicit the secret movement of artistic creation and in so doing decipher the hieroglyphics’.<sup>8</sup>

As such, if we ask what constitutes the basis for the inseparability of art and philosophy, what we must answer is that together they determine—or at least elucidate—‘the specific engagement of man ... with the world’. But even if we are safe to say that art and philosophy are critical to man’s place in the world, this still leaves us to wonder—and everyone must know where this is going—what man is and what constitutes a world. The latter in particular seems to elude Biemel. Whereas, man might be understood as regards his relation or belonging to the world, the world itself defies definition. As Biemel puts it, a philosopher ‘wants to know what is involved in being human, what man’s place is in the world, whatever “world” may mean’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Biemel, Walter. ‘On the Relation Between Art and Philosophy’, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Nevertheless, even if Biemel abdicates in the task of defining the world, his phrase does tell us something about it. Whatever the 'world' may mean, what it *does* mean is that meaning is essential to it. That is, in his approach and ones like it, the meaning of the world itself is at stake. Moreover, because such an assumption is so critical, we will give this world a name and call it a 'serious world'. The key aspect of this 'serious world' is that it is believed, or at least hoped, that in questioning the ways of the world we will find answers. In other words, what a serious world assumes is that the world is susceptible to our questioning, that it is a riddle which one day the proper answer will make unfold just as does the world of Combray in the bottom of Proust's tea cup. But just as Proust's metaphor would indicate, such hope has bounds, and very *serious* ones at that. On the one hand, if a serious world is a world susceptible to our questioning, then to fully participate in it, we *must* question it. We cannot simply drift along thoughtlessly in its currents and still say that we are an active player in it. This exposes us to the demands of *the necessity of questioning*. However and on the other hand, these demands are both motivated and mitigated by a second determining aspect of a serious world: namely, *the possibility of answering*. That is, our submission to the necessity of questioning is predicated upon the hope that our questioning will indeed lead to ways of answering.

We see this dual-action at work if we now turn back to the relation between philosophy and art. On the one side, a serious world can be dominated by the heady, hopeful motor of the possibility of answering. Such an aspirational world would require, just as Biemel does, that artists are in a unique position, that their experiences and activities are central to the meaning of all our lives. Artists would be the tragic heroes of such a serious world, their deeds faithfully recounted by philosophers attentive to the possibility of answering these deeds open up. On the other side, we have a serious world dominated by the relentless demands of the necessity of questioning, an ironic world in which philosophy and art echo each other much in the way Robert Morris' drawings *assume* Donald Davidson's response as much as they *call for* it. In such a world an artist is as blind as Morris is when he undertakes his *Blind Time Drawing*, but *no more* blind than the philosopher who rises to the challenge posed by them.

Moreover, we should recognise this pairing of tragic heroism with ironic questioning in the works of a number of philosophers, the most important of which are probably Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin. Kierkegaard is the author not only of *Fear and Trembling*, but also *The Concept of Irony*. Friedrich Nietzsche is not simply the thinker of the will to power; he is also the author of *The Gay Science*. And Walter Benjamin's *oeuvre* is marked by his two lengthier historical investigations, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. In all three cases, an impulse toward the tragic heroic is pitted against an extreme awareness of the seriousness of irony.<sup>10</sup> For all three, if the world is truly at stake, if it really is a question of the seriousness of the world, both extremes are possible, both the darkest tragedy and the most ridiculous farce.

We will start with the tragic heroic version, because it is perhaps easier to see how the world can be at stake in the case of tragedy. Walter Benjamin's understanding is a case in point:

'Tragic poetry is based on the idea of sacrifice. But in respect of its victim, the hero, the tragic sacrifice differs from any other kind, being at once a first and a final sacrifice. A final sacrifice in the sense of the atoning sacrifice to gods who are upholding an ancient right; a first sacrifice in the sense of the representative action, in which new aspects of the life of the nation become manifest. These are different from the old, fatal obligations in that they do not refer back to a command from above, but to the life of the hero himself; and they destroy him because they do not measure up to the demands of the individual will, but benefit only the life of the, as yet unborn, national community. The tragic death has a dual significance: it invalidates the ancient rights of the Olympians, and it offers up the hero to the unknown god as the first fruits of a new harvest of humanity'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, we will focus in the introduction primarily on this split as it is developed in the work of Walter Benjamin. As for the other two, Friedrich Nietzsche's work will command much attention in the body of the thesis, and Søren Kierkegaard's work, though perhaps not given its full due, will be addressed in the accompanying argumentation.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp 106-7.



First off, this passage should allow us a better understanding of the tradition in which Walter Biemel is working when he makes his statements about the significance of the relation between philosophy and art. Philosophy refers to art, and in particular to tragic art, because art offers insight into man's tragic place in a serious world. Such references can be traced from Hölderlin's meditations on *Antigone*, and Schlegel's analyses of Shakespeare, through Kierkegaard's celebration of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Nietzsche's investigations into the birth of tragedy, and Freud's interpretation of the *Oedipus* myth, to Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin's hymns, Adorno's indefatigable defence of 'serious music', and Alain Badiou's musings upon an 'Age of Poets'.

Secondly, in addition to identifying a tradition of philosophical writing on art, there is something else that this passage achieves: an understanding of the tragic hero. For if it is tragic art that is privileged in its conception of man's relation to the world, it is the tragic hero who occupies pride of place in such a vision. Moreover, when this understanding of the tragic hero combines with the Kantian notion of the genius—and its reworking by the German romantics—one arrives at the notion which will occupy our attention: namely, that of the tragic heroic artist. Possibly the most famous of tragic heroic artists is Richard Wagner as he is seen through Nietzsche's generous gaze in *The Birth of Tragedy* and 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth'; however, as will be developed, Heidegger is equally prone to such idolising in his treatment of Friedrich Hölderlin, and Adorno in his advocacy of Arnold Schönberg.

Luckily for the notion of a serious world, though, such idolising is only one half of the story. For as one can imagine, the notion of a tragic heroic artist, like any cult of the genius, is easily brought into question. Just the same, doesn't a tragic heroic world's susceptibility to critique play right into the notion of a serious world? Doesn't the latter's durability derive precisely from the fact that it is dual, and hinges upon a *necessity of questioning* just as much as upon a possibility of answering? As we said above, a serious world is as much a world of irony as it is a tragic heroic one. And what we shall see is that, if a tragic heroic artist represents one aspect of a serious world of philosophy and art, it is irony in the guise of a *blind poet* that affirms the other. In fact, the very same artists who ply the boards as tragic heroic artists can reveal themselves in other moments as masters of irony.

But what does it mean to be a blind poet? Or even more basically, what is irony—his tool of trade? This is not so easy to determine. If nothing else, because, as Paul de Man argues, irony is not a concept, and as such it is, ‘uncannily difficult to give a definition of’. And even though later on in this same essay De Man does offer a definition—‘the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes’—he himself admits quite openly that we ‘won’t be much the wiser for it’.<sup>12</sup> As such, it becomes quite common in writing on irony to focus much less upon what irony *is* than what irony *does*. Such a tendency may be driven by what Friedrich Schlegel identifies as the ‘irony of irony’, at work, for example, ‘when one uses irony to speak of irony without realising that at that very moment one finds oneself in another, much more striking irony’.<sup>13</sup> To avoid the ‘irony of irony’, then, many thinkers prefer to discuss irony in terms of its action, and in particular, its action in works of art.

This is Walter Benjamin’s approach. On the one hand, he describes a subjective form of irony, an ‘irony in... (such and such work of art)’, which consists in an ironisation of the *material* of works of art. The spirit of such irony ‘is that of the author who elevates himself above the materiality of the work by despising it’.<sup>14</sup> However, this is only the negative version of irony. Because of the boundary defying nature of irony, it can bring into question the very works that are supposed to exhibit it. The positive version of irony, therefore and on the other hand, is an *objective* irony which acts on the *form* of the work of art:

‘Thus, the ironization of form... assails the form without destroying it... This relation bears a striking affinity to criticism, which irrevocably and earnestly dissolves the form in order to transform the single work into the absolute work of art, to romanticize it’.<sup>15</sup>

It is this latter, totalising, conception of irony, which is at work in a serious world when we speak of the necessity of questioning. Such a tenaciousness in pursuit of the questioning of questioning, in uncovering the question marks behind the question

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<sup>12</sup> De Man, Paul. ‘The Concept of Irony’, pp 164 and 179.

<sup>13</sup> Schlegel, Friedrich. ‘On Incomprehensibility’, p. 267.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

marks—what Kierkegaard dubs with the Hegelian term ‘infinite absolute negativity’, by which it is ‘not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence, which [irony] considers *sub specie ironiae*’<sup>16</sup>—this is what the artist as blind poet undertakes.

The reason it is an artist who undertakes this ironisation will be discussed at greater length in the dissertation itself, but for the moment we might mention that it is linked to artists’ presumed privilege with regard to the aesthetic. And even if we are doubtful of anything that might be called ‘aesthetic experience’, we must admit that there is something in the aesthetic which presumes a momentary arrestation of our attention, an ‘aesthetic moment’ that gets us thinking and questioning, very much akin to that moment of engagement at the heart of taking seriously. It is the moment that no questioning and no answering can ever entirely account for, because it is the moment our questions always follow and our answers always chase; it is the blind spot of a serious world.

And it is because of the opacity of the aesthetic, of its impenetrable ‘that-ness’, that many philosophers who interest themselves in art do not attempt to express their interest by way of general concepts, but rather by means of particular examples. It is with this in mind that we will now shift to the second of the two approaches to the relation between art and philosophy that we outlined at the outset, that typified by Davidson and Morris. Now Davidson would almost certainly protest that he is not taking either Morris or his works as examples, and in fact, he would have every reason to argue that philosophy ceases to be philosophy at the point it is no more than commentary upon empirical examples. Nevertheless, even if philosophy must avoid straightforward empiricism, it cannot entirely disentangle itself from the need for examples.

This dilemma is typified by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. One of Kant’s primary targets in this work is David Hume, who attempts to ground causality in empirical experience. According to the latter, our understanding of causality ‘is not... attained by reasonings *a priori*; but arises entirely from experience, when we

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, p. 271.

find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other'.<sup>17</sup> What Kant points out, however, is that even if 'appearances do provide us with cases from which we can obtain a rule whereby something usually happens, they can never provide us with a rule whereby the result is *necessary*'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, for causality to exist as a *principle* rather than as a simple guide or benchmark—and thus as universal and necessary rather than as potentially coincidental—it must be conceived *a priori*, and *not* on the basis of examples, according to Kant.

That said however, the case of causality does not rule out the possibility that there might be situations in which it is precisely guides and benchmarks that are most needed. Moral actions, for instance would be impossible if they followed automatically from *a priori* principles. That is, what would be the meaning of saying someone did the right thing, if there was never the possibility that he could do the wrong thing? Because moral actions require freedom, they also require standards for its proper use. Such standards are, in Kant's terminology, 'archetypes', *Urbilder*; 'originary images' that serve as ideals 'for the thoroughgoing determination of the cop[ies] [*Nachbilder*]' as they appear in the empirical world.<sup>19</sup> Now Kant would say that these archetypes are not examples, and certainly they aren't in any conventional sense. As the preceding statement indicates, archetypes are not derived from empirical experience. They necessarily lack 'objective reality', and any attempt to 'realize the ideal in an example' would subject the archetype to the suspicion that is 'mere invention'.<sup>20</sup> But this begs the question of exemplarity: for if archetypes are neither examples drawn from empirical experience nor inventions held up as models, how are we ever to recognize them? Kant posits them as the 'indispensable standard of reason',<sup>21</sup> and yet offers no explanation for how they ever acquire this role. He exhorts us not to simply dismiss them as 'chimera', and yet for all Kant says, we have to imagine that they pop into our heads fully formed in the way that only fairies and goblins do.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 562.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Kant reinforces this notion of miraculous manifestation by contrasting the 'archetype' with the 'monogram', saying that the latter amounts 'less to a determinate image than to a design that hovers, as it were, at the mean of various experiences' (*Ibid.*).

Because of his silence on this point, it is worth momentarily considering the *examples* Kant himself cites. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the passage where he introduces the notion of archetypes, Kant offers as an example that of the 'wise person', who is said to derive from the Stoics. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the notion of the archetype reappears in the figure of Christ<sup>23</sup> as he is presented in the Bible. And perhaps most significantly, in *Critique of Judgement*, the notion of the archetype is used to present the figure of man as the ideal of beauty, in particular as he appears in the figure of the genius.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it is the notion of the genius that makes sense of archetypes. On the one hand, the genius shares with the other two the characteristic of being a product of a certain literature, of a certain philosophico-historical vector that includes both the writings of Kant and the notions of the philosopher and artist as they appear in this investigation. As the products of a literature, archetypes are indeed neither to be found in empirical reality—our relation to Christ, for instance, his redemptive power, depends entirely upon the sacrifice that took him from this world, and thus only comes to light through the gospels written after his death—nor can be imputed to the intentional activity of an individual author—even as a prime contributor to the literature on genius, Kant does not invent the notion any more than he can pierce the veil that shrouds its origin.<sup>25</sup> At the same time and on the other hand, then, the products of this literature can only be considered archetypal to the extent that it is genius itself that produces them. According to Kant's logic, it is only genius that has the capacity for producing models that can

<sup>23</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 80. It is worth reading this passage because it restates the problematic of the origin of ideals such as archetypes: 'Now it is our universal human duty to elevate ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection, i.e. to the prototype [*Urbild*] of moral disposition in its entire purity, and for this the very idea, which is presented to us by reason for emulation, can give us force. But, precisely because we are not its authors, but the idea has rather established itself in the human being without our comprehending how human nature could have ever been receptive of it, it is better to say that that *prototype* has *come down* to us from heaven, that is has taken up humanity... This union with us may therefore be regarded as a state of *abasement* of the Son of God'.

<sup>24</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, pp 69 and 72. The notion of the 'archetype of taste', or 'ideal of beauty' is introduced on p. 69. Its relation to genius appears in a footnote on p. 72, where Kant rejects both regular features and exaggerated caricature as constitutive of the ideal of beauty, in favour of 'what is called *genius*, in which nature seems to depart from the ordinary relations of the mental powers on behalf of some special one'.

<sup>25</sup> On p. 151, Kant suggests that 'it is probable that the word "genius" is derived from *genius*, that peculiar guiding and guardian spirit given to a man at his birth, from whose suggestion these original ideas proceed'.

‘serve as a standard or rule of judgment for others’;<sup>26</sup> only genius—as it is found amongst the Stoics, as it appears in the Bible—can produce archetypes.

What this self-referential aspect of archetypes does is to protect archetypes from the fate of simple examples. Whereas, simple examples can be ‘neutralised’ by being taken as examples; whereas as Derrida puts it, in philosophy ‘to take something seriously, is to read the essence in the example’,<sup>27</sup> thereby dissolving singularity in conceptual thought; an archetype, by contrast, survives such treatment by having its singularity reside in its very exemplarity. It is an example that can never be entirely *taken* (as an example) and *possessed* by conceptual thought. Andrzej Warminski describes this excess when he says, ‘[a]n example can never represent or exemplify itself enough *as* example to recover its own excess, the excess of example “itself,” for there will always be one more (or less) as yet unreflected and forever unreflectable and unmediatable example left over or missing’.<sup>28</sup> It is this ‘+ *Beispiel*’,<sup>29</sup> this excess of exemplarity, that Kant draws on in his notion of the archetype, with artistic genius as its paradigmatic instantiation.

As such, when in his response to Hume, Kant attempts to eliminate exemplarity from philosophy, he does nothing other than to offer one more *example* of the strategy of ‘anti-mimesis’, a strategy that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe identifies in his essay ‘Typography’ as typical of philosophy. Such a strategy strives to eliminate exemplarity through a pure speculativity.<sup>30</sup> However, as Lacoue-Labarthe argues, this attempt at a displacement or de-installation of mimesis, and thus exemplarity, has the very opposite effect from that intended; rather than successfully eliminate exemplarity, anti-mimesis leads to its (re-)installation at the heart of philosophical discourse.<sup>31</sup> This is what we observe in the case of Kant and his ultimate recourse to the notion of genius, and this is what we want to recover in considering the exemplarity of art and artists.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, Jacques. ‘La parole soufflée’, p. 255.

<sup>28</sup> Andrzej Warminski. ‘Reading for example’, p. 178.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. ‘Typography’, p. 127; ‘*Anti-mimesis* is what will finally be revealed in the last, Hegelian dream of philosophy: absolute (in)sight, the subject theorizing its own conception and engendering itself in seeing itself do so—the speculative’.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance, p. 121.

Initially we will focus on the exemplarity of the artist, and the degree to which his activity can constitute a model for the activity of a philosopher himself. In such a situation, a philosopher explicitly rejects the anti-mimetic strategy undertaken by Kant and sees himself as the heir to a socio-historical project that he shares with artists. But as such a project would imply, its potency itself depends upon receptivity to works of art. As such, our next question must regard the exemplarity of works themselves—to ask to what degree these philosophers hope to create works of philosophy on the model of works of art. As we will discover, however, it is not at all the case that these philosophers want philosophy to be art. Quite the contrary, they want philosophy to have art's critical power without, for that token, having to be art. To the very extent that they see in works of art a response to modern ways of living—a resistance to the predominance of instrumental reason, as Adorno might put it—they want to distance themselves from the apparent powerlessness of artists themselves, no matter how engaged. They do not want their critical interventions to appear as mere illusions as do works of art; they want to engage directly with the world itself. It is at this juncture that the initial exemplarity of the artist becomes a counter-exemplarity, an example of what not to do—and a re-engagement with anti-mimesis.

Finally, we must acknowledge that in addition to these various relations of exemplarity between philosophers and artists, thinking and poetising, there is also the exemplarity of the pairings themselves of philosophers and artists—the paradigmatic aspect of Nietzsche on Wagner, Heidegger on Hölderlin, and Adorno on Schönberg. Even though we cannot argue from the outset and on strictly philosophical grounds that these cases are indeed paradigmatic—for this would be for us to presume that we can see the limits of the literature of philosophy and close the door to future, potentially even more exemplary, cases—we can make our arguments on the hope—and as the furtherance of the hope—that others will also see how these pairings place something at stake. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno themselves, then, we are in the awkward position of taking seriously before we take seriously, of accepting the model and engaging ourselves without fully being able to account for the implications of that engagement.

**Part One**  
**Serious World**



## chapter one

### In their own words

*In this first chapter we will consider those points at which Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno themselves take up the question as to why we take art and artists seriously.*

#### 'Why do I take this seriously?'

Sometimes we're sorry that we asked.

This is because asking why we take something seriously is an admission of doubt, and possibly even the first groan of despair. Whereas references to seriousness usually add weight to our statements—'You should seriously consider this option', 'She was seriously hurt'—this time it betrays us, and just weighs on our minds. Saying things are serious should act as a bulwark against attacks on our perceptions and presuppositions, an assurance that what we believe is true and sacrosanct. However, in this case our own protector mocks us. This 'this', whatever 'this' is, could be a joke; that is what the question implies.

Just the same, there is no reason to see this admission of doubt as a concession of defeat. Rather, this *incipit parodia* has all the hope of a new beginning. For as long as we are *not* willing to pose the question of taking seriously, we have little chance of clearing the moss from the edifice of 'serious' debate. In other words, if we do not question things' seriousness, 'serious' debate risks amounting to nothing more than the mindless reaffirmation of what we already held dear. As Kathleen Higgins concludes from her reading of Nietzsche, 'the more adept we become at inference—at remarking, "Consequently",—the more we ignore the extent to which our classification scheme is arbitrary'.<sup>1</sup> *Not* asking the question of taking seriously, then, is an acceptance of arbitrary classification schemes and received ideas about what is important and should not be contested; *asking*, at the very least, exposes these received ideas as what they are, received.

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<sup>1</sup> Higgins, Kathleen Marie. *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science*, p. 56.

Nevertheless, we also have to ask ourselves what we expect to find through our probing. For one, we have to resist the false triumphalism of the overzealous iconoclast, who in his excitement is willing to topple large monuments in order to show what we already knew: namely, that they are made of quite common stuff. Even quiet resistance to received bastions of seriousness can easily degrade into mockery, including the mockery of he who mocks. Secondly, we have to engage this exposure to self-mockery head-on. The self-mockery arises because whatever we might find by asking why we take something seriously, what we are certain *not* to find is *why*. Asking the question *why* we take something seriously is first and foremost an engagement with that something as *serious enough* to warrant questioning. To ask *why* we take something seriously, then, is to question our own questioning of that something—as something serious—and there is nothing to inhibit us from pursuing this logic to its abyssal conclusions, infinitely questioning our questioning of our questioning of our questioning of that something. Our motivation for first asking is opaque to us, and this *blindness* makes us ridiculous.

Just like physical blindness, this interrogative blindness invites creative strategies for overcoming it. One of these strategies is metaphor, and is the first we will examine, largely through the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Someone might argue that such a rhetorical figure is inappropriate to philosophical rigour, and yet interrogative blindness forces upon us those ‘conjectures for which the language of science and traditional philosophy is totally unsuited’, and which Ernst Behler identifies in Nietzsche’s writings as ‘events which announce their arrival or which still throw a shadow, although they have passed... thoughts which evaporate at the moment one articulates them’. ‘[T]hese phenomena can only be communicated in a language that suggests through images and attempts to persuade through its tone—the language of rhetoric’.<sup>2</sup> Faced, therefore, with the insurmountable task of explaining why one takes something seriously, a possible recourse is to claim rhetorically, and metaphorically, that this ‘something’ is *like* something else whose seriousness is not in doubt.<sup>3</sup> If for example, one was trying to defend the seriousness of art, it might be quite tempting to claim that art was serious because it was *like* war and rebellion.

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<sup>2</sup> Behler, Ernst. ‘Nietzsche’s conception of irony’, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> One might protest at this point that the abyssal logic of questioning seriousness would eventually place even the most important ‘something else’ in doubt. As we will see, a possible response to this very real risk is to introduce an asymmetry or disjunction into the metaphorical relation.

Sounds ridiculous, and yet, we accept speaking of art in terms of revolutions, the *avant garde* and movements without even a hint of a smile. What is even more noteworthy about this acceptance is that it goes against a 'conventional wisdom' about art: that it is opposed to the warlike spirit. In his preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he claims the importance of taking art seriously, Nietzsche refers to this 'conventional wisdom' and signals his intention to challenge it: 'But anyone who thought that this book reflected the contrast between patriotic excitement and aesthetic indulgence, between courageous seriousness and cheerful play, would be mistaken'.<sup>4</sup> By turning a conventional opposition into a metaphorical association, Nietzsche asserts the seriousness of art in a serious world.

### A political manifesto

A first response to this last statement might be to wonder why the seriousness of art is said to be 'in a serious world'. What is this serious world? And moreover, how does it relate to the Janus-faced nature of the question of taking seriously as we have introduced it? What we said in the introduction is that the phrase 'serious world' designates a questioning of the world which places the world itself at stake. What this means in the case of Nietzsche is that when he asserts the seriousness of art in a serious world, what he does is to make the very seriousness of the world hinge upon how seriously we take art. In Nietzsche's view, whether we take art seriously impinges directly upon how seriously we take the world, with the radical implication that if we ignore the former, we can expect nothing decisive to ever occur in the latter.

It is this firm link between the fate of art and the world that we see if we now return to the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* and again take up the passage just mentioned above:

'But anyone who thought that this book reflected the contrast between patriotic excitement and aesthetic indulgence, between courageous seriousness and cheerful play, would be mistaken: were they to read this

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 13.

essay, they would be astonished to discover the seriously German problem that we are dealing with, a vortex and turning point at the very centre of German hopes'.<sup>5</sup>

What is at stake, then, in *The Birth of Tragedy* is not, as we might have been led to expect by its title, the origins of an artistic form, but the very fate of the German people and their place in the world. Nevertheless—and this is what is philosophically interesting (or if you will, philosophically serious)—this fate can only be understood through art, that is, through the birth of tragedy. Moreover, the way in which Nietzsche binds the fate of the world to that of art is via a metaphor between art and war. As such, Nietzsche's reference to the conventional opposition between art and war is actually his way of assuring their inseparability.

We find the arguments that underpin this inseparability most fully developed in an earlier version of the essay entitled '*Socrates und die griechische Tragödie*'. What we discover there is that the 'seriously German problem' has, at least for the young Nietzsche, a very real political solution: namely, the Kaiser's military, anti-liberal politics. By tying his hopes to the Kaiser's bandwagon, Nietzsche imagines that he can decisively take sides in a serious world, and see the opposition between art and war transposed into a unified and unifying figure of hope.

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'And now my hopes!': This is the celebratory enthusiasm with which Nietzsche greets the then recent victory of Germany against France. According to Nietzsche, since the power which achieved this 'most colossal' of victories is the 'only productive political power in Germany',<sup>6</sup> it can and should use its power to rid Germany of 'liberalism', which Nietzsche hopes 'will bleed to death on this above mentioned, inflexible power'.<sup>7</sup> Such evisceration is called for, because liberalism—rather than war, as conventional wisdom would have it—is 'the *real* opponent of every deeper philosophy and artistic consideration'. It is 'a sickness, from which the German

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, F. '*Socrates und die griechische Tragödie*', p. 7 (Nietzsche's emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

essence has suffered above all since the French Revolution, and which also has afflicted the best of German nature in ever-returning gouty convulsions'.<sup>8</sup> The first hope, then, that Nietzsche is so colourfully expressing is that, with a common front of artistic and military might ranged against it, the obstacle of liberalism 'will be cleared out of the way of the genius'.<sup>9</sup> As such, if there is any opposition to speak of with regard to art and war, it is liberalism's objection to them, and not their opposition to each other. They, by contrast, stand politically united with their sights on the genius and the future.

By way of a second hope Nietzsche tries to substantiate his first. For even if the first hope links art and war, it only really does so negatively—i.e. as united against liberalism—so what Nietzsche presents next is something that would give them common ground. What he offers is the (supposedly) German characteristic of bravery (*Tapferkeit*):

'... who other than the German will be able to take on [the] tragic disposition, which I require, as preparation for the genius, as the new goal of cultivation for a noble, striving youth? Who other than the German youth will have the fearless gaze and heroic trait amidst the monstrousness...?'<sup>10</sup>

The notion of German bravery is supposed to make it plausible to assert past military victory as a guarantee for future cultural achievements, and to see in the German hero of the recent war, the shape of the German genius to come. Such a militarisation of art encourages us to think of it in the stark terms of war, such that our support for it is so constituted that co-existence with its enemies appears impossible. In this context, the question of whether we take art seriously takes on an urgency, which, when pursued to its fullest implications, becomes tantamount to a necessity. To the extent that we respond to this necessity we plunge with Nietzsche into a serious world, in which questioning art promises a response in the form of the genius.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

## The 'aesthetic problem'

What must be developed, then, is the notion that art is rent by an opposition as unsustainable as that in war. However, contrary to our expectations, Nietzsche does not argue for this by rooting out resistance to art, but rather by focusing on an 'aesthetic problem'.

That the opposition involved in this 'aesthetic problem' is so starkly serious is not immediately obvious from its terms. What are opposed are 'a true and a false concept of "Greek cheerfulness"',<sup>11</sup> and what is at stake in this contest is that it is impossible 'to arrive at an insight into the essence of Greek tragedy from [the] false concept of cheerfulness'.<sup>12</sup> But even though this description certainly tips our sympathies in favour of the 'true' concept, there is no reason to immediately conclude that the opposition necessitates decision. It seems quite reasonable that those holding a 'false concept of Greek cheerfulness' would be able to endure their ignorance as to the essence of Greek tragedy. Therefore, what Nietzsche also needs to do is to make this ignorance, and with it the 'false' position, untenable.

The 'false' concept maintains that 'Greek cheerfulness' is a form of "'comfortable sensuality'", beautiful images representing deeper truth. For the 'false' concept the appeal of Greek art, its 'cheerfulness', is that it makes this depth comfortably and clearly accessible—Nietzsche refers to the metaphor of the sun's rays reflecting on the bottom of the sea such that one imagines oneself able to touch it with one's hand.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this representational approach is that it cannot take into account the very distinction—between surface and depth—upon which it is based, and as such it constantly confuses the two, contributing to a muddying of the metaphorical waters, to a 'churning of the Greek depths'.<sup>14</sup> This confusion is particularly evident in the philological project to 're-erect the fallen statues of Greek antiquity lying sunken in the ground',<sup>15</sup> because this project, rather than spawning a rebirth of Greek art,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* It should be noted that Nietzsche presents this idea (flatteringly) as being something he learned from Wagner: '...von Ihnen weiß ich gleichfalls, daß Sie es für unmöglich halten, von jenem falschen Heiterkeitsbegriffe aus zur Einsicht in das Wesen der Tragödie zu kommen'.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

destroys it. This failing is important, because the desire for, and even necessity of, rebirth makes the 'false' concept untenable. To the extent that we are haunted by the 'German problem', by Germany's inability to assert itself in the world, we strive for its rebirth, such as it is promised by the 'true concept of Greek cheerfulness', and blocked by the 'false'.

Thus, in the light of the promise of renaissance, the 'true' concept of 'Greek cheerfulness' contests the representational nature of the 'false' concept. Since rebirth has to involve the simultaneous re-emergence of both idea and appearance (depth and surface), it cannot be achieved by focusing on the appearance of Greek art as separate from the idea it supposedly represents. The first notion Nietzsche develops to this effect is that the appearance of Greek art does not resemble its essence, that its beautiful surface does not re-present beautiful depths. Quite the contrary, what Greek art has taught Nietzsche is 'that there is no beautiful surface without *dreadful* depths'.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, this notion modifies the representational approach without entirely repudiating it—it still thinks in terms of surfaces and depths. The repudiation comes when 'Greek cheerfulness' itself arrives on the scene... literally. What Nietzsche calls this immediate presentation of the concept is the 'future hero of the tragic disposition'. Now, it is a bit confusing that 'Greek cheerfulness' comes as a 'hero of the *tragic* disposition'; however, this convergence of the beautiful and pleasant with the tragic and dreadful has already been established. The way Nietzsche deals with it here is to describe the 'future hero' as glowing with 'Greek cheerfulness'; it is his aura and transcendent presence: 'This future hero of the tragic disposition will be such that upon his brow lies the echo of this Greek cheerfulness, this halo, with which a still to come rebirth of antiquity will be inaugurated, the *German* rebirth of the Hellenic world'.<sup>17</sup> The aura allows us to identify the presence of 'Greek cheerfulness' in spite of the hero's dreadful, his 'angry sovereignty, proudest gaze, [and] most daring will'.<sup>18</sup> It establishes the 'context of understanding in which great men (geniuses) do not appear as strangers',<sup>19</sup> as Salim Kemal sees it as necessary to Nietzsche's thought.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4 (my emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Kemal, Salim. 'Nietzsche's politics of aesthetic genius', pp 260-61.

It is necessary, moreover, because only if the 'true' concept of 'Greek cheerfulness' can overcome the deceptive distinction of surfaces and depths—that is, only if we are able to immediately recognise the future hero—only then is much at stake in Nietzsche's 'aesthetic problem', only then does the latter decisively mark the threshold to a new era. And *even* then, there remains a question mark as regards the possibility itself of the hero's arrival. Nietzsche's whole argument hinges upon our willingness to believe in this possibility, and yet his difficulty is that there is no assurance that the 'future hero' will indeed appear.

### A hopeful metaphor

As such, then, Nietzsche is put in the position of having to argue, not in order to prove something, but in order to make us hope. To instil hope in us he first off solicits what he believes might be 'our' sentiments—'ourselves' thought of as his probable German readers in 1871—and then, on the basis of these hopeful sentiments, makes a bid for the potential universal import of particular experience. Nietzsche achieves the first half of this strategy by making an appeal to patriotism and the feelings likely to have been aroused by Germany's victory in the Franco-Prussian war. He says quite simply (addressing himself to Wagner): 'Ah, my honourable friend, scarcely can I say in what way I tie my hopes for this rebirth [of the Hellenic spirit] with the current bloody glory of the German name'.<sup>20</sup> The second half of the strategy is achieved when Nietzsche links his experience at the front with the idea of Greek tragedy:

'These [hopes] made it possible, while the earth shook uninterruptedly under Ares' march, and myself in the middle of the war's next horrible effect, to be dutiful to the contemplation of my theme; yes I recall lying in the ambulance together with the wounded to whose care I was bound during the solitary night, with my thoughts on the three abysses of tragedy, whose names are "Madness, Will, Travail" [*Wahn, Wille, Wehe*]',<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'Socrates und die griechische Tragödie', p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 5-6.



This narration highlights hope's capacity to make our individual experiences seem to reverberate on a wider stage, and does so precisely by means of a metaphorical relation between art and war: because of his hopes Nietzsche binds his experiences at the front with the idea of Greek tragedy, and places in parallel his duty in the war and his dutifulness to his theme. In this way, the decisive seriousness of war is made to appear as analogous to that of art, just as his duty to the wounded was as great as his duty to the consideration of tragedy.

However, the seriousness of war cannot be said to be reflected in the realm of art without exposing war's seriousness to some scrutiny. In other words, if Nietzsche indeed wants to imply that his theme and the wounded held an equal claim upon him, this just as readily reflects well on the seriousness of his theme as it reflects poorly upon how seriously he took his duties to the war. Therefore, in order to encourage us to read the metaphor between art and war in the sense that art is like war, but not the reverse, Nietzsche introduces a disjunction or asymmetry into their metaphorical connection. He does so temporally, by placing art's protagonist—who paradoxically is, just the same, a projection of the heroes of the recent war—beyond time: 'in the great "individual", in the saint and the artist, lies the goal [of mankind], thus neither in front of nor behind us, but outside of time'.<sup>22</sup> The effect of this temporal disjunction is to throw art into the forefront, shielding our attitude to war from critical questioning. Furthermore, as temporal, the disjunction presses us with the urgent need to decide, and more specifically, the need to decide in favour of art. In such a way, art is presented as our greatest, *and most serious*, hope.

Furthermore, it is not just art as such, it is art as it is embodied in a particular figure that we are being asked to take so seriously. This is what distinguishes Nietzsche's thought on genius (here appearing as the 'future hero') from that of earlier philosophers, and in particular from that of Immanuel Kant. Whereas Kant attributes to the genius a decisive role in art and aesthetics, and does so in such a way as to make the latter central to any systematic thought about the world, Nietzsche goes even one step further and *names* the genius. In other words, it is not incidental that the prefaces to both '*Socrates und die griechische Tragödie*' and *The Birth of Tragedy* are

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

addressed to Richard Wagner. For Nietzsche, the genius is not simply a necessary systematic possibility; for him, the genius must really and actually be able to exist; for otherwise, all thought of the rebirth and renewal of the world is empty speculation. As such, he does not simply ask us to take art seriously, he asks us to take the *artist* seriously—to see Wagner as undertaking ‘the supreme task and the truly metaphysical activity in this life’.<sup>23</sup>

## Two questions

However, even if we accept the logic of this argument, the adoration of the early Nietzsche for Wagner—contrasting, as it does, so neatly with his later revulsion—begs the question of ‘why Wagner?’ Why is it, in other words, that Wagner is said to be so perfectly suited to disjunctively mark what is serious? To some degree Nietzsche deals with this in ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’, a text we will look at in greater detail in the following chapter; nevertheless, it seems reasonable that the question of *who*, in the sense of *who* we are to take seriously, is germane to the question itself.

How the question ‘who’ can come into play is evident in the case of Martin Heidegger’s writings on Friedrich Hölderlin. For instance, by emphasizing the particular biographical fact that Hölderlin was a poet—as opposed to some other kind of artist—Heidegger gains the notion of *poetising*. And even if, as we will see, there are grounds for criticising this recourse to the biographical, the notion of poetising offers him an essential basis for the seriousness of art and the world. That is, it allows him to operate a reversal on Nietzsche’s strategy: rather than try to argue that art is like something from the ‘real’ world, something such as war, Heidegger argues that the ‘real’ world is itself essentially an artistic construction, entirely dependent on language as it is employed by the poet. As Heidegger says, ‘our existence is poetic in its very foundation’.<sup>24</sup> Because of the primacy of the poet’s language, therefore,

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<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 13. The full phrase is as follows: ‘Let these serious people know that I am convinced that art is the supreme task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life in the sense of that man, my noble champion on that path, to whom I dedicate this book’.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 465. For those unfamiliar with Heidegger’s writings on Hölderlin—and it is unfortunate that not all exist in translation, in particular

taking a poet seriously can be the deepest acknowledgement of the seriousness of the world.

Nevertheless, even with this substantial reversal upon Nietzsche's approach, we still find echoes of the latter's militarism. That is, if we look at Heidegger's early appeal to the seriousness of Hölderlin and his poetry in the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*, what we find is an account that very much replays the Hobbesian brutishness characteristic of the world of Nietzsche's artist-warrior:

'One takes Hölderlin "historically" [*historisch*] and misunderstands this unique essentiality, that his work, itself still outside space and time, has already overpowered [*überwunden*] our historical fuss and founded the beginning of another history [*Geschichte*], of this history, which commences with struggle [*Kampf*] over the decision about the arrival or flight of the god'.<sup>25</sup>

And it is this echo of Nietzsche and his flag-waving rhetoric that complicates any reading of Heidegger on Hölderlin, because as we will develop here and throughout the thesis, Heidegger does not pose just one question about the seriousness of poetry and the poet, he always poses both questions simultaneously. That is, when he asks how seriously we take poetry, he is also asking how seriously we take the poet, such that the seriousness of the one has implications for that of the other, but that we can never be sure of the seriousness of the one until we have committed ourselves to the other. In this way, Heidegger's arguments play directly upon the dual aspect of seriousness, its non-serious seriousness.

In terms of this passage, it means that on the one hand, there is a moment in it in favour of taking Hölderlin seriously which very much resembles the one we found in Nietzsche's early work: a decisive temporal disjunction marked by tragic struggle. On the other hand, there is a moment of indecision and self-doubt, which mocks our misunderstanding of the 'unique essentiality' of Hölderlin's work, and ridicules our

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the 1934-35 lectures—Gary Aylesworth offers a summary of Heidegger's basic themes in his essay 'Heidegger and Hölderlin'.

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 1.

uncertainty as to whether *we*, living as we are in our ‘historical fuss’, can *belong* to the new history founded by Hölderlin. Heidegger’s arguments about Hölderlin succeed to the extent that they draw upon the tension between these two moments.

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We re-encounter the double questioning of the poet and poetry in the essay ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, which appeared one year after the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*. In it, Heidegger asks explicitly why we take poetry seriously:

‘And we are inquiring into the essential, into what forces us to decide whether we will henceforth take poetry seriously, whether we accept our being placed within the sphere where poetry can affect us’.<sup>26</sup>

But even before this, and as the very first sentence of the essay, he asks: ‘Why is it that Hölderlin has been chosen to explore the essence of poetry?’<sup>27</sup> As such, the question ‘Why Hölderlin’ is presented as an introduction to the question of taking poetry seriously, and the upshot of this is the following: whereas the argument for taking poetry seriously opens up a realm of indecision as to our belonging—uncertainty as to whether we will *indeed* ‘accept being placed within the sphere where poetry can affect us’—the already decided essentiality of Hölderlin—the question is ‘Why Hölderlin’, not ‘Whether Hölderlin’, or even better, ‘Who’—encloses the indecision within a horizon of tragic seriousness. To caricature, it is as if we were asked which poet’s poetry we most identified with, and were told we could choose anyone as long as it was Hölderlin. What constrains matters even further, however, is that we do not even have the option of *not deciding*. It is in this characteristic—in the necessity of deciding—that one perceives the serious world at the heart of Heidegger’s writings on Hölderlin: For him, one must decide about poetry, because otherwise one is doomed to a shallow existence blind to the seriousness of the world. In other words, one must decide, because one is *fated* to a serious world—to a world that necessitates questioning—and thus to even belong to one’s *own* existence, one must question poetry.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 456.

## Political persuasion

As such, even if it avoids the kind of militant determinism that haunts Nietzsche's early account of art's seriousness, Heidegger's question of our acknowledgement and belonging to poetry is not entirely aloof from the appeal to political sentiments. Just as Nietzsche imagines that hopes from the Franco-Prussian war can carry over into art, Heidegger wants to persuade us that poetry offers a model for political consensus and power relations. However, as we will see, Heidegger also projects something even more radical than a political vision: he points to a world beyond the political. Robert Bernasconi notes this aspect of Heidegger's thought, saying: 'To side with Hölderlin is "politics" in the highest and most authentic sense, to the point that one no longer has any need to talk about the "political"'.<sup>28</sup> The crux of this dual vision is evident in the question of taking poetry seriously from 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', particularly if we read it in the original German:

*'Doch eben dieses Wesentliche des Wesens suchen wir, jenes, was uns zur Entscheidung zwingt, ob und wie wir die Dichtung künftig ernst nehmen, ob und wie wir die Voraussetzungen mitbringen, im Machtbereich der Dichtung zu stehen'.<sup>29</sup>*

It is the last phrases which allow us to trace the political aspect of Heidegger's thought on Hölderlin. Heidegger wonders in them 'whether and *how* we will henceforth take poetry seriously', and it is important to emphasize the word 'how'. It does not appear in Paul de Man's translation, and yet, the doubling of the question—in terms of 'whether and how'—is critical. Like the question of 'Why Hölderlin', the 'whether' alludes to something already decided, something already fated to seriousness—if nothing else, in that we are bothering to read an essay on Hölderlin and poetry, it is safe to suppose that we take poetry seriously to at least some degree. Just the same, we would not acknowledge the full seriousness of poetry if we were

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<sup>28</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. 'The Greatness of the Work of Art', p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung', p. 34.

satisfied to deal with it at the level of this presupposition,<sup>30</sup> and it is for this reason that Heidegger must also wonder 'how we will henceforth take poetry seriously'.

As such, therefore, Heidegger plays the already decided seriousness implied by the 'whether' off against the openness to non-seriousness implied by the 'how', and does so through the *Leitworte*, or key-passages, which guide his reading of Hölderlin. The first of these key-passages speaks of the non-seriousness of poetry's seriousness, stating that poetry is "'the most innocent of all crafts'", which Heidegger understands as saying that poetry 'appears in the humble disguise of a *game*'. And what of this game? 'This game is spared the hard necessity of making decisions, of taking sides, of an earnestness which is bound sooner or later to lead to guilt'.<sup>31</sup> Even if poetry playfully vacillates, therefore, the kind of seriousness it is thereby lacking is a guilty, *schuldig*, kind of seriousness, completely incompatible with poetry's innocent, *unschuldig*, nature. Thus, Heidegger here presents poetry in terms of an innocent, non-serious moment resistant to the tragedy of its predetermined nature as already serious.

The importance of this non-serious moment, however, only becomes clear in the second key-passage where Heidegger focuses in on the privileged position of language:

'This act [of creating a world], by means of which man truly fulfills himself as man, arises out of his own free decision. In this decision he takes hold of necessity and answers to the summons of his highest calling: to bear witness that he belongs among all that is. This comes to pass in the form of history. Language has been given to man to make history possible. Language is man's possession and a blessing to man'.<sup>32</sup>

The very first sentence puts the innocent openness of poetry to work. On the model of the free play of language in poetic verse, man's 'bearing witness'—that is to say,

<sup>30</sup> One could accuse Timothy Tarno of doing just this in his book, *Finding Time: Reading for Temporality in Hölderlin and Heidegger*, where he asserts: 'By setting as the goal of his search that which compels a decision from us, Heidegger indicates the seriousness with which he takes poetry. To do justice to his reading, we too must take it seriously' (p. 102).

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 457.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 459.

his acknowledgement of belonging—is free and occurs in language. Yet, its open innocence does not mean that it can avoid the horizon of decision; rather, it must reveal itself in terms of a ‘free decision’, which ‘comes to pass in the form of history’. In history, the duality of seriousness—its non-serious seriousness—plays out.

This is so, because history, according to Heidegger, appears as a conversation. As he says in the third key passage, ‘[t]o be a conversation and to be historical is one and the same’.<sup>33</sup> And it is in this notion of the conversation that the political significance of poetry’s dual seriousness comes to the fore. The phrase he cites from Hölderlin’s unfinished poem, beginning ‘*Versöhnender, der du nimmergeglaubt...*’, is “‘Since we are an exchange of words’”, and what Heidegger interprets this as saying is that ‘we are *one* exchange of conversation’. He continues:

‘And the unity of a conversation consists in this: the essential word discloses the one and the same upon which we agree, on the basis of which we then *are* agreed and thus are ourselves’.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, being ourselves—that is to say, bearing witness to our belonging—is tied up with agreeing, *einigen*, or becoming one, and to the extent that we must *be* one, we *must* agree. However, we cannot understand this consensus as being forced upon us. It is not a demand so grave as to accept nothing but blind obedience. Rather, since agreement is never truly possible without the will to agree, we must be left free to follow the meanderings of the one conversation in our own manner, free to innocently play amongst its words. Only in this way can our agreement be a ‘free decision’, a binding but freely given consent.

That said however, we are indeed bound to say yes, indeed bound to the *one* conversation. Because of the dogged conformism this implies, we cannot help but

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 461-62. This reading of “‘we are an exchange of words’” as ‘we are *one* exchange of conversation’ is unnatural in English translation. However, it follows much more smoothly in German where *ein* can be more easily read both as indefinite pronoun and as indicating number. If we read the original German, we see that it is precisely the multiple meanings associated with *ein*, which guide the reading—most importantly between ‘unity’, *Einheit*, as one-ness and ‘to agree’, *einigen*, as becoming one: ‘Wir sind ein Gespräch, das bedeutet zugleich immer: wir sind *ein* Gespräch. Die Einheit eines Gesprächs besteht aber darin, daß jeweils im wesentlichen Wort das Eine und das Selbe offenbar ist, worauf wir uns einigen, auf Grund dessen wir einig und so eigentlich wir selbst sind’ (p. 39).

make connections between it and the politics of fascism. Heidegger's relation to Nazism has commanded much well-deserved attention, and for this reason we would be wrong to just pass it by without mention. At the same time, however, it is important not to let this issue serve as an excuse for not reading Heidegger, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe criticises Victor Farias of doing.<sup>35</sup> For his part, Lacoue-Labarthe sees Heidegger as guilty of a 'national-aestheticism', whereby an 'aesthetisation of the political' appears as 'a will to immediate effectuation or self-effectuation'. For Lacoue-Labarthe, this will is 'the crime—the boundless excess—of Nazism'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Heidegger's identification with this 'national-aestheticism' actually appears twice in his thought. The first instance is his engagement with the Nazi Party in 1933-34, and the second his writings on Hölderlin.<sup>37</sup> That said, however, Lacoue-Labarthe does not seem to believe that the notion of a 'national-aestheticism' exhausts these latter writings, and certainly our interest in them here belies this possibility. As it is, then, the approach that will be taken here is sympathetic with that expressed by Kathleen Wright in her essay 'Heidegger and the Authorisation of Hölderlin's Poetry'. She warns that we should not lose perspective in an analysis of Heidegger's politics, because

'the difficulty is to keep in mind what remains thought-provoking about Heidegger's 1934-35 reading of Hölderlin, and this difficulty arises because of the danger of reading Heidegger the way he reads Hölderlin. In other words, just as Heidegger, by concentrating on the political, leaves out something important in this poetry, so too my own interpretation runs the risk of leaving out something that remains worthy of thought in Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin's two poems [i.e. *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*]'.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See appendix, 'On Victor Farias's Book, *Heidegger et le nazisme*'.

<sup>36</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, p. 70. It might be noted that Jacques Taminiaux also faults Heidegger for this 'prejudice' that 'closes the existing being within the impregnable walls of a self-willing' (p. 210). This passage appears in his essay 'The First Reading of Hölderlin', where he looks at the indebtedness of the 1934-35 lectures to fundamental ontology, Hegel and Nietzsche, in an attempt to understand how these relations appear in the light of Heidegger's links to National Socialism.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, Kathleen. 'Heidegger and the Authorization of Hölderlin's Poetry', pp 166-67. More generally, her argument in this essay is that the politics at stake in Heidegger's writings from the mid-30's is not fascism (or anti-fascism, the 'traditional line' she rejects) per se, but 'antipacifism', and that the transformation of the 'fatherland...from one that is "defenceless"...into one that is "victorious"' (p. 170) is reason enough to question Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, and thus does not require a recourse to an accusation of Nazism.



Furthermore, by concentrating too exclusively upon the question of fascism, we also risk obscuring important differences between the respective 'national-aestheticisms', if you will, of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In Nietzsche's political hopes, the triumph of a certain Germanness would come with the 'future hero', whose arrival one can imagine in terms of a great, decisive war in which the 'future hero' will emerge victorious. In Heidegger's vision, by contrast, 'struggle' will *only* commence *after* the decisive event—Hölderlin, if you remember, 'founded the beginning of another history, of this history, which *commences with struggle*'. In other words, the decisive event is not brought about by any sort of conflict; quite the contrary, it is what establishes the conditions that make conflict possible at all. Only on the basis of the consensus initiated by the event of Hölderlin and manifested in the 'one conversation' is there the possibility of either agreeing or disagreeing. As such, even if we are, according to Heidegger, ultimately bound to say yes, it is not because we are externally coerced by acts of war, but because of the consensus that must precede dissent and found its possibility. As Heidegger points out, 'If there is to be *one* conversation, essential words must refer to one and the same entity, *otherwise* no conversation *and certainly no controversy* could take place'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, if indeed all essential words 'refer to one and the same entity', then at the limit, agreement and unity would be able to assimilate all disagreement, and a world beyond politics is imaginable where decisions follow necessarily from a unifying consensus, rather than being debated according to relative criteria.

The irony—and, in the light of Nazism, tragedy—however, is that it takes political persuasion to go beyond political persuasion, and this is what we see at the end of Heidegger's formulation of the question of taking seriously in 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry'. Heidegger asks 'whether and how we possess the prerequisites to stand in poetry's realm of power'. This expression, 'poetry's realm of power', explicitly associates poetry with force. As such, when Heidegger announces that 'we are inquiring into the essential, into *what forces* us to decide...' what he is really saying is that *what forces us to decide* is poetry itself, that it is, on its own, persuasive. By itself, this idea is not so controversial; it is not unusual to speak of poetry moving

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<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 462 (latter emphases mine).

or affecting us. What is eyebrow raising is that Heidegger goes on to hint that it is *only* poetry that is persuasive. In other words, in Heidegger's serious world, all power, including political power, is affected by poetry's *Machtbereich*.

## Language and event

The argument that would substantiate this notion is less an argument than the establishment of a myth. Very much like Nietzsche, who is put in the position of trying to make us hope; Heidegger is put in the position of trying to make us believe—make us believe in the myth of poetic founding. In 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry' this myth appears in the language of the poet himself, in lines from '*Wie wenn am Feiertage...*' that describe the poet's exposure to 'God's thunderstorm', that is to say, to Being:

'Yet it behooves us, O poets  
To stand bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,  
To seize the Father's ray itself  
With our own hands and, wrapped in song,  
To offer the heavenly gift to the people.'<sup>40</sup>

According to these lines, the poet, possessed by a childlike innocence, exposes himself to 'God's thunderstorm'—that is to say, to Being—and is struck down. However, in spite of, or because of, his exposure to this danger, the poet is able to create the *appearance* of innocence by cloaking the danger of 'the Father's ray' in song. Only cloaked in this innocent fashion is the 'free gift' of the founding of being possible, whose occurrence constitutes the dangerousness of poetry's works. Only, that is, as an *event* can poetry be both playfully innocent and tragically dangerous, and thereby truly live up to its dual seriousness.

However, as follows from the 'logic of the beginning' identified by Alexander García Düttmann, and which says that 'every inauguration is its own repetition',<sup>41</sup> there are

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<sup>40</sup> Lines cited in 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 466.

actually two events. The first is the mythical event just recounted, the event whose seriousness can never really be in doubt because it is never really serious. As mythical, it is beyond questioning, and even precisely what bounds questioning. It is an event that is untranslatable into the argumentative language of philosophy, and as such, must remain and only be poetry. As for Heidegger, when he speaks of this event, rather than discuss, he more nearly sings: 'Speaking with always growing assurance and simplicity, out of the wealth of images which crowded upon him, Hölderlin has consecrated his poetical word to the realm between gods and men'.<sup>42</sup>

What is surprising, though, is that, in spite of the irrefutability of such lyricism, Heidegger does indeed offer it as an argument: '[It] is *why* we must say that [Hölderlin] is the poet of the poet'.<sup>43</sup> By this odd mix of the discursive and the rhetorical Heidegger tries to hammer home the seriousness of poetry, to convince us that even the rigour of philosophical language is poetic in its essence. However, the effort is self-contradictory: the recourse to the argumentative and discursive language of philosophy is the very admission that poetry by itself might fail to convince. As Andrzej Warminski points out, even if 'Heidegger's language is saturated by Hölderlin's', there is a persistent distinction between poetising and thinking, and Heidegger never really 'does answer the question of where the passage, crossing, going-over (*Übergang*), of poetry and thought takes place'.<sup>44</sup>

For this reason we cannot fail to acknowledge the second event of Hölderlin. If the first event is the mythical moment of the founding of being, the second is the very real event by which Hölderlin is 'struck down'. In other words, in order to 'prove' that the poet does indeed seize 'the Father's ray itself' something must happen to him. What happens, of course, is the other event of Hölderlin, the insanity of the poet, and for Heidegger, this insanity is indeed evidence or 'proof' of poetry's essence: '[a]n excess of light has thrown the poet into darkness. Do we need further *proof* of the utter

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<sup>41</sup> Düttmann, Alex García. *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, p. 174.

<sup>42</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 469.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, (my emphasis).

<sup>44</sup> Warminski, Andrzej. 'Heidegger Reading Hölderlin', pp 46 and 47, respectively. Warminski's argument about this lack of *Übergang* is that Heidegger's attempts to ontologise Hölderlin can never entirely subsume the ontic element of language, even poetic language, as language: 'One could say that "linguistic form," syntax—and the necessity to dismiss it as ontic—mark an irreducible, necessary remainder of the technical (*Technik*) in any language (no matter how "ontologised") as language' (pp 70-1).

danger of his “craft”? The particular destiny of the poet is revealing enough’.<sup>45</sup> Hölderlin’s insanity, therefore, is called upon to ‘prove’ the seriousness of poetry. However, if the first event is suspicious in its mixture of the discursive and rhetorical, this latter one is perhaps even more so for its reliance upon the contingent and ‘*historisch*’. David Halliburton questions this shift ‘from *Geschichte* to *Historie*’, saying: ‘The problem is that [Heidegger] asks for more support from the biographical “historical” quarter than his own hermeneutic principles give him a right to expect and that this quarter is appealed to at a time when the reader is expecting Heidegger to be fully Heideggerian’.<sup>46</sup> The reason we expect Heidegger to be fully Heideggerian here is because this event is at the very crux of poetry’s essence and why we take it seriously. When confronted with this question, what Heidegger offers are references back to poetry and to the life of the poet himself. The very vulnerability of this gesture itself triggers the question that it is meant to resolve. In fact, the paradox of poetry’s seriousness—its dual nature as both tragically decisive and harmlessly innocent—is perhaps best captured in this way: namely, that precisely the reference which should enthrone poetry’s seriousness sets in motion a questioning which threatens to undermine it.

### ‘the new era’

But as it is conceived of by Heidegger, does the questioning that is set into motion really possess the full power of this paradox, that is, the power to completely undermine poetry’s seriousness?<sup>47</sup> To answer this we might look at Heidegger’s projection of a ‘new era’:

‘Hölderlin’s poetry is about the essence of poetry if we do not understand by this essence a concept that is universally valid, but admit that it belongs to a specific time. Not as though it adjusted to a given situation, but rather in the sense that Hölderlin, by founding the essence of poetry anew,

<sup>45</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 466 (my emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> Halliburton, David. *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger*, p. 99. We will return to this issue of the recourse to the biographical and ‘historical’ in both chapters two and four.

<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that the power to undermine poetry’s seriousness is not simply the power to establish it in its non-seriousness, because the latter would just reconfirm poetry’s necessary exposure to the question of taking seriously and its place in a serious world.

*determines and defines the new era* [my emphasis]. The era is the time of the departing gods *and* the coming of God. It is the time of *dearth* because it stands under the token of a two-fold absence: it is defined by the no-longer of the departed gods and the not-yet of the coming one'.<sup>48</sup>

What this passage does is to insist that we pursue our questioning of poetry within the horizon determined by '*the new era*'. In other words, whatever our line of questioning, it will never be able to question the event(s) of Hölderlin itself, and rather must limit itself to relating us to this event, no matter how implausible. As such, our task is to place ourselves within what Michel Haar identifies as the '*secret history, parallel* to that of the [modern] technical world'.<sup>49</sup> Because we are for Heidegger inescapably part of the era opened by Hölderlin, when we question poetry, we can inquire 'into the essential, into what forces us to decide whether we *will henceforth* take poetry seriously', but we cannot inquire into whether the trajectory opened by Hölderlin is the only possible one, whether he indeed marks *the* event.

Heidegger's questioning of whether we take poetry seriously, therefore, even as dual, is limited in its scope—not as the consequence of externally imposed constraints (that is, poetry's tragic seriousness), nor as the result of the internally conditioned demands of paradox<sup>50</sup> (that is, its non-seriousness)—but because it is a temporal question, a question which must be posed in a post-Hölderlinian world. Heidegger's relentless insistence upon Hölderlin as the only possible event closes the door to any truly new era, and as such, we have to wonder whether the reaffirmation of Hölderlin—which can only occur if we ask ourselves whether we take poetry seriously—might eventually grow old. In other words, once we sense that the decisiveness of Hölderlin's poetry is ultimately indifferent to our questioning of it, will we really continue to consider it seriously? Or will its seriousness itself simply lapse, passing beyond any potential farce and into oblivion?

<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 469.

<sup>49</sup> Haar, Michel. "'The End of Metaphysics" and "A New Beginning"', p. 161 (his emphasis). In this essay, Michel Haar also notes how 'the idea of a voluntarist passage (transition), the idea of this decisive leap', as we find it in essays from the 1930's, gives way to a 'turning' and certain 'passivity' (p. 162) in the post-war period without ever completely giving up the notion of a 'fractured' history.

<sup>50</sup> In fact, one of the weakness of Heidegger's formulation of poetry's seriousness is precisely that he limits the power of paradox, and the chance that poetry's seriousness might be substantially challenged.

## Interpretation

Thus, even though Heidegger wishes to *constructively* present Hölderlin's word in the light of a 'framework of stability and endurance',<sup>51</sup> it is not unreasonable to fear that this 'framework' will better serve as a barrier than a facility to *new* and *different* interpretations. Furthermore, Heidegger's explicit statements on interpretation invite such critique. They share with the notion of the 'one exchange of conversation' an emphasis upon enduring unity to the exclusion of disjunctive change. In his lectures on *Andenken*, he possibly makes his most explicit statement:

'The goal of true interpretation consists only in making itself superfluous. The more complete an interpretation's construction is, the more decisively it has in the end dismantled, and thus denied itself, so that only the poet's word speaks'.<sup>52</sup>

Heidegger argues very persuasively here against the practice of using poetry as a pretext for talking about something else, and yet, he also risks setting up Hölderlin's word as being so sacrosanct as to be itself beyond question. In fact, a similar statement from the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein* reinforce this impression: 'What we are to do, then, is at best like scaffolding on the cathedral, which is only there in order to be dismantled again'.<sup>53</sup> It seems quite likely that we would have to move beyond Heidegger's version of interpretation when what we want to do is *not* to renovate the cathedral, but to turn it into something entirely different. In other words, when Heidegger asks us to take poetry seriously, he is asking us to do so in the context of preservation, and as such he does not significantly question what it is that he wants to preserve.

Theodor Adorno's concern is more akin to the problem of turning the cathedral into something different, and that is largely because he fears, if left to the forces of society, that it will be turned into a bomb shelter. What makes this fear all the more alarming is that for him the bomb shelter would reveal what the cathedral always really was.

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<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 462.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins 'Andenken'*, pp 38-9.

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 23.

Adorno is deeply suspicious of arguments that rely on the acceptance that 'that's just the way things are', and in response, he advocates a thinking which shuns just reproducing how things *are*, and rather criticises reality—a thinking, in other words, which truly interprets. In his view, if thought 'leaves behind the medium of virtuality, of anticipation that cannot be wholly fulfilled by any single piece of actuality; in short, if instead of interpretation it seeks to become mere statement, everything it states becomes, in fact, untrue'.<sup>54</sup> The reason for this untruth is twofold. On the one hand, to state things as they *are* is untrue, since the statement itself would not be part of the being it is supposed to reproduce. On the other, even if such reproduction were possible, any attempt to do so would deny thought 'not only its autonomy in the face of reality, but with it the power to penetrate reality. Only at a remove from life can the mental life exist'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, there is no reason to think, at least in any significant way, unless one can think in a way that does more than merely reproduce reality as it *is*. As a consequence, what Adorno advocates is a kind of thought which has its meaning in the disjunction it maintains with regard to reality.

The model for this thought is the autonomous or serious work of art, and one of the artists to whom Adorno looks in order to develop his conception of such a work of art is Arnold Schönberg. Given the many other artists that Adorno addresses in his writings, it would be disingenuous to argue that we can only understand Adorno's relation to art by means of his writings on just this composer, and yet it is important to note what Robert Hullot-Kentor has to say about Adorno's relation to Schönberg: 'Adorno and Schönberg are related more integrally than comparisons [of their 'uncompromising' characters] demonstrate. In *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, Adorno marshals the resources of the entire theodicean tradition of German idealism...on behalf of the justification of an irreconcilable music'.<sup>56</sup>

This 'irreconcilable music' exposed Schönberg to the criticism that his work was difficult to understand, and what singles out Adorno's reception of the composer is that rather than see this as an argument against Schönberg, for Adorno, this difficulty

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<sup>54</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 127.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> Hullot-Kentor, Robert. 'The Philosophy of Dissonance: Adorno and Schönberg', pp 312-13. Similar observations, and even the assertion of a certain parallelism in their respective artistic and philosophical efforts, can be found in Lambert Zuidervaart's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (see pp 5, 48, 123-24).

constitutes a kind of protection, and more specifically a protection against what is for him a more threatening aesthetic development: namely, the culture industry. In the article 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951' Adorno addresses this opposition between serious, difficult music and comforting entertainment:

'...it is precisely because of its seriousness, richness and integrity that [Schönberg's] music arouses resentment. The more it gives its listeners, the less it offers them. It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis. In this, however, Schönberg blasphemes against the expectation... that music will present the comfortable listener with a series of pleasurable sensations'.<sup>57</sup>

That is, one cannot just listen to Schönberg's music, one must construct it, and this active step between experience and understanding allows for the critical distance from reality that provides a model for Adorno's thought. For him, '[works of art] are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost, a loss which plays into their content'.<sup>58</sup>

## The new

The key question, then, might be stated as follows: How do we distinguish those works whose 'code has been lost', from, on the one hand, those whose code is well-known, and from, on the other, those objects which have no significance at all? In other words, how do we identify *new* works of art. As we can already intimate, the task is twofold. Before one can worry about the *newness* of works of art, one must have already begun to address what a work of art is itself.

This dual task becomes clearer if we consider the probable critique Adorno would level against Heidegger's notion of 'the new era'. First, Adorno would object to the fact that Heidegger equates this 'new era' with *the poet* Hölderlin. This is not primarily because Heidegger identifies Hölderlin as opposed to some other poet, but

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<sup>57</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951', pp 149-50.

<sup>58</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 124.



because in his notion of the 'poet of poetry', Heidegger takes for granted that there are such things as 'poets' and 'poetry'. He never really questions whether, or how, *Germanien* and *Andenken* can be works of art; he just assumes that they are. Adorno, by contrast, is specifically concerned with the questionable and problematic existence of works of art, and the danger that they might not be able to continue to exist. In this, my reading of Adorno greatly diverges from that of Rüdiger Bubner who would like to saddle Adorno with a presupposed and 'unqualified work category'. My response to Bubner's rhetorical question, '[w]here else can the concrete and the universal be reconciled in a way that is far removed from all conceptual schematisations, if not within the autonomous sphere created by artworks',<sup>59</sup> is to ask in my turn what reconciliation he is thinking of. It is precisely the impossibility of thinking such a reconciliation that drives Adorno's thought and brings works of art into question. Secondly, Adorno would object to Heidegger's idea that, as post-Hölderlinian, 'the new era' already confronts us today, because the threat that he sees confronting works of art is precisely that the new is, for lack of a better word, past. This is not simply an expression of the new's dependence upon tradition, as it is identified by Simon Jarvis<sup>60</sup>—though it is this, as well—even more radically, Adorno recognizes that the possibilities afforded by tradition might eventually point to a situation in which the new was no longer possible at all: 'The cult of the new, and thus the idea of modernity, is a rebellion against the fact that there is *no longer* anything new'.<sup>61</sup>

This does not mean, however, that everything is old. Quite the contrary, the old's appearance is entirely dependent on the new: 'The old has refuge only at the vanguard of the new: in the gaps, not in continuity'.<sup>62</sup> For Adorno, the old never really exists, and certainly could never anchor our thought or provide a point of continual reference as David Roberts proposes in his reading of Adorno.<sup>63</sup> Rather the old is a

<sup>59</sup> Bubner, Rüdiger. 'The Central Idea of Adorno's Philosophy', p. 164.

<sup>60</sup> Jarvis, Simon. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p. 136: 'What crucially distinguishes the really new from the abstract novelty... of commodity production in the culture industry is that the really new work is made in undiminished awareness of the possibilities afforded by tradition'.

<sup>61</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 235 (my emphasis).

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 22.

<sup>63</sup> Roberts, David. *Art and Enlightenment*. He says, for example, on p. 42: 'The critique of the new can be understood only in relation to the old, of which it is the consequence'. Because of his reification of 'old' or traditional music, David Roberts reads *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, not as a projection of future hopes, but rather as 'the posthumous celebration of classical music' (p. 45).

manifestation of the new. As Alexander García Düttmann puts it, the old 'reveals itself as what is new to knowledge, laid bare by the visionary destruction of the idea, the figure, or the appearance, by the downfall of the image to which we have become habituated'.<sup>64</sup> To cite Fredric Jameson, 'what is "new" about the old involves a sudden intuition of taboos and constraints, negatives, restrictions, prohibitions, reluctances, and aversions',<sup>65</sup> in other words, an intuition into what *should no longer be*. It is only when we have such an intuition that we catch a glimpse of both the perpetuating sameness of modern reality *as* sameness and its possible *disruption* by the new.

Thus for Adorno, the disruption of the new has immediate socio-political significance—it relates to what should and should not be done. He, unlike Nietzsche and Heidegger, who almost seem to imagine artistic and intellectual struggles replacing socio-political ones, approaches the issues of art and aesthetics as inseparable from wider social conditions. He firmly rejects the notion that art could somehow stand aloof from society—and therefore be in a position to replace or supersede it—and rather emphasizes art's character as a '*fait social*'.<sup>66</sup> In fact, he deems the false notion of a completely independent art as evidence of a bourgeois conscious. Adorno's attention to art, then, is entirely intertwined with his vision of society, and his interest in its capacity for the new is due to the latter's revolutionary potential. But this is a potential that is seriously menaced. Instead of being an unambiguous force for change, the new is 'ambivalent in its enthronement. While it embraces everything that strives beyond the oneness of an ever more rigid established order, it is at the same time absorption by newness which, under the weight of that oneness... furthers total society, which modishly ousts the new'.<sup>67</sup> His vision of a serious world, then, is a place where totalisation is so comprehensive that even attempts to question it are absorbed and make the totality stronger. It is a world marked by the impossibility of the new.

<sup>64</sup> Düttmann, Alexander García. 'A Short Diary of the New', p. 158.

<sup>65</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*, p. 192.

<sup>66</sup> See section 'Double Character of Art; *fait social* and Autonomy; On the Fetish Character' in *Aesthetic Theory*. Moreover, for those interested in how this notion of the social character of works of art could impact the latter's technical analysis, one might see Max Paddison's essay 'Immanent Critique or Musical Stocktaking? Adorno and the Problem of Musical Analysis'.

<sup>67</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 237.

However, if the new is impossible, embracing this fact has in itself revolutionary force. But first off, Adorno has to convince us that the new is impossible, that the world is so serious that we must question it in spite of the apparent impossibility of finding answers. One instance of such argumentation appears in the first part of a two-part essay, 'Difficulties: 1. In Composing'. The difficulties are those faced by a composer who refuses to produce just 'a tautology of the world',<sup>68</sup> and rather aspires to the new in spite of its impossibility. What Adorno realises is that some people might view this obstinacy in the face of impossible odds as nothing more than thick-headedness, and airs it in an effective show of humour:

'I could imagine many of you interjecting, "If this business of composing is such a frightfully precarious and difficult thing that you have to make a special trip here to lecture us about it, and throw up your hands and exclaim, 'God, is this difficult, is this difficult!' then why do all of you even bother? Why don't you stay home and earn an honest living making music more or less according to the accepted models that, after all, still make many of us happy?" This trivial argument must be taken seriously...it cannot be dismissed with a vague gesture that says "anyone who thinks like that is out of step with the times"'.<sup>69</sup>

What is remarkable about this passage is that Adorno's only response to objections to obstinacy in the face of seemingly impossible odds—in other words, Adorno's only response to an objection to taking the world so seriously—is to say that we must, indeed, take it so seriously. What this brings to light is that the impossibility of the new—manifested, as it is, by the difficulties of modern composition—cannot be defended, because it is a presupposition. Adorno intimates this himself at the outset of the essay: 'to the extent that music is made in an unreflected way, to the extent that it does not, itself, *recognize its difficulties as preconditions* and incorporate them, it degenerates into the mere repetition of things that have been said a hundred times'.<sup>70</sup> Thus, with Adorno we see the question of taking seriously stripped down to its basics as an unjustifiable demand, as presupposition, but what this also means is that it

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<sup>68</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Difficulties: 1. In Composing', p. 646.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

emerges much more emphatically and unapologetically as a defiant sign of hope. In serious works of art, in those which acknowledge the impossibility of the new, what most comes to the fore is hope, and the more we despair of this hope, the more serious it becomes.

### Aesthetic seriousness

But we cannot lose sight of the fact that even though he focuses on works of art, Adorno does not conceive of the new in terms of the creation of new *objects*. In fact, the new could be said to be precisely the *failure* to create new objects. Adorno expresses this failure metaphorically in *Aesthetic Theory*, when he says that the 'relation to the new is modelled on a child at the piano searching for a chord never previously heard. This chord, however, was always there; the possible combinations are limited and actually everything that can be played on it is implicitly given in the keyboard'.<sup>71</sup> It would seem once again, then, that the search for the new should be dismissed as childish obstinacy; and yet Adorno rallies to Schönberg's reflection that '[i]f you do not seek, you will not find', and says it is 'a watchword of the new'.<sup>72</sup> So if one cannot create new things, what does one achieve in searching for the new? If, for example, Schönberg's search led him to a rethinking of the function of counterpoint in music, what is the significance of this 'revolution of the language of music'?<sup>73</sup> Right off, it must be stressed again that Schönberg created no new things in this undertaking; the elements which he undertook to derive 'from an identical core' were the 'traditional academic syllabuses', 'such as harmony, counterpoint, form, and tone colour'.<sup>74</sup> However, even if superficially all Schönberg does is to reorganise traditional musical elements, the new still appears in what is rejected by this reorganisation: namely, the unquestioned primacy of harmonic tonality. When he speaks of 'The Function of Counterpoint in New Music' in 1957, Adorno states that what was demanded was 'the creation of a specific coherence as authentic as the old universal system of tonality'.<sup>75</sup> What one sees in this is two things: On the one hand,

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<sup>71</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'The Function of Counterpoint in New Music', p. 137.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 124-25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Schönberg's development makes harmonic tonality *old*—as Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, perfect chords were 'relegated to exhausted special circumstances'.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, this rejection of what up until then was considered a constitutive aspect of music becomes part of musical material itself. And it is here that we find the new: 'through the new, critique—the refusal—becomes an objective element of art itself'.<sup>77</sup> The new of new music signals a critical disruption in music's trajectory, an explosion which makes things such that music can never be the same again: 'Schönberg's revolution of the language of music... is... the unceasing effort to take its claims seriously and to test them radically—right up to the breaking point'.<sup>78</sup> It is this explosive aspect of the new, which explains its decisiveness. According to Adorno, once the path of new music has been engaged there is no looking back; like 'the role played by Don Quixote', it 'is at once impossible and necessary'.<sup>79</sup>

A problem remains, however. In order for it to be decisive, the new must be necessary, but how do we really know that a breakthrough like 'Schönberg's revolution' is more than a mere 'escape from school', or an otherwise arbitrary decision on the part of the artist? It is this problem which leads Adorno to make an appeal to the notion of 'authenticity'; as he says, 'what is authentic about [Schönberg] is authoritative counterpoint'.<sup>80</sup> However, 'authenticity' is a notion which Adorno at other times rejects,<sup>81</sup> and for that reason we might prefer the term he uses in *Aesthetic Theory*: namely, 'aesthetic seriousness'.

First off, we might note that this term is not of Adorno's invention. He himself derives it from the Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard. In the latter's *Either/Or*, 'aesthetic seriousness' is presented in the context of the decision between ethical and aesthetic life-views, itself the absolute and decisive choice between 'choosing and not choosing'.<sup>82</sup> However, even if choice is associated with the ethical—'choosing gives

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<sup>76</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>78</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'The Function of Counterpoint in New Music', p. 137.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142: The whole sentence reads as follows: 'Art now finds itself, at the end of the bourgeois era, forced into the role played by Don Quixote at its beginning: a role that is at once impossible and necessary'.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>81</sup> I am thinking, for example, of the aphorism 'Gold Assay' in *Minima Moralia*.

<sup>82</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *Either/Or*, p. 491.

a man's nature a solemnity, a quiet dignity, that is never entirely lost'<sup>83</sup>—'aesthetic seriousness' is not the indifference of not choosing, but rather the relative choice associated with an in-between state lying 'at the dangerous transition between the aesthetic and the ethical'.<sup>84</sup> 'Aesthetic seriousness', therefore, is the recognition that it is necessary to choose, even if one is unwilling to choose the ethical. According to 'B', the spokesman for the ethical in *Either/Or*, 'if [a man] has what you [i.e. 'A', the spokesman for the aesthetic] so often speak of, namely *aesthetic seriousness* and a little worldly wisdom, he will see that it is impossible for everything to thrive equally well. So he will choose, and what decides his choice is a more-or-less, which is a relative difference'.<sup>85</sup> Like the new, in other words, 'aesthetic seriousness' involves decision in the face of indifference and sameness. The problem with such a path, according to Kierkegaard, however, is that it leads the aesthetically serious man into an abyssal plunge of his own manufacture. Because he has only his own subjectivity upon which to base his contingent, relative choices, he will develop this subjectivity all out of proportion. According to 'B', the aesthetically serious individual can never aspire to being anything more than 'a grimace of a man'.<sup>86</sup>

In Adorno's hands, however, 'aesthetic seriousness' no longer leads to 'paradoxical and irregular conduct', but rather the new. Some of this difference is probably due to the fact that it is regular conduct, rather than irregular conduct, which most alarms Adorno. However, the other important change is that rather than considering 'aesthetic seriousness' solely as concerns the individual, Adorno does so in the context of the work of art, thereby averting the abyssal plunge into pure subjectivity identified by Kierkegaard's 'B'. In Adorno's view, a work of art only exists to the extent that it follows 'the whippoorwill of objectivity immanent to it',<sup>87</sup> and so 'aesthetic seriousness' cannot come into play until the subjectivity of an artist acknowledges this 'immanent objectivity'. However, and possibly contrary to expectations, the highest seriousness is not attained when these two drives—the 'immanent objectivity' of a work of art and the subjective efforts of an artist to live up to it—converge in full accordance. For one thing, this is unlikely to happen, because

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 490.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 529-30. Kierkegaard does not explicitly link 'A's inbetweenness with 'aesthetic seriousness'; yet, the descriptions 'B' gives of 'A' makes it seem warranted to read them as connected.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 525 (my emphasis).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 551.

<sup>87</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 38.

one is 'without any guarantee that the productive forces—the spirit of the artist and his procedures—will be equal to that objectivity'.<sup>88</sup> For another, and even more importantly, such adequation of the two forces cannot be the goal, because such convergence would eliminate the very possibility of the new. As Adorno puts it, 'if such a guarantee did exist, it would block the possibility of the new, which itself contributes to the objectivity and coherence of the work'.<sup>89</sup> In other words, the new is only possible to the extent that an artist is 'aesthetically serious' enough to let a work of art race out ahead of him, and not to give up the race in spite of the fact that he will never catch up. The '*serious* in art is the pathos of an objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency'.<sup>90</sup> It is only inferior artists who would try to block the new and bring the work of art down to their level.

### A non-serious seriousness

In spite of the rhetoric, however, let us consider the failings of these inferior artists in more detail. That is, what they do wrong is to engage themselves in the development of works of art *too* actively, and one could even protest that they are being criticised for nothing other than being more conscientious than 'aesthetically serious' artists. One of the pitfalls for artists, in other words, is to be *too* serious.

How can this be? It would seem that there were much greater dangers in store for an artist who does not take things seriously enough, an artist, for example, like Stravinsky.<sup>91</sup> However, according to Adorno, Stravinsky's lack of seriousness is not an argument against him. Though he does criticise the latter for a certain cynical urbanity which is 'clever with regard to aesthetic seriousness',<sup>92</sup> Adorno is generally more inclined to defend a lack of seriousness, and to point out, by contrast, that to take things too seriously is 'awkward, pretentious in a characteristically German

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 38-9.

<sup>91</sup> In this, I am limiting myself to the Stravinsky presented in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*.

<sup>92</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 214 (footnote 47).

manner'.<sup>93</sup> What is needed for art is not seriousness, but more nearly a kind of non-serious seriousness, because 'it is precisely in the denial of seriousness, in the negation of any responsibility in art... that seriousness should consist'.<sup>94</sup> The reason Adorno rejects a sense of serious responsibility in favour of playful irresponsibility is that the former would in the end reinforce reality. If we return to the metaphor of the child at the piano, we see that an artist who is too conscientious with respect to the limitations of the instrument would never be willing to continue the impossible game of finding the 'never before heard, virgin chord'. He would stop searching, thereby capitulating to how things 'really are', to the sameness, against which the new should rebel.

Therefore, if the non-serious seriousness of 'aesthetic seriousness' implies a certain naivety of the artist, Adorno thinks the artist is all the stronger for it. He lauds the 'provincialism of the Schönberg school' as inseparable from its 'intransigent radicalism'.<sup>95</sup> In Adorno's view, to take seriously is to play. However, this does not in any way deny a work of art's capacity to confront reality: Rather its playfulness, its non-serious seriousness, betrays an even deeper awareness of the horrible inescapability of reality's sameness. As he says, 'music is seen as a parable of an attitude which ridicules seriousness, while this attitude itself is actually rooted in terror'.<sup>96</sup> Thus, why we take should take the work of art seriously is that in so doing we harbour the hope that things can be truly different.

### Risks of regression

A rapid glance would say that the hope just identified with Adorno in the form of the autonomous work of art is not incompatible with Nietzsche's hope for a future German hero and Heidegger's for 'the new era'. As was said at the outset, asking why we take something seriously has a tendency to lead, though possibly via despair, to hopes for a new beginning. However, this rapid glance would miss a revealing difference between Nietzsche and Heidegger on the one side, and Adorno on the

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*



other. That is, the first two view taking art seriously as a stepping stone toward our hopes; whereas, for Adorno, the work of art may be the most radical image we have of our hopes, but it in no way facilitates their realisation. Whereas Nietzsche speaks of a future German hero, a genius, who would bring about a 'German rebirth of the Hellenic world', and Heidegger speaks of the *Machtbereich* of poetry, Adorno muses that '[t]hat artworks intervene politically is doubtful'.<sup>97</sup> Adorno distances works of art from direct political activity, because he views such activity, even when revolutionary, as a 'cryptogram of domination' that 'tends towards that which, in terms of its own logic, it should abolish'.<sup>98</sup> In other words, an actively revolutionary art—such as Futurism, or on the other end of the scale, Socialist Realism—tends to reproduce the very patterns of domination it opposes.

It does so, because it loses sight of the fact that for any revolution to be true to itself it must remain open to the revolution that would overthrow it. Adorno's awareness of this paradox appears in his sensitivity to the possibility of regression: even the most revolutionary work of art has within it the possibility to regress, and thus become an apology for the state of society as it is. Adorno evokes this poignantly when speaking of the danger of kitsch: 'Kitsch is not, as those believers in erudite culture would like to imagine, a mere refuse of art, originating in disloyal accommodation to the enemy; rather, it lurks in art, awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth'.<sup>99</sup>

In terms of Schönberg, the problem of emerging regression is most obvious in what might seem the most innovative of his inventions: twelve-tone technique. Early on Adorno defends twelve-tone technique as 'the rational carrying-out of a historical compulsion, which the most advanced consciousness undertakes'.<sup>100</sup> However, in a biographical article written after Schönberg's death, Adorno makes almost the exact opposite claim about Schönberg's consciousness. He points out that 'the beginning of the twelve-tone phase dates at latest to 1922; its full development coincides with a change in Schönberg's life situation': namely, that 'from then on was he freed from the concern of attending to material needs'. Shortly thereafter, Adorno muses that the fact that 'many of the later works lack the force of the earlier' may allow one to

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<sup>97</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 242.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>99</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 239.

<sup>100</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Zur Zwölftontechnik', p. 364.

‘suppose a connection with the more comfortable life’.<sup>101</sup> So what has happened? Schönberg has been transformed from a robust revolutionary into a comfortable bourgeois. Why this portrayal of regression? The answer seems to lie in the relation between Schönberg’s innovations in counterpoint and in those of twelve-tone technique. In both the 1957 biographical sketch just cited and the essay on counterpoint from the same year (cited in previous sections), Adorno describes the development of twelve-tone technique as following from those of counterpoint, but he also presents this in terms disfavoured to twelve-tone, even to the point of describing the latter as the death of ‘Schönberg’s greatest feat’, binding counterpoint: ‘Twelve-tone technique, which represents the consummation of the spirit of counterpoint, also contains the potential for its demise... The last frontier of contrapuntal thinking becomes visible on the horizon’.<sup>102</sup> In other words, as much of a revolutionary achievement binding counterpoint may be, it is threatened by its own inner logic to eventually lose its revolutionary character and become regressive. Thus, the danger for Adorno is not only that we will somehow miss the decisive moment by not taking it seriously enough—a concern he shares with Nietzsche and Heidegger—but also that we will take any particular decisive moment *too* seriously and miss the next.

### Impossible decision

The decision to take seriously, then, is a delicately balanced one, and yet the historical urgency in which the decision is often placed risks undermining the balancing act. For if one decides too quickly to take seriously, one risks projecting oneself into a destructive conflict without any promise of re-emergence into a renewed world. If, by contrast, one hesitates in one’s decision, one risks never deciding and rather watching one’s resolution fall victim to mocking despair. In that there are no criteria for what would constitute the timely decision, there can be only indications and examples. In the next two chapters we will attempt to discuss two of these indications through the figures of the tragic heroic artist and the blind poet.

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<sup>101</sup> Adorno, T.W. ‘Arnold Schönberg (I)’, p. 317.

<sup>102</sup> Adorno, T.W. ‘The Function of Counterpoint in New Music’, p. 138.

As an introduction to these discussions—and in conclusion to what precedes—we should note, however, that these figures can be no more than indications, that they must always remain dual and self-contradictory. This is because the extremes that constitute them are inseparable, that taking seriously always involves a dual movement of simultaneous leaping forward and holding back, of darkest earnestness and lightest mirth. And because of the constant motion of *renvoi*, it is impossible for us to ever decisively resolve the questions that motivate our investigations through them or any other figures or examples. We cannot stand outside the texts we are reading and decide definitively why these philosophers take artists so seriously. Rather, like them, and like the figures they trace, we are faced with the impossible decision of when to take seriously, of when to risk making their words our own.

## chapter two

### Tragic heroic artists

*In this chapter we will examine that aspect of a serious world characterised by the hope promised by a possibility of answering as it is embodied in the figure of the tragic heroic artist.*

#### Who was that masked man?

In the figure of the tragic hero, common parlance and philosophical discourse converge. For it is quite conceivable that when asked why he takes so-and-so seriously, someone might answer that it is because so-and-so 'makes a difference', is 'his champion', or a 'hero' even. Just the same, don't we struggle to take such statements seriously? Don't we view the person who holds them as, at best, charmingly naïve, and at worst, deluded? Isn't our tendency to immediately relativise heroisation, to smile and comment 'how important so-and-so seems *for you*'? It would be a great boost to our intellectual pride if such 21st century scepticism reflected favourably upon us, and to the disadvantage of the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno; however, nothing of the sort is possible. It is precisely the recognition of their respective ages *as heroless*—as well as a rejection of smug, faux-worldly scepticism—which motivates these philosophers to embrace tragic heroism; their concern is that *herolessness* is tantamount to *hopelessness*, that hope which cannot be embodied or realised is no hope at all. Furthermore, we cannot misunderstand this herolessness: it is not simply that there happen not to be any heroes at the moment, but that the very conditions necessary for heroes have been undermined. It is this situation which draws these thinkers to a different, creative kind of hero: as it is, the tragic heroic artist.

To the extent that such heroisation has become, as Adorno would put it, absorbed by the culture industry, and the trials and tribulations of Vincent van Gogh have become a coffee table book, we must take particular pains to understand what a tragic heroic artist really consists of. A tragic heroic artist is not simply an artist who suffers for his art. In fact, in that his roots trace back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the popular image of

the starving artist in the garret is a pale vision indeed. This is because if we consider the characteristics Aristotle attributes to the tragic hero in order that he can accomplish 'by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions',<sup>1</sup> what we find is a catalogue of daring virility: a tragic hero is to be virtuous, noble, active, but also susceptible to a fault so grave as to lead to his certain downfall. The last is of particular interest, for as Walter Benjamin points out in his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, it is possible to design a 'tragedy', a *Trauerspiel*, which otherwise fulfils all of the requirements for tragedy outlined by Aristotle, and yet fails to live up to Attic tragedy as regards the hero's downfall. As Benjamin puts it, the tragic hero's downfall is a sacrifice that 'differs from any other kind, being at once both a first and a final sacrifice'.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the tyrants of the *Trauerspiel*, the true tragic hero does not appeal for sympathy; he does not want the audience or existing community to mourn his death. Rather his death is to be of benefit to an 'as yet unborn, national community', and thus must be suffered in a defiant 'tragic silence'.<sup>3</sup> Such defiance on the part of the tragic hero is his acknowledgement of the necessity of his downfall, a necessity that 'is neither a causal nor a magical' one,<sup>4</sup> and as such cannot be averted by any action or appeasement of the gods. But this necessity is also the paradox of the tragic hero: he is shouldered with an immense responsibility over which he has, in fact, absolutely no responsibility. This paradox intrigued the early German romantics, who according to Peter Szondi, engaged in a thinking which neglects the 'the effect of the Tragic', in favour of an understanding of 'the phenomenon itself'.<sup>5</sup> Isolating the Tragic opens the possibility that the tragic hero could become conscious of, and thus, to at least some degree, responsible for, his own tragic fate.<sup>6</sup> In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche places himself in such a tradition in

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*, 49 b, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 107 and 108, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> Szondi, Peter. 'The Notion of the Tragic', p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> In her book *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism*, Leslie Thiele points to such a possibility in her distinction between classical heroes and 'the radical autonomy of the modern individual'. According to her, '[p]revious heroes were always, at least in part, representatives. They were incarnations of ideals or descendants of the gods. They were meant to serve as paradigms for their peers and their progeny, just as the gods served as models for the heroes. Nietzsche understood the modern hero quite differently. He is not a representative of ideals any more than he is a divine tool. He speaks only for himself; he represents only himself. The paradigm being offered is that of one who has become sovereign and unique, a law unto himself, not others. As such, he cannot serve as an exemplar, for his virtue consists in his incommensurability' (pp 42-3). As it turns out, however, Leslie Thiele turns away from this radical notion of tragic heroism when she goes on to describe 'higher men' as exemplary incarnations of heroic individualism.

his conception of '[t]he glorious "ability" of the great genius, for which even eternal suffering is not recompense enough'.<sup>7</sup>

Now, there is no question that eternal suffering and death have a serious decisiveness to them which promises nothing will ever be the same after their onslaught. Nevertheless, this seriousness would be meaningless unless it left traces, unless an elegy can be written to the fallen hero, by which his deeds are communicated to an 'as yet unborn, national community'. But how to write it? If one emphasizes the magnitude of his achievement—his heroism even in death—then one removes the sting of his death, and as such the tragedy of it. However, if one emphasizes the tragedy of his death, then his heroism tarnishes: his image suffers not only from the fact that he could not avert death, but also from the suspicion that he could have done even more if he had lived. There is, in other words, an excessive, inadequate relation between the tragic and the heroic that makes the contradictory demand that death be both fooled and triumphant. In Nietzsche's case, this becomes evident in the cyclical pattern of birth, death and then rebirth of tragedy: Dionysus, the 'original hero', reappears time and again, always wearing a different mask.<sup>8</sup>

However, if Dionysus is masked, how is it that we are to recognize him? For example, even during his early devotion to Wagner, Nietzsche is plagued by doubts concerning the composer's claim to tragic heroic status.<sup>9</sup> One reason this is the case, and one that has implications for our ability to recognize a tragic hero, is the unique temporality associated with tragic heroism. As a 'first and a final sacrifice', a tragic hero marks the closing of one era and the opening of a new one, and as such the cleaving of time into a before and after. What this means is that we view the tragic heroic event, as well as the artist who undertakes it, either as something to come, or as

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<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51: The full sentence is as follows: 'But we may claim with equal certainty that, until Euripides, Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero, and that all the celebrated characters of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus and so on—are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysus'.

<sup>9</sup> In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's possibly *least* ambiguous association of Wagner with the rebirth of tragedy occurs where he associates 'German music' and 'its mighty sun-cycle from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner' with '*the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit, in our contemporary world!*' (p. 94). However, Nietzsche soon thereafter qualifies the association by referring to 'the mystery of the union of German music and German philosophy' (p. 95), thereby instilling doubts as to whether rebirth can occur in the guise of Wagner alone. I should also note at this time that Shaun Whiteside uses the term 'Dionysiac' rather than 'Dionysian' in his translation; however, I will consistently use the term Dionysian, making this modification to all citations.

something in the past. We cannot be in the cleft itself and view the event as the decisive event it is. *Our age, in other words, is never the age of heroes*; once the notion of a tragic heroic artist is embraced, the disjunction between before and after means that on one side lies the age of fable or myth and on the other some sort of dark, heroless age.<sup>10</sup> When a philosopher writes his eulogy—or prophecy, as we will see—he is most often writing in some dark age gazing back (or forward) upon a mythical era in which people's lives made sense. And this last point is important because it is in the task of making sense of people's lives, of biography, that the figure of a tragic heroic artist most notably takes shape. Unlike most lives which drift arbitrarily or unexpectedly in and out of existence, a tragic heroic artist is unique in that his downfall is tragedy, it is an integral part of the story of his life.

But here is where the problems start to mount. If death must be considered an integral part of a tragic heroic artist's life, not only is it uncertain what happens when a philosopher tries to recognize a contemporary as a tragic heroic artist, as Nietzsche does with Wagner, but also, even when it is not a question of a contemporary, it is difficult to see the justification for treating a real person's life as a fable or myth. Do the demands of taking seriously justify such fabulation? And even if they do, why philosophically develop the notion of a tragic heroic artist at all? It is the answer to this last question which will help us understand why Nietzsche in 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', Heidegger in the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*, and Adorno in a 1957 biographical sketch, present Wagner, Hölderlin, and Schönberg, respectively, as living out lives that are larger than life itself, that is, the lives of tragic heroic artists.

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze offers a comparable understanding of time in his discussion of the 'third synthesis' or 'empty form' of time in *Difference and Repetition*: 'the idea of a totality of time must be understood as follows: the caesura, of whatever kind, must be determined in the image of a unique and tremendous event, an act which is adequate to time as a whole. The image itself is divided, torn into two unequal parts. Nevertheless, it draws together the totality of time. It must be called a symbol... Such a symbol adequate to the totality of time may be expressed in many ways: to throw time out of joint, to make the sun explode, to throw oneself into the volcano, to kill God or the father. The symbolic image constitutes the totality of time to the extent that it draws together the caesura, the before and the after' (p. 89). The figure of a tragic heroic artist would be one of these symbolic images.

## The mythical real

As has already been developed, the most important aspect of a tragic heroic artist is his relation to time. And as such, it is not surprising to find Heidegger begin his lectures of *Germanien* by warding off the danger of contemporising Hölderlin, of taking him 'historically'. According to Dominique Janicaud, this is critical for Heidegger, because the latter wants to endow Hölderlin with 'an historical privilege', 'historical' this time understood in the sense of *Geschichte*. This privilege appears as

'the assumption that Hölderlin's poetry, provided we listen to its most intimate message, offers a radically new experience, i.e., a new world and, first, a new space-time relationship (a new *Zeit-Raum*). To experience it, we have to perform a massive methodological change in our approach to space and time'.<sup>11</sup>

As befits such a radical methodological change, Heidegger engages in a practice we noted in the first chapter and relies upon poetical and mythical language at key moments in his argumentation.<sup>12</sup> One of these moments occurs when Heidegger calls Hölderlin 'heroic'.

What Hölderlin specifically does to deserve this epithet is, according to Heidegger, to veil the 'monstrous necessity of his calling' as poet with 'a unique tenderness': that is, to refer to poetry as "'the most innocent of all crafts'".<sup>13</sup> We should recognize this as the first key-passage from 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', and what the veil of harmless appearance spread by these tender words does is to both mark and maintain the position of the poet as "'thrown" out of ordinary life'.<sup>14</sup> Hölderlin's heroism

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<sup>11</sup> Janicaud, Dominique. 'The "Overcoming" of Metaphysics in the Hölderlin Lectures', pp 388 and 384, respectively. It might be noted as well that, according to Janicaud this assumption is something that 'does not change through all the Hölderlin lectures (and this could also be said of the *Erläuterungen* and of "Hölderlin's Erde und Himmel")' (p. 384), and in fact could even be said to be intensified by its combination with the project of overcoming metaphysics in the later lectures.

<sup>12</sup> We saw this in the previous chapter as regards the event of founding in the section entitled 'Language and Event'.

<sup>13</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 35: The full passage reads as follows: 'So künden gerade diese Breife an die Mutter in ihrer klaren Innigkeit die ungeheure Not seiner Berufung und das wahrhaft Heldische seines Daseins, weil se es in einer einzigen Zartheit verhüllen'.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 467.



consists, therefore, in standing excluded from the realm of men and *Alltäglichkeit*, 'thrown into an in-between'.<sup>15</sup> This in-betweenness has tragic heroic significance, because to stand in an in-between is the poet's tragic burden or flaw: '... the poet, in the necessity of suffering-with [*Mit-leidens*], stands with the suffering of the demi-gods',<sup>16</sup> that is to say, with the *Zwischenwesen* or in-between beings. The poet's tragic heroic fate, then, is to be thrust from ordinary space-time—a fate, if we recall, he bears with such heroic stiff upper lip—and into a mythical realm of demi-gods, where suffering reigns. Furthermore, what this mythical moment allows is a projection into the future. For, the in-between realm's suffering is of a particular sort: namely, a 'suffering-in-advance' [*Vor-leidens*] that makes Hölderlin's work stand 'as a fixed projection in the *Dasein* of our people: a veiled, poetic founding of our being'.<sup>17</sup> To sum up using Heidegger's unique vocabulary, then, the poet's suffering-standing-in-between (i.e. tragic heroism) is, in fact, an excessive-leaping-ahead that establishes the *Dasein* of a people as historical (i.e. in a new space-time).

But why, we must ask, are we expected to believe in such a tale of tragic heroic achievement? Why would we not simply dismiss this as childish fantasy? Why, in other words, would a philosopher such as Heidegger rely on a host of demi-gods, tragic heroes and in-between beings to advance his arguments? Heidegger's response to these questions might be to point out that a tragic heroic artist is, in fact, 'the founder of being'. And as such, rather than it being the tragic heroic which is unreal, it is '[w]hat we in everyday life call the real [which] is, in the end, the unreal';<sup>18</sup> the tragic heroic, by contrast, would be what is most real and essential. However, this response is weakened not only by Hölderlin's own dependence upon the everyday real—something which we will discuss shortly—but also by the fact that this

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 182 (my emphasis): '...der Dichter in der Notwendigkeit des Mit-leidens mit dem Leiden der Halbgötter steht...' 'Suffering-with' as a translations of *Mit-leiden* does not capture the duality of the term as also meaning, without a hyphen, 'to have compassion'. This second meaning would give the following translation: '...the poet, in the necessity of having compassion, stands with the suffering of the demi-gods'. Such a translation would also have tragic heroic undertones to the extent that one could imagine the poet being burdened by a heroic capacity for feeling that forces him to take part in the suffering of the in-between, or cleft.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184. We might also note that this passage follows soon after the point where Heidegger reveals that the phrase, 'the poet of poets', derives from a statement made by Hölderlin concerning Homer. The reference to Homer underscores the kinship between Heidegger's conception of the establishment of being and Nietzsche's notion of the 'German rebirth of the Hellenic world'.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33: 'Dichtung ist Stiftung, erwirkende Gründung des Bleibenden. Der Dichter ist Begründer des Seyns. Was wir so im Alltag das Wirkliche nennen, ist am Ende das Unwirkliche'.

dismissive response to the problem of a tragic heroic artist's mythical character will not satisfy all philosophers with a penchant for tragic heroism. In particular, it will not satisfy Adorno.

### Mythology of refusal

This is because, in Adorno's conception, there can be no separate mythical realm for art and aesthetics—thereby, barring the notion that an artist can be excluded from the realm of *Alltäglichkeit*—and it is evident from a variety of his ideas, not the least of which being the notion of art as '*fait social*' mentioned in the previous chapter. As relates to Schönberg, the inescapable inclusion of art in society is revealed through a biographical moment portrayed in both *Prisms* and a later article from 1957. In the *Prisms* biography, Adorno relates that:

'[i]n the midst of the blindness of specialization, [Schönberg's] music suddenly saw the light that shines beyond the aesthetic realm. His incorruptible integrity once attained this awareness when, during the first months of the Hitler dictatorship, he unabashedly said that survival was more important than art'.<sup>19</sup>

There are three things we might notice about this event in Schönberg's life. The first is what we have just stated about Adorno's philosophy, which is that it will not tolerate some sort of aesthetic realm insulated from social and political realities, and in particular from that of Nazism. In fact, in *Minima Moralia* Adorno criticises Heidegger (though without mentioning him by name) precisely for presenting a separate tragic heroic realm *as if* it were independent of Fascism, when really indebted to it: 'To the converted and unconverted philosophers of Fascism, finally, values like authenticity, heroic endurance of the "being-in-the-world" of individual existence, frontier situations, become a means of usurping religious-authoritarian pathos without the least religious content'.<sup>20</sup> However, and this is the second point, Adorno himself is not entirely free of such 'pathos'. The first sentence from the

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<sup>19</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951', p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 152.

*Prisms*' passage reads as a moment of revelation—'his music suddenly saw the light'—and even though it is impossible not to read this as tongue in cheek, the irony is also a form of self-irony. For, Adorno's comment at the end of the *Prisms* essay that Schönberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* is 'music as the protest of mankind against myth'<sup>21</sup> is not simply a criticism of the kind of misuse of myth that was undertaken by the Nazis, it is also the establishment of another mythology, a mythology of refusal by which 'music regains its *redeeming power* through negation'.<sup>22</sup> Finally, and thirdly then, what this passage does is to help establish this mythology of refusal. According to this mythology, if survival is more important than art, this is largely because art itself, in its most radical manifestations, appears as nothing more than its own impossible survival faced with current social conditions.

The place where Adorno thematically develops the tragic heroism of this mythology lies, unfortunately for this investigation, not in his writings on Schönberg, but his writings on Beckett. Nevertheless, there are reasons for seeing parallels between that 'most musical of writers'<sup>23</sup> and the composer. This is not simply because Adorno himself compares Beckett to Schönberg in 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', it is also because tragedy as Adorno comprehends it in that essay—that is, as an 'asymptote', which tends toward silence<sup>24</sup>—is very much compatible with his conception of Schönberg's musical development. Long before the rise of Nazism silenced art and necessitated a focus on survival, Schönberg musically anticipated this menacing tragedy. That is, his works do not simply react negatively to the events leading up to and during the second world war, they apparently prophesy them: as Adorno puts it, in the 1930's and 40's '[t]he sounds of *Erwartung*... of "impending danger, anxiety, catastrophe", finally meet what they had always prophesied'.<sup>25</sup> This ability on the part of Schönberg to create works before their time, to prophesy the very catastrophe which would silence them, is his tragic heroism.

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<sup>21</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951', p. 172.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

<sup>23</sup> Paddison, Max. *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, p. 275.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 260: The full sentence reads as follows: 'The asymptote toward which Beckett's drama tends is silence, which was already defined as a rest in the Shakespearian origins of modern tragedy'. As for the analogy between Schönberg and Beckett, see pp 259-60.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951', p. 172.

Now, one may be tempted to argue that Adorno's interpretation of Schönberg benefits from just a little too much 20/20 hindsight to be taken seriously. In other words, in 1956 it is simply too easy for Adorno to claim that Schönberg anticipated WWII. And yet, this is where the statement by Schönberg comes into play. Adorno does not simply assert that, *after the fact*, we can hear the menace of fascism in Schönberg's compositions, rather he more nearly argues that a prophetic temporality offers the best way to grasp Schönberg's actions in life—or to put it differently, to see the tragic heroism of his life. Schönberg is a tragic hero, because he so deeply lived the hope promised by his own music, that he preferred to sacrifice this music than to reconcile it with Nazism, and moreover said so as early as 1933. It is this tragic heroic insight into, and rejection of, impending catastrophe, which constitutes Schönberg's access to the 'seriousness of music':

'He accepted the collective fate without complaining about his individual one, without even dwelling upon it for long; at that time, in early 1933, came the word that there were more important things in life than composing. Spoken from this mouth, it stated the *seriousness of music* better than any pathetic elucidation of the value of art. After a few months of wandering, he emigrated to the U.S.; there the almost sixty-year old was stricken with the first serious illness of his life'.<sup>26</sup>

It is this prophetic refusal by Schönberg, his unwillingness to in any way compromise music's seriousness, and rather to accept the collective fate, which is the tragic heroic event for Adorno. For Adorno, tragic heroism lies not in the commotion of active deeds, but in the austerity of a lapsing into silence, not in bold words, but in the recognition that because of the catastrophe, 'meaning nothing becomes the only meaning'.<sup>27</sup>

But how, we must ask, is this tragic heroic refusal to be distinguished from the self-interested passivity it so resembles? If Schönberg is saving himself, how is it that we can argue that his doing so has wider implications? The important distinction, it would seem, hinges entirely upon some vision—even if only negative—of how things

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg (I)', pp 320-21 (my emphasis).

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', p. 261.

could be otherwise, of some alternative to 'the way things are'. The difference, in other words, depends on the notion of a serious world. For a serious world offers the hope that things can be otherwise, the hope that by critically engaging the world, we can arrive at new answers. It is this hope that allows Adorno to describe Schönberg's life as larger than life, the latter's self-preservative action as more than simple self-preservation. Thus, even though Adorno does not say anything that would positively develop some other realm or age of myth as do Nietzsche and Heidegger, he relies upon it implicitly and negatively in order to reject the way things are and assert the seriousness of his hopes for a different society.

### Allied for better or for worse

What the gesture toward myth does, however, is to make these philosophers dependent upon artists. Not surprisingly, this condition can be a source of philosophical discomfort, such as is expressed by Alain Badiou in his thesis of an 'Age of Poets'. According to the latter, philosophy 'sutured' itself to poetry in recognition of its own weakness. By supposedly being 'at the very locus where philosophy falter[ed]',<sup>28</sup> art helped philosophy continue its task. That said, however, for Badiou it is now time for philosophy to reassert itself. As such, not only does he want us to believe that an 'Age of Poets' really and historically existed—that there really were tragic heroic poets who stepped into the breach and 'cut open a space... within historic pathos'<sup>29</sup>—but also that it is now possible to end this 'age', and to definitively 'de-suture' philosophy from poetry. The problem, of course, is that such a de-suturing would depend upon the very sort of mythology of refusal that it would like to exclude. Badiou would like to see us safely deposited in a philosophical age posterior to that of poets, but the constitutive aspect of this latter age would be precisely that it is poet-less—that is, heroless—with the implication that it would be yet another mythological age—as it is, one in which negation and refusal, rather than artistic creation, have become meaningful.

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<sup>28</sup> Badiou, Alain. *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Put another way, what Badiou fails to explicitly acknowledge is that philosophy's attempt to reject art would be its presumption of the very independence that its relation with art belies.<sup>30</sup> More specifically, philosophy's attempt to reject art would rob it of the very voice it needs in order to do so. Because philosophy must acknowledge its position in the world—and if it doesn't it is open to the charge of empty speculation—the philosopher is in the impossible situation of addressing the world in such a way that his addressing is already included in it. In fact, this is central to the very *enjeu* of a *serious*—as opposed to *wishful*—world. A philosopher's alliance with an artist, therefore, is his way of gaining access to a language already situated in the world. If the philosopher subsequently tries to reject his relation with the artist, he ironically contradicts his own intention by presenting *himself* as a poet in the mould of an 'Age of Poets', able to realise his very own words.

If we now consider this alliance in terms of tragic heroism, we see that what an artist does when he creates a temporal cleft, is to initiate discourse. He does this by speaking the first word, the word that says its own saying, and it is the role of the philosopher to indicate this unique and original event. Now this almost magical act of speaking can be projected into either the past or future, with implications for the resulting discourse. When it is projected into the past, the resulting discourse is elegy, a nostalgia for a former unity and earlier uncleaved time. When it is projected into the future, it gives rise to prophecy, a projection of hopes for a future in which the cleft will be healed. The strength of these forms of discourse is that they take the speaker's voice into account. Their weakness is that they are locked into the strict temporal division that makes them possible, and as such, keep at a distance the very hope that they reclaim.

Thus, as we will discover, the figure of a tragic heroic artist is as much a figure of false hope as that of hope. It is striking that all three of the texts upon which this chapter primarily depends were redressed by later ones: 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth' was negated and denounced in many of Nietzsche's subsequent writings, but most obviously in *The Case of Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. In the

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that Badiou seems *implicitly* aware of the risk of this presumption. As such, he does not as much argue that the philosophy should reject art as he asserts art's desire to separate itself from philosophy.

lectures on *Andenken* that followed those on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*, Heidegger retreats from his more audacious claims about the political import of Hölderlin's work. As for Adorno, he returns to the biography of Schönberg in 1967 in revisions to 'Toward an Understanding of Schönberg', and maybe even more importantly, substantially revises Schönberg's centrality to art and aesthetics in '*Vers une musique informelle*' and *Aesthetic Theory*. Thus, the corollary to the question of why a philosopher would present an artist as a tragic hero might be why he would subsequently withdraw the compliment.

### The man as myth

Since the mythical nature of the tragic heroic artist would seem to provide us with the best reason for *not* taking him seriously, it is to this apparent weakness that we will now turn. We will first examine the characterisations of the lives of Wagner, Hölderlin and Schönberg, respectively, cataloguing their mythical traits. Only on this basis we will subsequently be able to address the role of the mythical in the philosophical discourse of tragic heroic artists, undertaking close readings of it in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno, respectively.

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In this examination, we should not be misled by biographical factuality into believing these traits do not exist. Adorno, for example, seems especially eager to implant the impression of factuality. The very first phrase of the 1957 biography of Schönberg reads like a birth certificate: 'He was born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 1874 in Leopoldstadt in Vienna'.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, this factuality comes to have a very discordant tone in that Adorno often presents facts about Schönberg's life seemingly with the sole intention of denying them. If, for example, we take the next two sentences, we already see a pattern emerging: First there is the factual detail—'Origins pointed to Slovakia...'—but then its denial—'However, pre-history and

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<sup>31</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg (I)', p. 304.

arrival lie in the dark, as if he came out of a no man's land'.<sup>32</sup> This movement of assertion and denial is especially strong as concerns Schönberg's musical abilities. Adorno introduces the possibility that Schönberg's mother had been a piano teacher, and denies it in the very same breath, explaining that 'neither [Schönberg's] father nor his mother were artistically talented; the information that his mother had been a piano teacher seems to be based on an error'.<sup>33</sup> In that it is just a statement to say that someone's parents were not musically inclined, but an enigmatic provocation to remark that though it was *believed* that someone's parents were musically inclined, that this was, in fact, *not true*, we must ask why Adorno writes in this fashion. The answer seems to lie in the notion already mentioned of a 'no man's land'; Schönberg's existence, talent, and music are all portrayed as if deriving from a region of absence. Even though he is said to have parents and other normal familial relations, these relations are denied, and denied in particular as concerns his music. His music is said to 'come wholly from the outside as that of a foundling'.<sup>34</sup> This movement of assertion and denial fictionalises Schönberg, opening up a space of mystery and irreality.

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By comparison with Adorno, Nietzsche's approach to Wagner is remarkably up-front about its fictionalisation of the composer. Early on in 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', Nietzsche explains that

'in the case of people of out-standing talent, life must not only become, as is true for everyone, the reflection of their character, but also above all the reflection of their intellect and their own peculiar abilities. The life of the epic poet will have something of an epic quality... while the life of a dramatist will take dramatic form'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', pp 262-63. In his essay "'How One Becomes What One Is,'" Alexander Nehamas notes this aspect of Nietzsche's thought, and relates it to the philosopher's project of self-creation. According to Nehamas' thesis, Nietzsche 'developed his attitude toward character and the self in general, as he did in many other cases as well, by considering literature as his primary model and generalizing from it' (p. 277).



Thus, from the very outset Nietzsche claims his intention to present Wagner as a dramatic personage, and justifies such an approach on the basis of Wagner's own artistic activity. According to this life drama, Wagner is cleft in twain, 'torn between two drives or two sides'.<sup>36</sup> On the one side, or as Nietzsche puts it, '*below* there rages the rapid current of a violent will that seeks out, as it were all paths, crevices, and ravines to bring itself to light and that desires power'.<sup>37</sup> On the other, 'a process of purification' which expresses itself with 'such a loftiness and sanctity of mood that we cannot help but think of the glowing ice- and snow- covered peaks of the Alps'.<sup>38</sup>

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The specifics of this division in Wagner's character is noteworthy, because metaphorically speaking, it very much resembles the Heideggerian topology of '*die Schaffenden*', 'the creators'—'the poet', 'the thinker' and 'the founder of states'—in the circle of which Hölderlin finds his place in the world. Very much like Wagner's 'process of purification' 'the creators' live upon 'high swelling mountains, the peaks of the mountains, which solitarily stick up into the ether, that is to say, the realm of the godly' and look down upon 'the flatness of the everyday'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, what is interesting about 'the creators' is that their development takes the place of an absent biography in the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*.

Early on in the lectures, Heidegger mocks the kind of approach Adorno undertakes, saying: 'We begin with a poem and thus neglect to narrate: Hölderlin was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1770 in Lauffan am Neckar as son of... etc'.<sup>40</sup> But we must ask: Why does Heidegger feel so free in neglecting to recount these details? Answer: Because his very own ontology makes them irrelevant. In the section that precedes the first

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, M. '*Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*', p. 52: 'Die Zeiten der Schaffenden—hochaufwogendes Gebirg, die Gipfel der Berge, die einsam hineinstellen in den Äther, und das heißt in der Bereich des Göttlichen. Diese Zeiten der Schaffenden ragen heraus über das bloße Nacheinander der eiligen Tage in der Flachheit des Alltäglichen...' We will shortly address the fact that Heidegger presents the notion of the 'three powers' as involving, in particular, a temporal distinction.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

reference to 'the creators'<sup>41</sup> entitled 'Die berechenbare Zeit des Einzelnen und die ursprüngliche Zeit der Völker' ('The countable time of the individual and the originary time of the people'),<sup>42</sup> Heidegger dismisses the former time as 'übersehbar', both in the sense that it 'can be overlooked' or passed over as unimportant, and in the sense that it is 'overlookable' or surveyable—it can be 'stuck between the numbers of the dates of birth and death'. By contrast, the 'time of the people' is 'hidden' and 'true'.<sup>43</sup> No wonder, then, that Heidegger focuses on the latter. As regards Hölderlin, what is of particular significance about it is that the 'time of the creators' is the 'time of the people'. As such, the biographical story of Hölderlin as a man is replaced with the tale of Hölderlin as popular myth. Additionally, what is asserted by this myth is a clear link between itself and Hölderlin's existence as a poet: 'the creators' are mythical precisely because of their abilities *as* creators. The poet, for instance, is marked by his power to 'establish', *Stiften*. And what he establishes—that is to say, the *Dasein* of the people as historical—marks a temporal cleft, a beginning or *Anfang*.

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Thus, for all three of these thinkers the mythical character of their discourse is justified by the life of the artist himself *as an artist*. In other words, to speak about an artist is to mythologize, and vice-versa. Therefore, we should not see in fictionality an argument against a tragic heroic artist's seriousness. Rather, as we will see, the more effective argument against his seriousness will be, in fact, to expose its dependence upon actuality.

### In the breach

And this brings us to our close readings, as well as back to the shared metaphor. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger speak in terms of heights and depressions, mountains and

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<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that earlier—on the same page as the foregoing dismissal of biographical details—there appears a reference to 'three powers', '*drei Mächte*', which are identified as '*Dichten, Denken und Sagen*'. It is never made clear what the relation is between these 'powers' and the later development of 'the creators'; nevertheless, it is interesting to speculate since it is precisely the last and most politically controversial element, the '*Staatsschöpfer*', which is here missing.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

ravines, because though it is the case—as Heidegger puts it in ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’—that ‘the valley belongs to the mountains’<sup>44</sup>—and thus vice-versa—it is also the case that the mountains overshadow the valley. In other words, there is an asymmetry in favour of mountains and heights which makes things such that they alone can stand for the pair and close it as a unity. In Heidegger, the mountainous time of ‘the creators’ not only looms over the everyday existence of individuals, but also determines it *as* existence. This is the case, because for Heidegger, ‘our existence is a knowing’,<sup>45</sup> by which he means that even though neither we nor ‘the creators’ know ‘who we are’, the temporal unity of the latter offers the hope that we *can* know who we are.<sup>46</sup> And what this hope depends upon is precisely that we *take seriously* the temporal unity of ‘the creators’:

‘Because our existence is a knowing... for this reason there never again is for us a *pure poetic* becoming of existence, as little as [there is] a *pure thinking* and even as little a *solely active* one. We will be required not only to furnish accommodating and regular equalizing between the poetising, thinking and doing powers, but also *to take seriously their hidden, culminating temporal unity* [my emphasis] and thereby to experience the mystery of their originary belonging together and to form it originarily into a new, till now unheard of, structure of being’.<sup>47</sup>

Now the question is how this temporal unity—which we have just been asked to take seriously—is possible. The answer is the sacrifice or downfall of the poet.

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<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 467. The original context of this phrase fits in perfectly with the asymmetry we are trying to establish, because what Heidegger says is that ‘this harmless appearance belongs to the essence of poetry as the valley belongs to the mountains’. In other words, ‘harmless appearance’, and its playful non-seriousness, must defer to the tragic seriousness of poetry as bound to the ‘*one* conversation’.

<sup>45</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 184: ‘Das abendländische geschichtliche Dasein ist unausweichlich und unaufhebbar ein *wissendes*’. The following discussion also depends upon the section on pp 56-7: ‘Das Wissen der Schaffenden, wann die Zeit des Ereignisses des Wahren nicht ist’.

<sup>46</sup> A statement to this effect can be found on pp 58-9 where Heidegger concludes: ‘Jetzt zeigt sich: Wir wissen nicht nur nicht, wer wir sind, wir müssen am Ende sogar erst und gerade teilnehmen an der Dichtung, um allererst die notwendige Bedingung dafür zu schaffen, daß es die Zeit wird, in der wir dann überhaupt erfahren können, wer wir sind’.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 184-85: Note that the references to ‘pure poetic’, ‘pure thinking’, and ‘solely active’ becomings of existence correspond to the poet, thinker, and founder of states, respectively.

This tragic fate of the poet is actually Heidegger's solution to a problem he has created for himself through the notion of 'the creators'. He says there are three 'creators'; however, unless at least one of these plays a unificatory role and closes the ranks of the three, then there is no reason not to suppose a fourth, or even fifth, 'creator'. We see this closing of the ranks when Heidegger explains that the 'truth of the people is the particular openness of being as a whole, according to which the carrying and structuring and leading powers [i.e. 'the poet', 'the thinker', and 'the founder of states', respectively] receive their rank and achieve their unanimity'.<sup>48</sup> And how does this occur? 'The fundamental tone, that is to say the truth of the existence of a people, is originarily established by the poet'.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is the poet who originarily establishes the possibility of the unity of 'the creators'.<sup>50</sup> What this means, however, is that the poet is both inside and outside, both excluded from and included in, the temporal unity he himself establishes; he is at the cleft of the *Anfang* because he himself forms this cleft. However, we should not think of this formation in some sort of instrumental fashion, whereby the poet is the heroic figure of action. Rather, his heroism follows from his *Entbehrenwollens*, from his willingness to endure the cleft, whose formation is his tragedy. And Heidegger describes this tragedy in terms of sacrifice; the poet is a 'firstling', who 'must be sacrificed'.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the poet is a tragic figure to the extent that he forms the cleft, and a heroic one to the extent that he endures it.

Nevertheless, a question mark remains, which is, once again, 'Why the poet?'—as opposed to one of the other 'creators', for example. A possible response is to refer to the privileged position of language in Heidegger's philosophy. A particularly relevant indication of this privilege comes when Heidegger apparently digresses to speak of the '*Kameradschaft der Frontsoldaten*', the 'camaraderie of soldiers at the front'.<sup>52</sup> He relates it to the 'nearness of death'. According to him, facing the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> As we will see, however, it still takes the other two, and in particular 'the founder of states' to seal this unity.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146: 'Für diesen Kampf der Unstimmung der jeweils noch herrschenden und sich fortschleppenden Stimmungen müssen die Erstlinge geopfert werden. Das sind jene Dichter...'

<sup>52</sup> The particular relevance of this passage derives from the fact that it ties Hölderlin, the poet, to the *actuality* of soldiers at the front. This association is strengthened by repeated reference throughout the Hölderlin lectures to Norbert von Hellingrath, who helped prepare the collection of Hölderlin's poetry used by Heidegger, but who died at the front in 1916.

nothingness of death becomes a 'source of unconditional belonging together', where 'belonging together' itself, *Zueinandergehören*, supposes our 'ability to hear', our *Hörenkönnen*. In this way, even in a context as seemingly far removed from language and poetry as existence at the front, Heidegger comes back to their realm. He says: 'The ability to hear from one another is first possible when each is exposed beforehand to the nearness and distance of the essence of things. This occurs through language...as the originary establishment of being'.<sup>53</sup> The implication of this is that even the heroism of the soldier at the front is grounded in the poet's.

At the same time however, doesn't the heroism of the poet himself depend upon that of the soldier?<sup>54</sup> In other words, in that Hölderlin's heroism consists in his endurance of the cleft—the trench, if you will—he does not entirely become a hero until he overcomes it, until the unity, which his suffering makes possible, realises itself *as a* unity. And the role of sealing the unity falls to 'the founder of states', the ultimate soldier. As long as 'the founder of states' does not place Being in 'the last and first seriousness of beings', and bring 'the people to themselves *as people*'<sup>55</sup>—that is to say, to knowing who they are—the poet's heroism and 'the creators' unity remain undecided; there is an opening of an era, but it is undecided whether it will really affirm itself *as an era*. Another way of putting this is to say that the opening the poet establishes resists its closing under the banner of unity, and Heidegger, as we have already seen, *decides* in favour of unity. This is the significance of Heidegger's demand that we *take the unity seriously*: it is the inconceivable decision needed in order for the serious world of the tragic heroic artist to come into existence. The problem is, however, that this taking seriously, this *actualisation* of the tragic heroic artist as soldier, is also his exposure to certain death, his self-denial as poet. Such actualisation inaugurates, as Véronique Fóti, eloquently puts it, 'a refined form of

<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> When Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert addresses the notion of the three creators in her essay, 'Heidegger and Hölderlin: The Over-Usage of "Poets in an Impoverished Time"', she presents the tie between the poet and the founder of states as relating to Heidegger's ambiguous treatment of the notion of genius: 'In contrast to Hölderlin, Heidegger generally rejects the notion of the genius, Schelling's as well as Schopenhauer's, taken from the tradition of the *Critique of Judgment*, but he does so in such a sweeping way that he retains essential moments without being able to know or realise it'. One of these moments is the philosophical identification of poet and statesman, which he apparently inadvertently retains because he 'loses sight of the difference between theoretical and practical Philosophy' (p. 71).

<sup>55</sup> *Hölderlin's Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 144.

totalization'.<sup>56</sup> Just the same, if we do *not* rise to the demand to take the unity seriously, the poet wavers undecidedly in the breach.

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If we now return to Nietzsche, we confront precisely the situation of an artist left in the breach. Whereas Heidegger focuses primarily on the establishment of a before, an origin, Nietzsche finds himself in the odd position of arguing for an after that is before itself. As we have already seen, Nietzsche undertakes his biography of Wagner as if addressing a dramatic personage; nevertheless, this fictionality is book-ended by two very real events. The first is the foundation laying ceremony of the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* in May 1872, and the second is the impending festival itself scheduled for 1876. Though the biography is ostensibly guided by the temporal cleft which the latter will mark, it is rather the first event which decisively cleaves time. During this rainy day in 1872, Wagner is said to turn his gaze inward, gaining what Nietzsche calls a 'Wagnerian perspective', a point of view likened to that of Alexander the Great 'in that moment in which he had Europe and Asia drink from one and the same cup'.<sup>57</sup> And what Wagner saw with his penetrating perspective was 'how he had become what he is, [and] what he will be'.<sup>58</sup> In other words, he saw his life temporally divided, cleft into a before and after, where everything 'he had accomplished previously was but a preparation'.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the portent of this cleft is not limited to just Wagner himself, it apparently relates to humanity as a whole. As Nietzsche says in the very first sentence of the essay: 'For an event to be great, two things must come together: the great sensibility of those who create it, and the great sensibility of those who experience it';<sup>60</sup> those who are meant to experience Bayreuth are '*human beings of the future*', 'a freer humanity'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Fóti, Véronique. 'Textuality, Totalization, and the Question of Origin in Heidegger's Elucidation of "Andenken"', p. 56.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', p. 262.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 326 and 325, respectively.

But where does this leave the actual festival of Bayreuth? If Wagner 'does not belong to this generation' and is 'the messenger of another age',<sup>62</sup> then how can anything be expected of the 1876 festival, which can only be attended by those of this generation and age? In other words, if the festival *actually takes place*, isn't it unlikely that the 'idea of Bayreuth, 'the transmission of Wagner's art to 'a distant, merely possible... future',<sup>63</sup> will continue to be taken seriously? Only as long as the hope for ideal transmission can be maintained—only as long as the full realisation of the already initiated 'after' can be deferred—can its decisive seriousness remain immeasurable and disjunctive. For this reason, Wagner must stay in the breach of the 'Wagnerian perspective', and the impending festival moved into the realm of myth. To accomplish the latter, Nietzsche offers two strategies. The first concerns the spectators of the Bayreuth festival: they will have to be 'unfashionable people', who 'have their home elsewhere than in the fashions of the present time'.<sup>64</sup> Only these unfashionable sort can be, like Nietzsche, the 'disciples of resurrected art', who 'have both the time and inclination for seriousness, for profound, holy seriousness!'<sup>65</sup> Such a demand transforms the festival of Bayreuth into a mythico-religious gathering of initiates, probably modelled on those of the cult of Dionysus. The second strategy concerns Wagner's tragic heroic sacrifice: 'Here [i.e. in Bayreuth] you encounter the most devoted self-sacrifice of the artist *and* the drama of dramas'.<sup>66</sup> As such, on this 'day of battle',<sup>67</sup> the artist is displaced by his dramatic characters, who 'can live in no more beautiful way than by preparing themselves to die and sacrificing themselves in the battle for justice and love'.<sup>68</sup> In this version of things, the festival of Bayreuth models itself on the self-sacrifice of its author, and becomes an event as mythical as the events of the *Ring of the Niebelungen* themselves. Unlike Heidegger, therefore, who relies upon the realisation of the poet's promise, Nietzsche toys with the idea that the 'Wagnerian perspective'—its decisive cleaving of time—is actually most serious if it remains mythic. To this effect, he describes the 'intervals of quiet before and during the battle', 'those moments when looking backward and ahead we understand

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 326 and 327, respectively.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276 (my emphasis).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277: The full sentence is the following: 'For us, Bayreuth signifies the morning consecration on the day of battle'.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

the symbolic'. Even though these mythic moments cannot last, even though the 'day and battle dawn together', their 'comfort accompanies us the entire day'.<sup>69</sup> The actual battle itself—the festival and its tragic heroic artist—may after all offer nothing but false hope.

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The disillusionment that Nietzsche vents once he attends the festival of 1876 and concludes that Wagner is indeed a false hope is much more traumatic than anything Adorno ever expresses about Schönberg, and yet they confront comparable dilemmas. Adorno, like Nietzsche, seems to have felt himself in the presence of a 'great man',<sup>70</sup> and as such one of the questions that haunts him is that of legacy. The reason that talk of legacy is so importunate is that it has the same effect of closure as the Bayreuth festival in 1876 or the realisation of temporal unity by 'the founder of states': They all mark actualisations which entomb the tragic heroic artist by sealing him in the very temporal cleft that he makes possible. In a vain attempt to stave off such a fate, Adorno proposes that Schönberg's 'extravagant power spurned ever to exhaust one of the possibilities it created itself'.<sup>71</sup> Such open-endedness leaves room for future developments that would keep Schönberg from being shelved amongst the composers of the past, but does so at the cost of ambiguity concerning his legacy. Adorno wants to argue that Schönberg's place in the history of music is that of the total innovator, that his 'new music' is the *only* future for music. For that to be possible, all music must respond to the possibilities created by his 'extravagant power'. However, to the

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> One of the ways in which Adorno may have expressed this is in his own compositions. In fact, in his book *Augen.Blick: Eine Skizze zu Bildern Arnold Schönbergs und Texten Theodor W. Adornos*, Severin Hansbauer makes such a connection when he comments upon Adorno's professed experience of being 'too late' in his arrival in 1924 in Vienna to study composition with Alban Berg: 'Die Enttäuschung über das Zuspätgekommen sein schlug sich nicht zuletzt in den Komposition Adornos nieder. H.K. Jungheinrich versteht sie als nostalgischen Rekurs "auf einen musikgeschichtlichen Kairos, der lange vobei war..." Diese nach- und hervorholende Erinnerung eines musikgeschichtlichen Kairos bezieht sich auf die Zeit um 1910, als Arnold Schönberg in freier Atonalität zu komponieren begann'. We should also point out that this understanding of Adorno's compositional relationship holds equally well with regard to his philosophical one in that Adorno imagines 1910 to mark a temporal disjunction that can subsequently only be observed in the form of eulogy. In her work, *Exact Imagination, Late Work*, Shierry Weber Nicholsen develops the notion of lateness in terms of an idea of 'late work' that she sees has having central philosophical importance for Adorno. '[L]ate works are the catastrophes in the history of art', embodying 'radical discontinuity' (p. 8). They are signals that the state of disintegration (of individuals, of works of art) has proceeded just beyond the reach of a unifying grasp.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg (I)', p. 314.



extent that all subsequent music must respond *solely* to these possibilities, and to no others, Schönberg must be able to reclaim these possibilities as his legacy, and exclude all possibilities that lie outside of it. Thus, very much like Hölderlin who is said to open an era but cannot reclaim such an achievement until it has confirmed itself *as an era*, Schönberg cannot reclaim his legacy until the possibilities he has created eliminate all others. To assure Schönberg his legacy, then, Adorno must also say that the composer's work builds 'a cosmos for itself, a model as it were, which Schönberg left to others to follow further'.<sup>72</sup> In positing such a universal model, Adorno blocks the path to any innovation which would lie outside the Schönbergian legacy. Such a move encloses new music in a casket of Schönberg's own making. There is tragedy in this, but it is in fact Schönberg's heroic triumph, his reach beyond the grave; his tragedy would have been to be without a legacy, to have opened up the possibility of new music, but been tragically unable to see its promise affirmed in realisation. As it is, he is guaranteed his place and a seriousness of a sort, but unfortunately it is as the dictator of new music.

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Thus, the question of legacy brings us back to the same conclusion we keep reaching: *Realised seriousness is not so serious after all*. The disjunctive seriousness promised by a tragic heroic artist is denied precisely by his heroic compulsion to realise the disjunction. If, for example, new music marks a complete disjunction within music, it is assured of seriousness only to be threatened by irrelevance, by its branding as an aberration doomed to disappearance because of its own oppressiveness.<sup>73</sup> As Thomas Mann puts it in *Doctor Faustus*: 'Far be it from me to deny the seriousness of art; but when it becomes serious, then one rejects art and is not capable of it'.<sup>74</sup> If, on the other hand, new music—or the Bayreuth festival, or 'the founder of states'—does *not*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*: Therefore, the full sentence is as follows: 'Ein jegliches muß einen Kosmos für sich selber bilden, gewissermaßen ein Modell, das weiter zu verfolgen Schönberg anderen überließ; seine verschwenderische Kraft hat es verschmäht, jemals eine der Möglichkeit auszuschöpfen, die sie selber schuf'.

<sup>73</sup> In an article from 1960 entitled 'Music and New Music', Adorno recognizes the untenability of the relation between music and new music, but in his view, what I am calling oppressiveness was necessity, and as such music had to fade in favour of new music. In support of his hypothesis, he points to an 'objective trend toward unity' (p. 268), but does not seem to see the danger of paralysis implied in new music becoming what music *must be*.

<sup>74</sup> Mann, Thomas. *Doctor Faustus*, p. 179.

mark a complete disjunction, it has no claim *at all* to the decisive seriousness implied by taking seriously in a serious world. It is the tragic heroic need for realisation that converts hope into false hope.

### The sidekick

So we return to our main question: Why *does* a philosopher take an artist seriously? Our response up to now has centred upon how the myth of a tragic heroic artist feeds into the notion of a serious world. In this version of things, a philosopher has constructed a world such that it is an artist who promises the possibility of an answering to our questioning. And even though, as we have just seen, this promise is betrayed by the need to *realise* this answering as an *answer*, before we move on, it is important to re-emphasize how this tragic heroism depends upon something about the artist *as artist*.

On the one hand, artists are described by these philosophers as having sensual particularities which could account for their unique abilities. In the case of Wagner, it is the so-called 'Wagnerian perspective', the enchanted stopping of the clock, which conjures 'those moments when looking forward and backward we understand the symbolic, those moments when with the feeling of mild fatigue a refreshing dream comes to us'.<sup>75</sup> This access to a dramatic pause constitutes the 'spell of art', and thanks to a blurring of the distinction between the lifework and life of the dramatist, for Nietzsche such moments are not just reserved for the stage.<sup>76</sup> As for Heidegger, the key notion is language. The poet can be said to establish the *Dasein* of a people because of his special relation to language, a relation possibly best expressed by Heidegger's claim that the 'poet names the gods and names all things for what they are'.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, this special relation depends upon the poet's unique ability to hear the call, *Rufen*, of the gods, which Jacques Derrida identifies as the 'ear of the poet'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', p. 278.

<sup>76</sup> This is a reference to the passage cited earlier where he says that 'the life of a dramatist will take dramatic form' (p. 263).

<sup>77</sup> Heidegger, Martin. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 464.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'Heidegger's Ear: Philopolemology', p. 185: 'This ear of the poet stands firm beside the origin that the poet has a passion for. The poet is steadfast in hearing what originally and properly happens and what in general "is". This ear of the poet, which is distinguished from that of the

As for Adorno, he also focuses on hearing, and refers at various times to the notion of 'an awakened ear'<sup>79</sup> and 'Schönberg's restlessly probing hearing'.<sup>80</sup>

On the other hand, artists are significant *as artists* to the extent that they are creators of *works of art*. Adorno signals the importance of the latter when he says:

'Scarcely is it possible to estimate what Schönberg, the individual, gave and achieved in the history of music as a whole; not so much through the material changes and renewals... *as through the compositional work* which he struggled from the grasp of objective-social and spiritual conditions, which already no longer wanted to tolerate such success'.<sup>81</sup>

So it is his works that make Schönberg the artist so important in a serious world. At the same time, however, to the extent this is the case, and his works exceed his actions—his 'changes and renewals'—we have to wonder whether we are still correct in talking about *his* works.<sup>82</sup> For this points to an ambiguity in Adorno which also finds resonance in Nietzsche and Heidegger, and opens up another approach to a tragic heroic artist's place in a serious world: namely, who decides which works?<sup>83</sup> Does an artist decide by himself which part of his 'social labour' are works? And if not, who does? And in any case, whose works are they really? It is tempting to make vague references to society and culture, but this averts a much more pressing question for us: namely, what role does a *philosopher* have in the drama of tragic heroes and historic beginnings. It would seem quite plausible that the relation between a philosopher and the artist he addresses is not irrelevant to any serious world the former constructs. Furthermore, this is most likely not invisible to the philosopher himself. Heidegger, for example, very explicitly writes himself, or a projection of

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gods as well as from that of the common of the mortals...hears the "ist" before or at the origin of philosophy'.

<sup>79</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Warum Zwölftonmusik?', p. 117.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg (I)', p. 314.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 323 (my emphasis).

<sup>82</sup> We will return to this question of the artist and 'his' works in Part Two. There I will argue that the focus upon works of art very often signals a strategy of exclusion that treats the artist as a counter-example.

<sup>83</sup> Those familiar with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Plato, through Heidegger and Girard, should recognize this formulation as closely related to 'the question we must not read in Plato', and yet Plato himself poses in the form of 'What is?': namely, 'Who manufactures what?' As such, it is a question fundamental to the relation between philosophy and art ('Typography', p. 85).

himself, into the tale he is weaving about ‘the creators’, including ‘the thinker’ as the second of them. He, furthermore, undertakes a practice which Adorno also maintains of making little distinction between references to statements by the artist and the latter’s actual works, thereby blurring the line between art and (philosophical) reflection on art. This complicity between artist and philosopher is not always a happy one as is bluntly admitted by such undertakings as that of *musique informelle* by Adorno.<sup>84</sup> But even when a philosopher does not go so far as to tell artists what their job should be,<sup>85</sup> he is still hard-pressed to deny his entanglement in the process of producing works. He is very much like a narrator, whose neutrality is placed into doubt by the very fact that there is a tale to tell.

However, could it be otherwise? What would be the meaning—or even how would it be possible—to speak of art and works of art (or anything really) in such a way that it excludes our experience of them, and thus the relation by and to our voices? In this perspective, the philosophical attractiveness of a tragic heroic artist takes on new contours. Embracing this figure offers philosophers a way to shed the pretence of neutrality, and gives them, if you will, a *say* in what they are saying. They cannot, of course, say just anything. They have a duty to say the truth of their tragic heroic artist. For instance, in the case of Heidegger on Hölderlin as it is understood by Paul de Man, the philosopher relies upon the artist as a ‘witness’ to the ‘moment of truth’:

‘As one reads the last commentary on Hölderlin (... “dichterisch wohnet der Mensch [poetically man dwells]...”), one understands why Heidegger is in need of a witness, of someone who can say that he has named the immediate presence of Being. This witness is Heidegger’s solution to the

<sup>84</sup> Adorno introduces this essay with an open admission that he is dissatisfied with contemporary new music, and is quite frank in allowing that younger musicians may feel justifiably inclined to disregard his criticism. Nevertheless, he still goes on to propose the task of *musique informelle* as the proper task of new music. In defence of Adorno—if one feels such a necessity—one might point out that this unwillingness to just accept things as they are, even the state of new music, is a central aspect of his philosophy.

<sup>85</sup> I am referring to the fact that he identifies the state of new music in 1910 as being the moment when *musique informelle* became a real possibility, however that instead there came after it the ‘vastly overrated twenties’. He rejects, in other words, the development Schönberg, the musician, actually took, saying the latter should have developed differently: ‘the task [of *musique informelle*] is to resume the process which Schönberg throttled at the very moment when his brilliant innovation appeared to give it fresh impetus’ (p. 275). This passage will be considered in greater details in chapter four.

problem that had tormented equally poets and thinkers, and even mystics:  
how to preserve the moment of truth'.<sup>86</sup>

However, if a poet or artist is a philosopher's 'witness', what does this make the philosopher? Isn't he simply a hanger-on to the other's greater deeds? A philosopher sidekick to a tragic heroic artist? And this is not the only issue at hand, because the very insight on the part of a philosopher sidekick that makes him stand by the side of a tragic heroic artist—that is, his insight as regards the 'moment of truth'—requires a complicity which throws it into doubt.

Another way of approaching this is to return to the issue of temporality. As said throughout this chapter, a tragic heroic artist cleaves time, and as such can only be addressed from the perspective of a before or after. What this implies is that his tale is never a report upon what 'really happened' liable to corroboration by facts, but requires, as Andrzej Warminski puts it, that the philosopher 'think... that which is *not there*'.<sup>87</sup> As such, the resulting discourse can only prophesy beforehand or eulogise after the fact. Such self-referential discourse points to the relation between the speaker and the spoken of, but is not usually able to claim authority beyond the proximity that grounds it. And yet, this authority is precisely what the philosopher sidekick reclaims, presenting his privileged position as the model for wider circles.

Consider, in this light, Nietzsche's appeal to 'the few' and their special claim to the 'Wagnerian perspective':

'But what Wagner inwardly saw on that day [i.e. in May 1872]—how he had become what he is, what he will be—that is something that we, those closest to him, are also able to see to a certain degree. And only from this Wagnerian perspective will we ourselves be able to understand the greatness of his deed—and with this understanding vouch for its *fruitfulness*'.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> De Man, Paul. 'Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin', p. 252.

<sup>87</sup> Warminski, Andrzej. 'Heidegger Reading Hölderlin', p. 46.

<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', p. 262 (Nietzsche's emphasis).

Nietzsche's relation to Wagner, therefore, is that of an exemplary closeness which others are claimed to share. Moreover, the insight it makes possible involves a dual responsibility, which brings it to an even wider circle. According to the first aspect of this responsibility, Nietzsche must be 'able to understand the greatness of [Wagner's] deed'; that is to say, he must foresee Wagner's future action, and *grasp* it in advance as great. According to the second, he must 'vouch for its fruitfulness'. In other words, he must *affirm* that what he grasps ahead of time will indeed be great. Now it would seem initially that the second part of the relationship is unnecessary: if he's already grasped the great deed, what is the need of affirming it? He has it. But then again, greatness is not exactly like a loaf of bread; it isn't much use unless others affirm one's possession of it. So Nietzsche must be prepared to *perform* his possession, and vouch for this greatness *to others*, in order for the initial grasping to have any significance. This is what makes his relation exemplary. However, there is a risk involved in this double commitment, because there is nothing to guarantee that what is *grasped as great* can be *affirmed* as such. For example, Nietzsche is prophesying the greatness of the Bayreuth festival, and he is bound by his special relation to Wagner to affirm its greatness when it does indeed take place, but what if he can't? What if he really doesn't think it's so great when it comes time to affirm? This, as we know, is an essential moment in Nietzsche's break with Wagner. The problem is that the special relation of tragic heroic artist and philosopher sidekick solders together two moves—grasping and affirming—whereas, for critical thought to be possible, and in particular the thought that would be in the best position to recognize greatness, they must remain distinct.<sup>89</sup>

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If we now turn to the pair of Heidegger and Hölderlin we find that their relation—assuming, as I am, that it is reasonable to see some inspiration for 'the thinker' of Being (of the three 'creators') in the thinker of Being of 1930's Germany—again

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<sup>89</sup> The notion of recognition is central to this analysis, and in particular as it is developed by Alexander García Düttmann in his book *Between Cultures*. In brief, he criticises the hypostatisation involved in a dogmatic notion of recognition which '*recognizes as...*' Along these lines, he might observe that Nietzsche's difficulties with Wagner commence with the fact that he limits his own room for critical manoeuvre by recognizing the composer *as great*.

centres upon two moves. These are detailed in Heidegger's explanation of the various creative roles 'the poet', 'the thinker' and 'the founder of states' undertake:

'The fundamental tone, and that is to say the truth of the *Dasein* of a people, is originally established by the poet. The thus shrouded Being of beings is then *grasped and structured as Being* [my emphasis], and thereby first disclosed, by the thinker, and the thus grasped Being is placed in the first and last seriousness of beings, that is to say, in the *determined* [*be-stimmte*, Heidegger's emphasis] historical truth, so that the people are brought to themselves as people. This happens through the creation by the founder of states of the state appropriate to its essence'.<sup>90</sup>

As with Nietzsche, a thinker's first responsibility is to grasp something as something. His second is to structure it as the same, and this can be understood as a performative affirmation<sup>91</sup> to the extent that structuring is thought in terms of a disclosure: in other words, the thinker grasps the '*shrouded* Being of beings' as Being, and then affirms by his *dis-closure* that it is, indeed, Being. Thus, if the Heideggerian thinker is, like Nietzsche, bound to the artist by a dual responsibility, does it mean that he, as well, is menaced by a divergence between the duties of grasping and affirming/structuring? That is to say, what would happen if Hölderlin said something which could not be affirmed as the truth of a people? According to Heidegger, such a thing would be impossible, since the truth is what was established by the poet himself. Heidegger can say this, moreover, with some confidence because he is eulogising rather than prophesying Hölderlin; the philosopher has everything the poet said neatly bound for him by Norbert von Hellingrath.

It is important to mention the latter because it is his eulogy which marks the whole Hölderlin project as being one of eulogy, of 'remembrance',<sup>92</sup> and to insist upon

<sup>90</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 144.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander García Düttmann also suggests that the action of the thinker can be understood as a 'performative act' in his book *Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*: 'Hence the repetition [by the thinker] is a performative act—to use a vocabulary alien to Heidegger—and does not content itself with being a constative act which refers to something already stated' (p. 153).

<sup>92</sup> In the very first paragraph of the interpretation of *Germanien*, Heidegger draws our attention to the co-editor of Hölderlin's collected works, and admonishes us to keep him in our memories: 'Vielleicht wird eines Tages die deutsche Jugend den Schöpfer ihrer Hölderlin-Ausgabe, Norbert v. Hellingrath, der 28jährig vor Verdun 1916 gefallen ist, in ihr Gedächtnis aufnehmen—vielleicht auch nicht' (p. 9).

keeping someone in our thoughts, as Heidegger does in the case of von Hellingrath—and in a way not unlike his repeated entreaties that we not simply read Hölderlin but become ‘living bearers of poetry’s power’<sup>93</sup>—this insistence is not a statement about the past as much as it is a projection into the future. Furthermore, it is in this dimension that the moves of grasping and affirming do indeed diverge in Heidegger. We perhaps see this most clearly in the term, ‘*das Nationelle*’. In a footnote to a 1959 essay entitled, ‘Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven’, Heidegger takes care to avert us against misinterpretation: ‘We must, of course, hear Hölderlin’s discourse on the “patriotic” (*Vaterländischen*) and “national” (*Nationellen*) according to the meaning of his thought, which means that we must free it from our current narrow representations... the “national” means the land of birth (*nasci, natura*)’.<sup>94</sup> So why is he telling us this? Is this an indication that he himself might have at some time projected ‘*das Nationelle*’ as meaning something other than the land of birth? Such a projection would constitute a divergence between the moves of grasping and affirming to the extent that it would feed off a tension between the native meaning and a hoped for meaning. It would also, of course, feed the suspicions that surround Heidegger’s political leanings, and there is material for reading the end of the 1935 lectures on *Der Rhein* as uncomfortably compatible with Nazi ideology. There is, for example, Heidegger’s claim that Hölderlin’s notion of “*der freie Gebrauch des Nationellen*” can be understood as the ‘creation of latitude [*des Spielraums*], in which the national can freely realise itself in history’.<sup>95</sup> Just the same, perhaps it is the ambiguity itself which is most important, because as it is, this divergence is actually essential to the seriousness of the poet. In other words, if Heidegger’s lectures had not implied there could be a divergence between what he grasps—‘*das Nationelle*’ as ‘land of birth’—and what he affirms—‘*das Nationelle*’ as a certain historical configuration of the state—then there would be much less at stake in the poet’s relation to the nation or people.

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In the lectures on *Andenken* themselves, a whole section is devoted to von Hellingrath and even concludes with a ‘Gedenkwort’ entitled *Norbert* by Stefan Georges.

<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin’s Earth and Heaven’, p. 206 (footnote 3).

<sup>95</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 292.



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For, what is it that happens when the grasping and affirming moves actually *converge*? It is Adorno who best addresses this question. This is not to say that he, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, doesn't struggle with divergence; twelve-tone technique in particular found him at great pains to uncritically affirm.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, it is his reflections upon the problems of convergence, which may most effectively lay the myth of tragic heroic artists to rest. As we said at the outset, an artist's seriousness as tragic hero consists in the possibility of answering; this is the hope he embodies. And yet, this hope is the denial of hope. For if the grasping and affirming moves converge, then the anticipation and remembrance upon which the hope is based become nothing more than scheduled appointment and reminder. In other words, when the two moves converge, a tragic heroic artist loses his disjunctive force, and his great deed, or historic founding, or revolution becomes just another entry on the calendar. It is this situation which Adorno is referring to when in *Aesthetic Theory*, he observes that '[i]f the utopia of art were realised, it would be art's temporal end'.<sup>97</sup> Such convergence makes disjunctive force turn upon itself and disappear. The problem, then, with the hope represented by a tragic heroic artist is that its highest moment is the moment of its realisation, and thus also the moment of its disappointment.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> We sense his difficulty in the odd compromises he crafts between his need to accept all of Schönberg's development as necessary, on the one side, and his aesthetic disappointment with the composer's later works, on the other. For example, in a passage from the 1957 biography addressed in the previous chapter, he veils his criticism of Schönberg's artistic achievement by reaffirming the musician's radical technique: 'Wenn vielen der späteren Werke der Stachel der früheren fehlt; wenn manche, das Wort recht verstanden, einen gewissen Konservatismus zeigen—Konservatismus nicht der Mittel, die folgereicht weitergetrieben werden, sondern der künstlerischen Gesinnung, die nun auf große runde Werke zielt—, dann mag man einen Zusammenhang mit dem beruhigteren Leben vermuten' (p. 317).

<sup>97</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 32 (cited with slight modification to translation).

<sup>98</sup> In his essay, 'Concept, Image, Name', Rolf Tiedemann, addresses Adorno's notion of hope, and points out that even though it must find 'fragmentary points of reference in the here and now', that is, in what is realised, Adorno will not thereby 'concede that hope is a *principle*' that could itself be realised (p. 126).

## A heroless world...?

When it is all said and done, therefore, one is disappointed in any case with a tragic heroic artist: if grasping and affirming converge and he realises himself, it is a disappointment, and if they don't and he doesn't, it is a disappointment. All three of these thinkers experienced disappointment in some form or fashion—with the result that Nietzsche rejects Wagner, Heidegger turns from 'the founder of states', and Adorno critically reevaluates Schönberg—and yet none of them really abandons tragic heroism. Why is this? Why is it that even though Heidegger ceases to speak of 'the creators', that there is no triumvirate, no *Kampf*, and no *führende Macht* in the lectures on *Andenken*, there is still the situation of Hölderlin leading us back home? Why is it that his disappointment leads Nietzsche not to turn from Wagner as much as to try to surpass him, to challenge him, to delight in the 'ominous sound' of swords crossing?<sup>99</sup> And why is it that Adorno—who questions the notion of the genius, who identifies a 'crisis of semblance' which undermines positive realisation—why is it that his hope still relies on the negation of tragic heroism, on the artist as victim, on the anti-hero? That is to say, why should Adorno muse in a late article: 'It is scarcely imaginable that in an age when the individual is so diminished and is conscious of his impotence and apathy, he should feel the same compulsion to produce as did individuals in more heroic epochs'?<sup>100</sup>

The more complex answers to these questions are well beyond our scope; nevertheless, it is worth briefly considering one hypothesis. And that is to say that the reason a tragic heroic artist can have such a lasting impact upon a philosopher's thought is that such an artist compels the latter to take him *too* seriously. Once motivated by the promise of a serious world, any disappointment a philosopher might experience is as likely to be attributed to his own 'disloyalty' as any fault with the tragic heroic artist himself.<sup>101</sup> For consider a philosopher's situation: If he attributes his disappointment to his own disloyalty, and *refuses* to question the tragic heroic artist, then he at least retains the possibility of answering initially promised by the

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<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo*, p. 63: 'This crossing of the two books—it seemed to make an ominous sound. Was it not as though two *swords* had crossed?'

<sup>100</sup> Adorno, T.W. '*Vers une musique informelle*', p. 283.

<sup>101</sup> This, in fact, would be another way of interpreting the peregrinations of the term, '*das Nationelle*'. In this version, Heidegger 'corrected' himself in 1959 for his disloyal deviance in 1935.

artist. However, and on the other hand, if he *does* question the tragic heroic artist, then he does not advance his position one bit, since questioning a tragic heroic artist is just another way of taking him seriously. Once taken too seriously, in other words, a tragic heroic artist is essentially beyond question; one can neither *not question* him, nor *question* him. No wonder, then, the temptation to try for another new beginning, in other words, the compulsion to continue thinking in his terms.

Nevertheless, isn't there another possibility in face of so much dead seriousness? Isn't this 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' situation a bit ridiculous? Nietzsche, at least, seems to enjoy the joke:

'To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *out of the whole truth*—to do that even the best so far lacked sufficient sense for the truth, and the most gifted had too little genius for that. Even laughter may yet have a future... Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom, perhaps only "gay science" will then be left.

'For the present, things are still quite different. For the present, the comedy of existence has not yet "become conscious" of itself. For the present, we still live in the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions'.<sup>102</sup>

The seriousness of a tragic heroic artist asserts that everything has already been decided, and yet this decisiveness itself depends upon our decision to take him seriously, on our decision to believe in his myth. But what if we refuse to decide? This is not to say that we decide *not* to take him seriously; this would be still to admit the possibility of his seriousness. Refusing to decide, by contrast, would be to place the decision in suspense, not unlike the way in which Nietzsche proposes to 'freeze' ideals,<sup>103</sup> or the way laughter interrupts a discourse. Furthermore, if the decision can be placed in suspense, it may not be so necessary after all. Such a refusal, therefore, opens the possibility that the world is not so serious.

<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science*, p. 74.

<sup>103</sup> From *Ecce Homo*, pp 56-60: 'One error after another is calmly laid on ice, the ideal is not refuted—it *freezes*... Here for example "the genius" freezes; on the next corner "the saint" freezes; "the hero" freezes into a thick icicle'.

## chapter three

### The blind poet

*In this chapter we will examine the other aspect of a serious world, that characterised by the demands of the necessity of questioning, such as it is appears in the notion of a blind poet.*

#### Is there anybody out there?

Someone might wish to point out that the foregoing chapter fails to significantly address an important characteristic of tragic heroic artists: namely, that they are models, that their deeds are held up for imitation by others. As a model, a tragic heroic artist is not simply a figure of disjunction, but also of continuation. Furthermore, such continuation does not simply extend into the future, it also reaches into the past; any innovation that an artist arrives at only has meaning in relation to some tradition or culture or society. In the case of Hölderlin, for instance, Heidegger takes great care to say that the poet lies '*in der griechisch-deutschen Sendung*'.<sup>1</sup> But what, then, is the nature of this relation of an artist to the art and artists which precede him? And subsequently, to that and those which follow? We would like to simply look for relations of influence and imitation; however, this is not possible. On the one hand, and as we have seen, the problem of *slavish* imitation complicates any question of legacy. And on the other, and even more disconcertingly, if a tragic heroic artist is only imitating those who come before him, then there is nothing disjunctive in his deeds. As such, if it is imitation which accounts for the historical relation between artists, it must be of a particular sort, it must be a *missing imitation*. One way of approaching such a notion is to first imagine its opposite, a supra-sensorial perspective which would be so powerful as to be able to see or hear all of that which had occurred in art up until then, alongside the capacity to render what had been perceived—in other words, the ability to imitate art as a whole. What, then, would be the product of this stupendous, godlike power? An enormous *pastiche*. Ironically enough, then, for imitation to be innovative, there must be something *missing*. There must be something lacking in the tradition of art itself, in the perception of it by the

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 151.

artist, or in his ability to render what he perceives. Moreover, this lack must be excessive: it cannot, for example, be simply that he is lacking learnable technical skills; it must be, as Adorno says, that the insufficiency of an artist's production is 'historically imperative'.<sup>2</sup> Only with such a blind spot is there an opening for innovation, a chance for the kind of missing imitation, which avoids both slavish copying and simple pastiche.<sup>3</sup>

But how or why does such blindness arise? In that innovation is not considered a daily event, such blinding must be out of the ordinary. Indeed what marks a blind spot is precisely its unique particularity. If general notions are round holes, it is always eccentrically shaped. And whereas, we can predict the appearance of regular shapes, a blind spot's particular contour can never be calculated or planned for. This is its resistive force. It resists, because its 'deficiency', its eccentricity, is not due to the weakening or absence of some positive trait—its blindness is certainly *not* a loss of sight—but rather the absence of the kind of generalizability that would identify it *as* a deficiency. In fact, if a blind spot is in any way deficient it is in its *lack of generality*. It lacks the general, conceptual framework which would allow us to explain why and how it arises. As such, the only way to talk about a blind spot is to discuss its already achieved particularity as it is found in instances of it.<sup>4</sup>

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Perhaps one of the most evocative of these instances lies in Heidegger's "'Homecoming / To Kindred Ones'" from 1943. Heidegger reads this essay as a meditation on the possibility of poetic homecoming, that is of poetically naming what it means to be at home. In this meditation, he appeals to the figure of the 'mourning

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<sup>2</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 39. We have cited this passage in chapter one as somewhere Adorno argues that such insufficiency is necessary for the new, and constitutes the seriousness of art.

<sup>3</sup> One might recognize in this notion Derrida's understanding of imitation as developed in 'La Pharmacie de Platon': 'L'imitation ne répond à son essence, n'est ce qu'elle est—imitation—qu'en étant en quelque point fautive ou plutôt en défaut' (*La dissémination*, p. 160).

<sup>4</sup> Which instance we choose to start off with—and we will begin with Heidegger—will obviously have a significant impact upon what we say, and as a consequence it would seem reasonable to make the demand that the choice be defended. However, this is precisely what is not possible, because such a defence would require the very general, conceptual framework denied by the notion of a blind spot.

poet', who pines for the 'fatherland' by searching for the 'naming word' that might identify it. What interests us about this 'mourning poet' is that he is a 'blind poet'.<sup>5</sup>:

'The naming word is missing for He who is himself and dwells in the holy, for He who says and in saying lets himself appear. This is why poetic "singing"... still remains a song without words—"lyre music" [*Saitenspiel*]. To be sure, the player's "song" follows the high one everywhere. The "soul" of the singer does indeed glance into the brightness, but the singer does not see the high one himself. The singer is blind'.<sup>6</sup>

What is distinctive about the blind poet is his search for the 'naming word', and what is distinctive about this word is the fact that it is missing. And what we can say about this conjunction of a blind poet and the lack of a naming word is that it implicates the latter in an event, whereby the blind poet *becomes* the blind poet.<sup>7</sup> But this is already to say a great deal, because what this event implies is that whatever the relation between the poet and the naming word, this relation is not an eternal one: something

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<sup>5</sup> Even the most distracted of readers will immediately notice that Heidegger does not, in fact, speak of a blind *poet*, but rather of a blind *singer*, though some translations do state 'poet'. Moreover, in that neither Adorno nor Nietzsche speaks specifically of a *poet*, it would be perfectly reasonable to question the term, 'blind poet'. My response to these observations is dissatisfactory to the extent that I propose the term as no more than an attempt to name a recurring notion of artistic blindness. Just the same, and as will be developed, the fact that such blindness appears as *figures* in the work of these thinkers is significant, and needs to be indicated by a name. Moreover, 'poet' allows for an allusion to Greek thought, which lies very near the surface in many of these writings.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, M. "Homecoming / To Kindred Ones", pp 45-6. Because I have made modifications to the translation, here is the original German: 'Wer Er selbst ist, der im Heiligen wohnt, das zu sagen und sagend ihn selbst erscheinen zu lassen, dafür fehlt das nennende Wort. Darum bleibt jetzt das dichtende "Singen", weil ihm das eigentliche, das nennende Wort fehlt, ein wortloses Lied—"ein Saitenspiel". Zwar folgt das "Lied" des spielenden Mannes überall dem Hohen. Die "Seele" des Sängers blickt zwar in die Heitere, aber der Sänger sieht nicht den Hohen selbst. Der Sänger ist blind'. (*Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, p. 27).

<sup>7</sup> Just a quick outline of possibilities: the 'naming word' is missing because the poet is blind. In this version of things He, 'who says and in saying lets himself appear', does indeed appear, but because the poet cannot see Him, the former misses the 'naming word'. This version of things is only interesting if we imagine that it is the excessive appearance of Him who first robs the poet of his sight. A similar logic would also allow us to reverse the sequence and say that the poet is blind because of the absence of the 'naming word', where it is His disappearance, rather than appearance, which first removes the poet's sight. A second, comparatively undramatic approach would be to note that the 'naming word' could never be missing unless someone were looking for it. However, if this looking is indeed what constitutes the missing, then this looking could be said to be blind; it is a looking which never sees what it is looking for. It would, however, beg the question of what started the poet in his looking, and would as such bring us back to the necessity of some sort of initiating event. A third reading of this passage returns to straightforward theatricality. Here it is only when the poet names Him, who 'lives in the heavens', that He will appear.

*happens* to make the poet blind, and it is only in this transformation that he becomes connected to the lack of a naming word. As such, even if 'for now' there is only 'poetising "singing"', his blindness implies that things could be otherwise.

Moreover, it is this transformative aspect of the blind poet, which indicates his filiality with the tragic heroic artist. Like the latter, the blind poet offers a hopeful song for the future, but unlike him, the poet does not make the demand that these hopes be realised. If one recalls, it is the demand for realisation that makes a tragic heroic artist a disappointment. The blind poet averts this fate by offering nothing but hopefulness. This may sound like a great advance upon the foibles of the tragic heroic artist, but if so, it is dearly bought. For when one says that the blind poet offers *nothing but hopefulness*, it is important to emphasize the *nothingness* of this hopefulness. In other words, the blind poet eliminates the problematic nature of realisation precisely by ensuring that nothing can ever be realised. Hope remains hope only as long as it is deferred; this is its irony, and it is the blind poet who sets this irony in motion.

He does so by means of a self-manifestation that recalls the heroic deed of the tragic heroic artist precisely by tracing its ironisation. Whereas, the tragic heroic deed cleaves time into a before and after, the blind poet's song manifests itself by means of an interminable, self-obsessive repetition which never even manages to catch up with its own moment. His search for the missing word is a search which doubles back to imprint its own looking—as its failure to find—upon itself. This failure guarantees the search will continue; however, and as we just indicated, its manifestation only sings of hope by operating its perpetual deferral. Only by missing hope is hope maintained, and thus, whereas the tragic heroic artist offers himself as a model for imitation, the blind poet eludes the aporias of mimesis by means of missing imitation. By doubling back in a search that is an example of its own searching, he breaks down the relation between original and copy at the core of tragic heroic mimesis. Rather than be a model or example, the blind poet sets exemplification itself in motion, endlessly doubling back upon itself as yet again its own example.

Since it is a description of this process of self-manifestation, of the poet's 'song without words', we might look for more clarification in Heidegger's notion of *Him*

'who says and in saying lets himself appear'. His self-manifestation occurs through speech, and as such opens the possibility of comparing His talking Himself *into* existence with the more banal case of someone talking *about* his existence. In the latter case, a person mirrors himself to the extent that his words offer an *adequate* depiction of his state of mind, regardless of the nature of their saying. In the case of Him, by contrast, self-manifestation follows directly and *necessarily* from saying. When someone talks about himself, his appearance might be a useful gauge as to the degree of correspondence between his words and state of mind; however, it offers no assurances since the appearance could just as easily be a mask or disguise. When He says, no such deception is possible. His appearance *must* correspond to His word since He will not appear without it. Furthermore, since in the case of someone talking about himself, saying is *not* appearing and is external to the relation between what is said and who says it, the words themselves can be retained and imitated in other contexts and by other people. Nothing of the sort is possible when saying *is* appearing. In fact, this constitutes the further necessity of His appearance: if He does *not* appear, all His saying will flow away like words lost to the wind. Therefore, what distinguishes the blind poet's song is its dual necessity, as both consequence and origin of its own appearance. It is the only possible example of itself, and thus can never fall victim to the contingencies of realisation, as does the exemplarity of the tragic hero.

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To be its own example, a blind poet's song marks itself with its saying, and in marking, appears. It is this marking which constitutes its missing imitation. It is missing because it is always excessive—always missing its mark, if you will—always anticipating what will be said next, always lacking since awaiting the next mark. At the same time, because of its dynamism, this excessive lack is inimitable. It reveals the inadequacy of imitation of the adequate sort. If an attempt was made to imitate Him, then all we would have is a retrospective picture as to what was said, or to use Heidegger's distinction, *Historie* not *Geschichte*. A blind poet's song is *Geschichte*, because he does not try to imitate adequately; he sings searchingly and in singing blinds himself. In this way, his blindness marks the dual necessity of his singing. On the one hand, it guarantees the hopes he sings. His blindness bars him from seeing



who we are today, and therefore from the temptation of suiting his song to who we *seem* to be; he is undeceived by appearance, and thus cannot deceive us in turn. On the other, his *blinding* is necessary, since it is what sustains our hopes. His insight into our hopes is retained by his blinding such that it cannot be replaced by any sight.

Such a situation is as tragic as it is ironic, and it is for this reason that we cannot be misled by the blind poet's '*Saitenspiel*' into believing that his song is not serious. The blind poet is as central to the notion of a serious world as the tragic heroic artist. His saying is a persistent and necessary questioning driven forward by the hope that the world is indeed susceptible to questioning, a hope whose main solace is that it does not fall silent.

### A 'figure' of irony

Just the same, there is something in the notion of a blind man wandering around singing at the clouds which demands our scepticism. In other words, rather than be a philosopheme, doesn't a blind poet seem more nearly a loony, the kind of person we might try to avoid in the streets? What distinguishes a blind poet is his particularity, his unique insight, but this can also be said of the loony. As such, we must differentiate a blind poet from such a clown, and ask what makes the former seem compelling, and the latter deranged.

To this end, we might start by considering the role of irony in our thinking. For instance, we have said that a blind poet is a 'figure of irony', but the very idea that there could be such a 'figure' is highly doubtful. Such a 'figure' would always remain in inverted commas, because the essential difficulty with irony—and the one this chapter is most concerned with—is precisely that it resists coalescing into anything so generalizable as a figure or concept. That said, there is at least one philosopher who explicitly ignores these inverted commas and presents a figure of irony in the flesh, so to speak. The philosopher is Søren Kierkegaard, and the figure

is Socrates.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the thesis of *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates* is quite simply that 'Socrates' existence is irony'.<sup>9</sup> What this means is that in Socrates a world historical moment is reached where 'one development ends and a new development begins'.<sup>10</sup> Such a role puts Socrates in direct relation with the tragic hero. For Kierkegaard, if the tragic hero primarily 'fights for the new', the ironist ensures that the old is 'displaced and seen in all its imperfections'.<sup>11</sup> Because of his engagement in bringing about the new, 'the ironist is in one sense prophetic'; 'he constantly points to something future'.<sup>12</sup> Just the same, his pointed witticisms remain something '*a poétiser*'—to refer to the notion of *Witz* developed by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *L'absolu littéraire*<sup>13</sup>—because he is blind to the very future he ushers in. Thus and in another sense, '[h]is position and situation are... the opposite of the prophetic'; '[t]hat which shall come is hidden from him, concealed behind his back'.<sup>14</sup>

Such a posture once again resembles that of a clown, who entertains us by blindly backing into his own comic undoing. However, it is important to see these comedic histrionics<sup>15</sup> first and foremost as indicators of irony's ambivalent relation to seriousness. Kierkegaard observes that linguistic irony 'is not serious about its seriousness',<sup>16</sup> and such a paradoxical statement could be made about irony more generally. Irony reveals what is ridiculous about taking seriously, and by the same token is serious in its lack of seriousness. Irony is, as Alexander García Düttmann puts it, 'a construction of seriousness'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Possibly another example can be found in Nietzsche's treatment of Socrates in *The Twilight of the Idols*, though it must be noted that Nietzsche fundamentally presents the ancient Greek as a dialectician rather than as an ironist.

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234: The full sentence reads quite directly: 'In Socrates one development ends and a new development begins'.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>13</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe and Nancy, Jean-Luc. *L'Absolu Littéraire*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin notes the theatrical proclivities of irony in his text 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism': 'Among all the literary forms, dramatic form can be ironized to the greatest extent and in the most impressive way, because it contains the highest measure of the power of illusion and thereby can receive irony into itself to a high degree without disintegrating' (p. 163).

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Irony*, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> Düttmann, Alexander García. 'Odd Moves. Übertreibung und Ironie', p. 74.

One of the things that this construction reveals, moreover, is once again, the danger of taking *too* seriously. In the previous chapter we related this to the disappointment meted out by a tragic heroic artist. Such a disappointment arises because taking seriously is always ridiculous, always blind to what it takes seriously. As Simon Critchley puts it in his examination of a possible displacement of the tragic-heroic paradigm, 'one might say [that] the problem with the tragic-heroic paradigm is that it is not tragic enough and that only comedy is truly tragic'.<sup>18</sup> This irony shows up in philosophy to the extent that a philosopher's inherent inability to question what he is taking seriously makes him risk taking it too seriously. By his very seriousness, he himself risks being made into clown, of being seduced—and subsequently betrayed—by his own words. According to Adorno, it is for this reason that a philosopher is always in need of a corrective, a non-serious redressing, which allows him the necessary 'clownish traits' without, for that, making him into a clown:

'As a corrective to the total rule of method, philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise... The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He cannot deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious'.<sup>19</sup>

An 'un-naïve thinker', then, ironises, always thinks according to an *as if*, and namely an *as if* of mastery. He must do so because claiming his subject matter *as* mastered would be to deny its dialectic and potential for development, in other words, to tragically doom it to a premature grave.

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<sup>18</sup> Critchley, Simon. 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', p. 114. An interesting aspect of this comment is that it would seem to weaken the very hypothesis Critchley is trying to advance, indicating the impossibility of truly displacing the tragic-heroic paradigm with comedy—or as he thinks of it, with a certain version of laughter. To put it in the language we are using here, comedy and laughter cannot displace the tragic-heroic because they share with it the same *serious world*. Lawrence J. Hatab points to such a condition when he says in his essay, 'Laughter in Nietzsche's Thought': 'If tragedy and comedy can each be called an affirmative response to negative limits, it would not be surprising that a boundary line between them is often hard to draw' (p. 72).

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 14.

## Of clowns and blind poets

But what does this have to do with blind poets? It is tempting to simply pair such un-naïve philosophy with artistic blindness in such a way as to form a couple analogous to that of the tragic heroic artist and philosopher sidekick; however, this is not possible. For to do so would be to fall into the very ‘irony of irony’ identified by Schlegel, and to forget the ironies of our own philosophical efforts. To call anyone an ironist is to invite upon oneself the irony that it ‘takes one to know one’. In this rhetorically charged atmosphere, then, rather than call Adorno an ironist, we should probably simply note that Adorno’s description of ‘un-naïve thinking’ bears striking resemblance to the artistic blindness he attributes to Schönberg. And this raises the question of what it means when an ‘un-naïve’ philosopher acclaims one artist as a blind poet, only to denounce another as a clown, as Adorno does in his opposition of Schönberg and Stravinsky in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*:

‘Everything depends, however, upon whether this music, by its attitude, advertises this authenticity as something which it has already attained, or whether—with closed eyes, as it were—it surrenders itself to the demands of the entire matter in the hope of mastering it... Schönberg’s school obeys without excuses the reality of a perfected nominalism in composition’.<sup>20</sup>

Like the ‘un-naïve thinker’, the composer of a ‘perfected nominalism’, is a composer who acknowledges any claimed mastery as premature, and instead plunges himself into the unknown of the *as if*. Whereas Schönberg approaches authenticity *as if* it were something achievable, and thus with hope, Stravinsky presents it *as achieved*. As such, if Schönberg is a blind poet, Stravinsky is a clown. That is, the latter is a clown who ‘assures [the listener] that [music] is not to be taken seriously’, whose music ‘manifests clear traits of such conciliation, reminiscent of the master of ceremonies, who tells jokes to reconcile his audience with whatever else strikes them squarely and directly’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp 212-13 (my emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157 (footnote 18).

Nevertheless, the difference that would separate Stravinsky as clown from Schönberg as blind poet is slight, as inappreciable as the words 'as if' themselves. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, it is not really evident that Schönberg's *closed eyes* submit to the *open-ended* nature of the 'as if'. It would seem that if he can already obey 'the *reality* of a perfected nominalism', then the hope in question is not too much in doubt, and as such, Schönberg's approach to composition is more nearly to treat it *as* master-able than *as if* master-able. On the other hand, it is quite possible that it is precisely Stravinsky's much maligned 'attitude', which more nearly observes an *as if* of mastery. According to Adorno, one can recognize 'by its attitude' the signs of an attempt by Stravinsky's music to arrest the dialectic of new music and claim mastery, not *as if* achieved, but *as* achieved. However, if we, then, enquire into the nature of this 'attitude', we find out that it is precisely such as would erode the kind of certainty Adorno wants to attribute to it. What Adorno accuses Stravinsky of doing is writing 'music against music',<sup>22</sup> that is to say of parodying music. And since parody is just as readily self-parody, it is much more a *questioning* of fixed attitude than any attitude of its own. In fact, one might say that as regards mastery, parody is more inclined to place it in doubt than the kind of blindness attributed to Schönberg. At the very least, Stravinsky's parodying fully observes the 'if' of *as if*.

But why does Adorno not see it this way? Why is he so critical of Stravinsky's parody and humour? The answer seems to be that the kind of hope he imagines in Schönberg as blind poet would be threatened if it were possible to consider Stravinsky, the parodist, a blind poet as well. As Christoph Menke puts it—noting that Adorno's 'criterion of progress is, at the very least, ambiguous'— '[w]hat Adorno criticizes in the name of aesthetic progress as regressive can also base its claim to aesthetically stringent experienceability on a *different* conception of the genuine progress of musical rationalization'.<sup>23</sup> Resisting this *different* conception, Adorno invokes a criterion of dynamism, denouncing Stravinsky's music as *static*; however, such an accusation itself depends upon a very significant *state*-ment, or more to the point, fixing of the essence of music. Adorno's statement is that '[a]s a temporal art, music is bound to *the fact* of succession and is hence *as irreversible* as

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<sup>22</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait', p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> Menke, Christoph. *The Sovereignty of Art*, p. 135.

time itself'.<sup>24</sup> His *claim*, then, is that music is essentially historical, and this does not simply mean that it exists *in* history, but more nearly that it *is* history, that it is sedimented history. According to Krzysztof Ziarek, this is a claim Adorno shares with Heidegger: 'They both see art in terms of history: not as containing universal or unchangeable truth but as figuring a happening of historical truth'.<sup>25</sup> It is only based on this claim that Adorno's criticism of Stravinsky makes any sense, because only if music is *necessarily* and *irreversibly* a development of history, would music that is supposedly static, and even backward-looking, be such an affront. Only under such constraints would it be 'music that has been stifled'.<sup>26</sup>

A revealing connection, furthermore, can be made between the position Adorno claims Stravinsky is maintaining and Nietzsche's notion of a '*suprahistorical* standpoint'. He, who occupies such a 'standpoint',<sup>27</sup> is said to 'have recognized the single condition of all events: that blindness and injustice dwelling in the soul of those who act. From that point onward he would be cured of taking history overly seriously'.<sup>28</sup> Such a 'standpoint', of course, is impossible—Nietzsche himself indicates as much by presenting it entirely in conditional language—and anyone who would claim to occupy it would be as offensive and ludicrous as Stravinsky the parodist seems to be for Adorno. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the challenge such a standpoint throws out: such a 'standpoint' is impossible, yes—and according to Nietzsche, even nauseating<sup>29</sup>—but there is still some advantage in thinking *as if* one could occupy it. The benefit of this *as if* is that it allows us to *question history*, to question *its* seriousness, to ask critically 'Why and to what purpose people live?'<sup>30</sup> In other words, it allows us to question our hopes for the

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150 (my emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> Ziarek, Krzysztof. 'Radical Art', p. 342.

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait', p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> The inverted commas are necessary because, of course, no such standpoint is possible. In fact, it might be related to 'the paradoxical point of indifference at which irony and seriousness become indistinguishable' ('Odd Moves', p. 85) as it is understood by Alexander García Düttmann in his notion of irony as a 'construction of seriousness'. The attempt to occupy such an impossible position leads either to a subordination of seriousness to irony or the reverse, and the artificial arrestation of their dialectic.

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> As Nietzsche puts it, 'given the infinite superabundance of events, how could he [i.e. the suprahistorical thinker] possibly avoid being satiated, oversatiated, indeed, even nauseated!' (p. 94). Nietzsche's own dismissal of suprahistoricity would seem to belie our reasons for being interested in it, and yet nevertheless, we are doing no more than Nietzsche himself, who considers it in detail before denouncing it.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

future. For there is just as much risk that we take too seriously *our hopes* as anything else, and in the case of Adorno, it may indeed be that he takes too seriously the hope implied by music as history, the hope that its development points to utopia, even if only negatively.

Therefore, what Adorno fails to see in his attack on Stravinsky—or more probably, what he does see, but resists—is that the innovation he so desires in music is just as much dependent on parody à la Stravinsky as seriousness à la Schönberg, that the new must ironise itself and question its own hopefulness to ever have any hope.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, before we further address this duality, we should indicate what it is that makes the ironist blind. For this is where Adorno's suspicions about Stravinsky appear the most justified. When Adorno evocatively says that the latter's music 'takes the side of those who laugh',<sup>32</sup> what he means is that Stravinsky's music sides with the oppressors, that it is a hopeless reaffirmation of power relations, in which laughter is 'the echo of power as something inescapable'.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of how far one is willing to follow Adorno in this critique, one must acknowledge his insight into the inherent conservatism of parody. In order to function, parody takes seriously precisely that which it makes fun of. As a result, and appropriately enough *ironically*, it preserves precisely that which it attacks. This, one might say, is the blindness of parody. Such blindness appears in Nietzsche's notion of a 'suprahistorical standpoint' to the extent that for it 'the world is complete and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment'.<sup>34</sup> A mockery of history by history is blind to change, and as such even more exposed to history than ever. For Adorno, for whom music is essentially historical, this blindness is a-musical. For Nietzsche, however, this blindness can be that of a blind poet.

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<sup>31</sup> One even has reason to speculate that the very reason Adorno speaks about his own philosophy being 'un-naïve' is precisely that he assigns to philosophy this ironic role. Such a reading would also go some distance in explaining Adorno's blindness to Stravinsky. Nevertheless, it would also risk the 'irony of irony' mentioned above. By talking of a 'figure of irony', as forced as this can be, we at least we avoid the more dangerous path of structurally identifying irony with individual philosophers and artists.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 144.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 140.

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, F. 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', p. 94.

## Dual blindness

What turning to Nietzsche makes one realise is that by opposing Schönberg to Stravinsky—the former’s seriousness to the latter’s parody—Adorno masks the degree to which the former’s seriousness is also ironic. In fact, its very seriousness derives from its ironic character. When Schönberg writes ‘serious music’, he is writing music that treats all former composition as just so much fodder for new music. Everything older composers considered binding rules, Schönberg treats as exceptions, as ‘exhausted special circumstances’.<sup>35</sup> Such manipulations of the ‘tradition’—such playful exposure of it *as a tradition*—are ironic; that is, one can only refuse the tradition if one is already, and in all seriousness, a part of it.

There are, therefore, really two modes of being a blind poet: one whose blindness is the blindness of a dreamer who neglects the limits of the known world in favour of a leap into the unknown, and another whose blindness is that of the sceptic who eschews the merely possible in favour of critical engagement with the totality of the known. Schönberg’s ‘closed eyes’ are the blindness to the known rules of music that allow him to forge ahead in the creation of new music; whereas Stravinsky’s parody is his conscious grasp of the tradition of music as a whole, a critical engagement which, nevertheless, blinds him to the way in which this very grasp opens up new possibilities that are always, and ironically, just beyond its reach.<sup>36</sup> As it is, however, because Adorno tends to attribute the productive aspects of both of these roles to Schönberg, and to deny Stravinsky the least bit of ground, he does not allow us to fully investigate this duality.

In Nietzsche, by contrast, both modes of being a blind poet find their voice. We encounter a Schönbergian version in a ‘useful blindness’ that makes action possible. For Nietzsche of *The Gay Science*, this blindness to what is known is a ‘faith in oneself’ that blinds ‘the few’ who are ‘endowed’ with it to the ‘skeptic inside them’.

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<sup>35</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> If Adorno in any way develops Stravinsky’s role in new music in terms of artistic blindness as we understand it here, it is by describing Stravinsky’s music as mechanical and lifeless. A memorable phrase to this effect, and one that also inadvertently indicates the parodist’s broad access to known materials and forms, is Adorno’s quip that ‘the basic phenomenon in the spiritual movement perfected by Stravinsky is his substitution of the hand organ for the Bach organ’. (*The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 145).



In fact, '[e]verything good, fine, or great they do is first of all an argument against' this scepticism. It is, in fact, their 'genius'.<sup>37</sup> Like Schönberg, this sort of blind poet forges ahead and creates new things by positioning himself in opposition to scepticism. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the reverse situation holds for a sceptical/parodic sort of blind poet.

We find the latter in the preface to *Human, All Too Human*. There Nietzsche addresses critics who label his writings 'a School for Suspicion', acknowledging that indeed he does not believe 'that anyone has ever looked into the world with such deep suspicion, and not only as an occasional devil's advocate, but every bit as much, to speak theologically, as an enemy and challenger of God'.<sup>38</sup> By this acknowledgement he asserts his writings as the work of a sceptic and ironist, someone who goads our ignorance just as did Socrates as the gadfly of ancient Athens. But what is interesting about this assertion is not that a philosopher can be an ironist—the case of Socrates is the prototypical example—but that for Nietzsche this sort of philosopher must also be an artist. For what he says is 'often I tried to take shelter somewhere, to recover from myself, as if to forget myself entirely for a time'.<sup>39</sup> In these moments Nietzsche becomes blind to himself and indulges in the 'shared blindness' of 'repose in a trusted friendship'.<sup>40</sup> But very significantly, if he can not find such an alliance, he has 'to gain it by force artificially, to counterfeit it, or create it poetically'; these alliances, in other words, are instances of 'some sort of "art"', by which he deliberately and wilfully overlooks the blind faith of others.<sup>41</sup> What a sceptical blind poet creates, therefore, is not anything tangible or even conceptual, but rather a relation that couples him with the faithful, projective action of a blind poet such as Wagner, whose

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science*, p. 229. The relevant part of fragment 284, entitled 'Faith in oneself', reads as follows: 'Few people have faith in themselves. Of those few, some are endowed with it as with a useful blindness or a partial eclipse of their spirit (what would they behold if they could see to the bottom of themselves!), while the rest have to acquire it. Everything good, fine, or great they do is first of all an argument against the sceptic inside them. They have to convince or persuade *him*, and that almost requires genius'.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Human, All Too Human*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 4-5. The latter phrase runs as follows, and it should be read with an eye to the repeated visual imagery: 'Perhaps one could accuse me in this regard of some sort of "art," various sorts of finer counterfeiting: for example, that I had deliberately closed my eyes to Schopenhauer's blind will to morality, at a time when I was already clear-sighted enough about morality; similarly, that I had deceived myself about Richard Wagner's incurable romanticism, as if it were a beginning and not an end...'

‘Wagnerian perspective’, or inwardly turning gaze, makes him blind to known limits, and thus able to achieve the seemingly impossible.<sup>42</sup>

What the self-referential nature of the sceptical blind poet means—the fact that he points to his own need for the other sort of blind poet, the faithful, active producer of works, as well as the fact that his very creativity stems from his ability to provide himself with this needed companionship—what this means is that there is an asymmetry between the two sorts of blindness. In other words, even though each mode of being a blind poet is dependent upon its complement, a sceptical blind poet is superiorly endowed with the ability to acknowledge this dependence and fulfil his needs by himself. For this reason, it is possible to imagine an ironic artist able to respond to the imperatives of both sorts of blindness. At least, this seems to be Nietzsche’s thought when he speaks in *On the Genealogy of Morals* of an artist (namely, Wagner) who ‘is capable of *laughing* at himself’.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, such an artist is a sceptic who is able to question ‘ascetic ideals’, because he is blind to the possibility of his soul’s eternal damnation, such as is promised by ‘the whole horror of earthly seriousness and misery as it has existed from time immemorial’.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, he is a productive artist with the faith needed to create works of art. His ability to laugh at himself is his blindness to the kind of self-doubt that plagues lesser mortals. However, there are two things that we might note about this kind of dual blindness in an artist. The first has implications for his work. He is seemingly only capable of parody, and as such his work becomes exposed to the question Nietzsche poses here with regard to *Parsifal*: namely, whether it is ‘meant as a joke’.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, and this is the second point, if an artist is only capable of parody doesn’t this have implications for the artist himself? Doesn’t his relation to himself come to resemble that of self-parody, what Sander L. Gilman recognizes as parody’s role as ‘a means of introspection’, whereby an artist is able to engage in ‘self-examination’ and ‘self-abnegation’?<sup>46</sup> Such a contradictory combination of personal insight and the

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<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, F. ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’, p. 262. This is another point of contact between the blind poet and the tragic heroic artist. Both are wedded to an evenementality, which endows them with a unique perspective.

<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* We might note, in fact, that both Nietzsche and Heidegger use the same term to describe such work: ‘satyr play’.

<sup>46</sup> Gilman, Sander L. ‘*Incipit parodia*: The Function of Parody in the Lyrical Poetry of Friedrich Nietzsche’, p. 67.

wilful refusal of what this insight reveals culminates in a moment of self-overcoming by which the artist achieves 'the ultimate, highest artistic freedom, artistic transcendence'.<sup>47</sup> But in this transcendent moment when an artist is 'capable of *laughing* at himself' is he anything but his own laughter? As a 'satyr play', can *Parsifal* be anything other than an 'epilogue', the 'fitting and worthy way' in which 'the tragedian Wagner wanted to take his leave of us, of himself, above all, of *tragedy*'? In other words, it would seem that the only way a tragedian can ever take leave of tragedy is for him to become its last tragic victim. Such a dissolution brings out the full irony of the artist as blind poet.<sup>48</sup>

It also, of course, brings out its seriousness. For even if a blind poet is a figure of irony, and thus of parody and even laughter, his importance lies precisely in the seriousness of his non-seriousness. On the one hand, a blind poet demands to be taken entirely seriously, to be seen as someone whose blindness constitutes a faith in himself that allows him to project into the future. On the other, a blind poet must *not* be taken seriously, because if he is, he will be incapable of blinding himself to himself and achieving the kind of self-overcoming his projection demands. A blind poet, in other words, can only be understood with regard to a dual necessity: in order to question the world, he must *not* question himself, but in order to transform the world, it is necessary that he does. Regardless of his mode (as either faithful or sceptical) a blind poet questions, and it is according to this necessity of questioning that he stands at the heart of a serious world.

### Struck blind

As might have been noted, an equivocation is sneaking into this chapter between, on the one hand, describing a blind poet as an attitude or mode, and on the other, calling him a figure. In many ways, it would be better to only do the former, and yet the only reason we speak of blind poets at all is that they explicitly appear *as figures* in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno. It is our next task to understand this

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Conway identifies this irony as Nietzsche's *Versucherkunst*, his art of both experimentation (*Versuch*) and temptation (*Versuchung*). According to it, Wagner must tempt (*versucht*) tragic fate in order to attempt (*versuchen*) to parody 'ascetic ideals'.

appearance. To do so we might consider one of the most famous appearances—in fact, perhaps even the *first* appearance—of a blind poet.

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Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' plays on the notion of blindness. The poor prisoner who is 'forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light;... [who] would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to see'<sup>49</sup> is a blind poet. As in the case of other blind poets, he is a parodic figure whom others 'would laugh at', saying 'that he had gone up only to come back with his sight ruined'.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, he is a creative figure in that he is instrumental to the founding and preservation of the Republic. As such and furthermore, then, his blindness is dual: first, it is the blindness of a prisoner just released, unable to distinguish the reality of the images he was accustomed to; and second, it is the blindness of a returned prisoner, whose sight has been overwhelmed by all that he has seen. What Plato's argument in favour of the Republic depends upon is that a privilege is accorded the latter blindness, that rather than 'laugh thoughtlessly' at it, that we would be better to take it seriously.<sup>51</sup>

The problem, of course, is that in order to take it seriously, we must be able to distinguish it from the prisoner's first blindness, his blindness when first released. We *could* differentiate these two blindnesses by contrasting the ability to see that they each correspond to. According to this approach, the task would be to differentiate an early, inferior sight, which can only observe shadows, from a later, profound *insight*, which can gaze upon the sun. But this is exactly what Plato does not do. Instead he insists upon the essential sameness of these two capacities to see.<sup>52</sup> Rather what

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<sup>49</sup> Plato. *The Republic of Plato*, p. 229.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232: The relevant parts of this passage read as follows: 'a sensible man will remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways—by a change from light to darkness or from darkness to light; and he will recognise that the same thing happens to the soul. When he sees it troubled and unable to discern anything clearly, instead of laughing thoughtlessly, he will ask whether, coming from a brighter existence, its unaccustomed vision is obscured by the darkness...or whether, emerging from the depths of ignorance, it is dazzled by excess of light. If so, he will rather feel sorry for it; or, if he were inclined to laugh, that would be less ridiculous than to laugh at the soul which has come down from the light'.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* In fact, what he says is that what distinguishes them is only a matter of the eye being 'turned the way it ought to be'. His point is that learning does not bring sight to the blind, but rather accesses a

distinguishes the blindness of the recently released prisoner from that of the returned prisoner is precisely that the latter has *returned*. In other words, what distinguishes the *returned* prisoner's insightful blindness is the *act of returning* itself.

This is possible, because Plato establishes the Cave and its environs as a site of perfect visibility. As if caught between two mirrors, the Cave spins out endless reflections—shadows reflect objects, the interior of the Cave reflects its exterior, sunlight the sun itself—and this play of reflections means that no darkness or invisibility escapes the endless play of light. As such, nothing is hidden from he who looks. And the returned prisoner is he who has looked. Because of his round trip, the returned prisoner has seen everything... twice!... and thus can see the reflections in the Cave *as the reflections they are*. His blindness is an *insight*, a supplement that allows his sight to reflect upon itself. If compared with fellow prisoners, the returned prisoner sees before he sees; he has a (in)sight that precedes sight.

Moreover, this is not simply a personal revelation for the returned prisoner. Because he has returned, he is now in a position to educate others. Significantly, what he teaches is not as much a recounting of what he has *seen*—this would be to propagate yet more reflections—but more nearly to account for what *is* and *is not to be seen*. In other words, the returned prisoner's blindness turns visual receptivity into a performative act that points to its own seeing, and thus *shows* what *should be seen*. The returned prisoner's blindness may indeed be his *inability* to take reflections for objects, but it is also his *ability* to show that they are reflections, and to point to the objects that cast them. It is this pedagogical skill that makes the blind poet the first citizen of the Republic.

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But—as I am sure many are dying to ask—how is it reasonable to call this first citizen, blind as he may be, a poet? The answer to this question lies in the violent event hidden in the seemingly leisurely excursion of the Platonic prisoner. However,

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capacity everyone already has: 'education is not what it is said to be by some, who profess to put knowledge into a soul which does not possess it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes. On the contrary,...the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with'.

in order to recognize it, we need the help of Heidegger's version of the originary poet. In the latter's writings and lectures, Hölderlin is in various ways described as a first citizen; he is the one who 'comes home beforehand',<sup>53</sup> and who 'establishes' the grounds for *das Vaterland*. And very much like the first citizen of the Republic, he is said to be blinded by what he has seen. This blinding is due to the necessity of the poetic vocation, to the fact that "a sign is needed", and that 'the sign can only be the name for the poet'.<sup>54</sup>

'The poet, as poet, is the one who points, thus something that shows, and is thereby a "sign"—not a thing-like sign, not some sign-thing, which is what we mistakenly take to be the specific nature proper to a "sign". The poet is a sign that has a "soul" in which the thoughts of spirit quietly end: a sign to which a "mind" is appropriate, in which it bears the stars of the heavens. The showing is of such a kind as to first let appear that which is to be shown. Yet such a sign can, in saying, let appear that which is to be said only because it has before this already been shone upon by that which thus appears as what is to be poeticized. *This sign must therefore be struck and blinded in the face of the "fire"*. This is why it is initially unable to find the word, so that it seems as though this showing had lost its tongue'.<sup>55</sup>

As in Plato, the concern is with a showing, and more specifically with what is 'to be shown'. Moreover, access to this showing is clearly marked as an event, whereby the poet is 'struck and blinded in the face of the "fire"'. And our question is whether such an event, such a moment in which the poet is struck blind, also plays into Plato's tale of the returning prisoner. It would be tempting to take the moment the freed prisoner

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<sup>53</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymn 'Andenken'*, p. 167: 'Der Dichter ist als einziger zuvor heimgekommen in das Eigene...'

<sup>54</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, p. 150. The first citation is from line 51 of the poem by Hölderlin. The argumentation that leads up to this statement relates to the need for demi-gods, for in-between beings, between gods and men, something we should recognize from the lectures on 'Germanien' and 'Der Rhein', and elsewhere. The difference here is that Heidegger unambiguously assimilates the poet with the demi-gods, saying that Hölderlin comprehends 'the demi-god as the essence of the poet'.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151 (my emphasis).

is 'able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature'<sup>56</sup> as constitutive of this event; however, this would miss an essential aspect of a blind poet's blinding.

That is to say, what makes the blinding of a blind poet an event is not really the blinding itself, but the relationship this blinding establishes with regard to what is proper and improper. In other words, to the extent that the poet's blinding is the appearance of an ability to show, it is also a decisive differentiation between what is to be shown and what is *not* to be shown, that is, between what is proper and improper. In Heidegger, this corresponds with the blind poet's role as a sign. As a sign, his *Zeigen-können*, his ability to show, allows 'the belonging to one another of human beings and gods' to first attain 'the fortune of appearing'.<sup>57</sup> His showing decides the proper relation between human beings and gods, 'the becoming homely of human beings as historical'.<sup>58</sup> It thereby excludes any improper, ahistorical understanding of the world. Because of his blinding, because of this event in which he is 'shone upon by that which thus appears as what is to be poeticized', the blind poet comes to see in advance of any sight. Blind, he 'bears the "world" in [his] mind'.<sup>59</sup>

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If we now return to Plato, we have a better basis for recognizing the event at work in his account of the Cave. It may indeed be that it is the image of the Platonic sun that corresponds most closely to the 'world' that Hölderlin bears in his mind, and yet this image languishes as long as it resides only in the mind of the freed prisoner. He too must activate his *Zeigen-können*, and instruct others. And to do this, he must return to the Cave. However, as Plato notes, there is every reason to expect that once he has gazed upon the sun, the freed prisoner would 'endure anything rather than go back to his old beliefs and live in the old way'<sup>60</sup> inside the Cave. As a result, therefore, 'compulsion' must be brought 'to bear upon the noblest natures', and once they have climbed 'the ascent to the vision of Goodness', they must 'by persuasion or

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<sup>56</sup> Plato. *The Republic of Plato*, p. 230.

<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'*, p. 153.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>60</sup> Plato. *The Republic of Plato*, p. 230.

constraint' be returned to the Cave in order to 'watch over and care for the other citizens'.<sup>61</sup> It is this *compulsion* that marks the event of the Republic.

But where does this compulsion come from? Once the Republic is up and running, it can be the role of teachers to cajole candidate philosopher-kings into participation—because the latter will have been educated for their country's sake, they will be duty bound 'to be like leaders and king-bees in a hive'.<sup>62</sup> But what about the first citizen, the blind poet? The founder of the Republic is not in his country's debt, and thus cannot be persuaded to return to the Cave on that basis. Just the same, this does not mean that he does not owe some credit to others for his innovation; his creation is not *ex nihilo*. Rather, to create the Republic, the first citizen imitates the self-educated of *other* states, those who discover the world outside the Cave on their own. However, unlike these 'self-sown plants' of other states, the first citizen of the Republic does not subsequently 'refuse to collaborate' in the affairs of his country and remain above ground in blissful contemplation of the sun.<sup>63</sup> As such, he imitates, but only incompletely; his imitation is a missing one. Furthermore, what is missed is precisely that which constitutes the proper identity of the Republic. Precisely by excluding the foreign practice of allowing the best educated to 'spend all their days in the pursuit of culture', the Republic establishes the rule of those 'least desirous of holding office': namely, philosophers.<sup>64</sup> The first of these philosopher-kings is unlike all those who follow him; though he must imitate as they do, he must also do so in such a way that his imitation fails. In this failure, he distinguishes what is proper from what is improper, 'life in our commonwealth' from the 'dream, as it is in most existing states, where men live fighting one another about shadows'.<sup>65</sup> This missing imitation is a creative act because it allows for the founding of the Republic; it is an ironic one because it takes a foreign practice as the basis for what is most properly one's own. It is a violent event because it forces upon the blind poet and his fellow philosopher-kings 'a worse life than they might have' had had they remained above ground.<sup>66</sup> It is not for nothing, in other words, that one says a blind poet is *struck* blind.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 233 and 234.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 233 and 234.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* This is actually a polemical moment within the 'Allegory'. Glaucon, quite reasonably concerned that this *just* Republic is to be founded upon injustice, questions Socrates at this point as to



## Out in the open

This violence is particularly notable since a blind poet is very often called upon as a guarantor of peace and stability. In fact, that is precisely what he is for Plato, who hails his return to the Cave as that which will ‘unite the citizens in harmony’, and ‘ensure the welfare of the commonwealth as a whole’.<sup>67</sup> But isn’t this the irony of such stability? That since it must be wrested from chaos—that since the foreign practice of self-education must be displaced from its origin in dysfunctional states—that stability always involves suppression, the violent exclusion of the destabilizing improper? Moreover, the violence doesn’t end with the establishment of a realm of harmony. In the case of the Republic, for instance, since the first citizen imitates a foreign practice, he carries impropriety right into the heart of the state. Because self-education is constitutive of the Republic, it lurks beneath the peaceful surface as a constant threat. If a ‘self-sown plant’ appears *within* the Republic, he can challenge the supremacy of the philosopher-kings. Moreover, this threat can never be eliminated. Even if the blind poet, the ‘firstling’ and apparent source of the threat, is expelled,<sup>68</sup> the irony of his missing imitation survives his individual fate. This is because all philosopher-kings are meant to imitate him, and yet not imitate him; they are all to be educated like him, but not self-educated like him. As such the Republic cannot escape what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe identifies as the ‘*double bind*’ of mimesis, the dual, contradictory demand, “‘Be like me’/”Don’t be like me”’.<sup>69</sup> Its own persistence as a haven of peace and stability requires that it betray its own promise by means of ever-vigilant suppression.

This irony shows up in the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno to the extent that they, like Plato, are in search of a haven, turning to art as if to a protector and

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whether it is fair to compel those who have seen the light to return to the Cave to rule. But Socrates, seemingly refusing to see the irony in his response, argues ‘that there will be no *real* injustice’ in such compulsion. Of course there won’t; *real* injustice will not spring into existence until the philosopher-kings return to the Cave and take their place in the Republic. In other words, the whole founding of the Republic depends upon this twist of irony, this metamorphosis of injustice into the basis for justice, of the *improper* into the basis for the *proper*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> This, in fact, is Plato’s response to the danger posed by the blind poet. We will discuss this episode from Book X in Part Two.

<sup>69</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. ‘La césure du spéculatif’ in *L’imitation des modernes*, p. 55 (‘double bind’ in English in original).

guardian. Nietzsche wants art to help him escape from 'his' seriousness; for Heidegger, poetry's 'harmless appearance' preserves and maintains the founding of 'our' history; and Adorno marvels at art's survival 'in the naked existence it contradicts and resists',<sup>70</sup> a survival that promises that things could be otherwise. The irony is that the protective power of art seems most threatened, not by what it is meant to ward against—not by the improper at its gates—but precisely by these thinkers' efforts to assure themselves of it. Every attempt made to freeze the oscillating movement of the 'double bind', and exclude its irony, ends in tragedy. Every time a blind poet is struck blind, the violence of the Republic reappears, and with it two threats which menace to completely undermine the hoped for peace and stability.

The first threat is that of irrelevance. As we indicated above as regards the Republic, when a poet is struck blind, he internalises the very violence that his blinding is meant to exclude. If for example, as in the case of the first citizen, he is meant to exclude the chaos of the improper, he can only do so by founding the proper on the basis of this very same chaotic foreignness. This necessary relation exposes the proper both to subversion from within and mockery from without. The subversion stems from the fact that the original event invites its own repetition. As we have seen with the Republic, Plato depends upon the chance of event of a prisoner discovering the world of Forms outside the Cave, but subversively invites this same chance right into the heart of his Republic when he ushers this prisoner back in as its first philosopher-king. The founding of the Republic, and the peace it is supposed to guarantee, is irrelevant if it cannot even guard itself against its own imitation, an imitation all the more likely to the extent that the Republic is a *model* state.<sup>71</sup>

However, this is not the only type of irrelevance that can befall a blind poet, because there is also the chance that changes external to the realm of peace he establishes will throw his achievement into doubt. For example, what happens to our assessment of the Republic if other states also achieve the kind of stability and peace it promises, but

<sup>70</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Is Art Lighthearted?', p. 248.

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Fynsk says something similar in criticism of Heidegger's search for the 'way to language', a search for the stillness and silence of language. Even though Heidegger tries to evade the repetitive aspect of language, its noise, as Fynsk points out, the original essence of language as 'noisy' means that we must 'start from the fact of broken silence and begin to dwell with noise', that is repetition. ('Noise at the Threshold', p. 117).

in a different manner? Won't its *proper* identity as a philosophical oligarchy seem all the more oppressive when it is placed beside peaceful egalitarian states rather than chaotic despotisms? Because what is proper to the Republic is formed on the basis of a particular reaction to a particular situation—that is, a particular ironisation upon a particular foreign impression—it is forever indexed to that original problematic and moment in time. That is to say, the Republic's achievement can become irrelevant simply by becoming out of date.

Such a risk of irrelevancy is evident in a formulation from *The Philosophy of Modern Music*. Adorno is searching for a way to understand the appearance of works of art in the world; how their objective form emerges out of and in opposition to the relentless 'horrors of history':

'[The work of art] assumes a tense position against the horrors of history. At one point it is insistent, at another it forgets. It relents and grows hard. It endures or it renounces itself, hoping to outwit its doom. The objectivity of art lies in the fixation of such moments. Works of art are similar to those childish grimaces which the striking of the clock causes to become permanently fixed'.<sup>72</sup>

The 'striking of the clock' that fixes the work of art's expression, its 'grimace', is very much like the moment in which a blind poet is struck blind. It is a moment that determines a work of art's stance toward the world. Like the blind poet, the grimacing work of art will not relax its posture and reconsider its attitude; it has seen all that it needs to see. If this is its seriousness, however, it also has 'childish' aspects, because this 'striking of the clock' links the work of art irrevocably to the hour of its making. Like a child who stubbornly refuses his dinner, the renunciation rings rather hollow once the food that was rejected has been replaced by hunger. Because works of art must be products of the age in which they are created—because they must, as Adorno states here, be 'objective answers to objective social configurations'<sup>73</sup>—their

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<sup>72</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 132.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

self-reflective reference to their own 'striking of the clock' means that they risk the same irrelevance as the events of yesteryear.<sup>74</sup>

If we now move on to the second threat posed by the striking blind of the poet, what we find is that such striking, as reification, constitutes the basis for idolatry. Moreover, this risk is, like the previous, dual.<sup>75</sup> On the one hand, once fixed by the moment of striking blind, a blind poet maintains his significance to the extent that he commands idolatry, that he obliges reverence and wards off criticism. Only to the extent that he is taken—and takes himself—*too* seriously, can he maintain the rather implausible claim that the event of *his* blinding is the event *proper* to us all. In this rather traditional sort of idolatry, a blind poet suffers from a *deficiency* of self-irony, such as it is cultivated by Nietzsche in his moments of 'shared blindness' when he 'closes his eyes' to the blindness of others, and indulges 'in some sort of reverence, or enmity, or scholarliness, or frivolity, or stupidity'.<sup>76</sup> In these relationships Nietzsche requires self-irony of neither himself nor his idols; in fact, their 'shared blindness' marks precisely their lack of self-scepticism.

This is not the only way idolatry can manifest itself, however. Thus and on the other hand, to the extent that a blinded poet must still engage in questioning—even to ward off questioning one must acknowledge its possibility, and thereby anticipate it in *self*-questioning—the subsequent self-reflexive questioning can itself become fetishized, leading to a kind of *excess* of self-irony. We see this at work in another formulation from *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, where again Adorno is searching for a way to illustrate the appearance of works of art, this time by emphasizing their 'cognitive content':

'Works of art attempt to solve riddles designed by the world to devour man. The world is a sphynx, the artist is blinded Oedipus, and it is works

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<sup>74</sup> This, of course, introduces the temptation to counter the risk of irrelevance by declaring some event as absolutely decisive for works of art, as Adorno does with Auschwitz. A detailed discussion of the implications of this move for philosophy can be found in Alexander García Düttmann's book *Heidegger and Adorno: The Memory of Thought*. His critical notion is that such a move involves a 'naming of the name', and risks undermining the very disjunctive power it hopes to evoke.

<sup>75</sup> This is the case because irony is always and simultaneously self-irony.

<sup>76</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Human, All Too Human*, p. 4.

of art of the type resembling his wise answer which plunged the sphynx into the abyss'.<sup>77</sup>

Initially, we might read this passage as a case of traditional idolatry. There is nothing immediately in it to suggest that either we or the blind poet himself, that is Oedipus, are supposed to question the wisdom of his 'wise answer'; however, further reflection reveals a rich opportunity for self-irony. For what is it that happens once the sphinx has indeed plunged 'into the abyss'? If works of art resemble his wise answer, what is their wisdom once their question has disappeared? This irony cannot be invisible to Adorno himself; the enigmatic character of works of art, which he himself develops, depends precisely on art's self-questioning stance. A 'wise answer' deprived of its question is itself a question, and this self-ironisation on the part of works of art is an extension of the self-irony of the artist himself. His very action as an artist is to bring his own action into question, to constantly offer us works of art that question the very possibility of works of art. His self-irony is that of a man whose business is to put himself out of business. The paradox of this undertaking threatens the artist with fetishization. If his activity becomes an end in itself, its own pointless repetition, the artist himself becomes an idol, a kind of grinning, shadowless mask ready for the billboard.

It is important pause here, moreover, and consider the implication of this self-ironisation. For if there is a protective aspect to art, it involves this self-protective gesture on the part of idols. Even if idols are empty, they tend to survive their own deaths.<sup>78</sup> In this the 'Case of Wagner' is prototypical. Wagner is Nietzsche's most persistent idol, and the philosopher's task, his 'destiny' even, is 'to turn his back' on him.<sup>79</sup> But how can he achieve such an 'untimely' "self-overcoming" in his days?<sup>80</sup> If his idol 'summarizes modernity', how can he escape from its influence when he himself is just as implicated in the modern era, is its 'bad conscience' even?<sup>81</sup> Straightforward rejection is not an option since, as relating itself directly to its target, it is part of the very modernity it refuses. That is to say, Wagner is already and also

<sup>77</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 132.

<sup>78</sup> This is an allusion to Adorno's phrase from the 'Draft Introduction' to *Aesthetic Theory*, where he says: 'Art, for its part, seeks refuge in its own negation, hoping to survive through its death' (p. 338).

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

anti-Wagner, just as modernity is already and also its own rejection. Nietzsche calls this self-ironisation '*décadent*', but it is, in fact, the very grounds for hope. When one wishes that things could be otherwise, one can only sustain this hope as long as it is deferred, as long as it self-ironically denies its own realisation by presenting reality as something to be overcome, something *décadent*.<sup>82</sup> As such, Nietzsche's hope to overcome his idol only has any potency to the degree to which it takes account of this self-ironisation, to the extent that its 'untimeliness' is also, and ironically, 'timely'.

It is for this reason that he turns to Bizet. What he looks for in Bizet is not any sort of anti-modernity, but rather a modernity that is even more self-ironic than Wagner's is. What he finds is *amor fati*. He does not call it by this name, but it is 'love as fact, as *fatality*, cynical, innocent, cruel'. It is the love of a 'more southern, browner, and more tanned sensibility', that contrasts with Wagner's 'Senta-sentimentality'.<sup>83</sup> For Nietzsche, the latter is a kind of 'refined parasitism' that tries to possess its object, to make it one's own.<sup>84</sup> It has a the kind of barely repressed violence of appropriation as it is undertaken by the first citizen of the Republic. By contrast, love in *Carmen* is love that acknowledges its own possessiveness, its own self-ironic tendency to destroy its object. It is the love expressed in 'Don José's final cry': 'Yes! *I* have killed her,/ *I*—my beloved Carmen!'<sup>85</sup> This self-ironic love saves the lover for love. It preserves its hopefulness, precisely by deferring it. Very much as can be said about Nietzsche as regard Wagner; he does not overcome his idol as much as he is saved for him, becoming healthy enough to have idols.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See the very first section of this chapter for a discussion of the temporality of the figure of the blind poet. I say there that the 'blind poet's song manifests itself by means of an interminable, self-obsessive repetition which never even manages to catch up with its own moment'. By never catching up with itself, the blind poet's song keeps alive the hope that the present itself could be otherwise.

<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, p. 9.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. On p. 10, Nietzsche explicitly accuses Wagner of the latter: 'Auch Wagner hat [die Liebe] mißverstanden. [Die Künstler] glauben in ihr selbstlos zu sein, weil sie den Vorteil eines andren Wesens wollen, oft wider ihren eigenen Vorteil. Aber dafür wollen sie jenes andre Wesen *besitzen*...'

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> A perhaps more critical reading of this possibility than the one presented here would be to emphasize how this possibility points back to Nietzsche's original idolatry of Wagner, making Bizet seem nothing but a temporary detour in his on-going relation with the German composer. René Girard presents such a view in his essay 'Strategies of Madness—Nietzsche, Wagner, and Dostoevski', where he says: 'In order to undermine the Wagner cult, Nietzsche has resorted to many ruses, as when he suggested Bizet as a substitute musical god. Even a child would not be fooled...' (p. 62). His point is that for Nietzsche the rivalry must always be maintained, and so even if he is, as we say, saved for love, it is a love dependent upon the existence of his rival.

In this light, the protective power of art is as much a boon as it is a bane. And as such, if the figure of a blind poet is indeed a guarantor of our hopes, it is only as long as we can put up with his demands, his relentless questioning and self-irony. This is his non-serious seriousness, his wager with us; his wager that we are not quite as serious about our hopes as we claim to be.

### **The necessity of questioning**

For, one only imagines a blind poet if one has *hope* that either the world in which one lives, or some world to come is so constituted that our questioning of it is decisive. In other words, it is only meaningful for an artist to be thought of as a blind poet if, to use the language of Heidegger, his *Zeigen-können* points to a serious world. In fact, part of what makes this world serious is precisely that it demands this reference, that it demands to be questioned. Such a demand is the necessity of questioning that we have repeatedly associated with the figure of the blind poet. To conclude, then, we want to look at this necessity in its full duality.

On the one hand, the necessity of questioning refers to the necessity of the questions themselves, the way their posing traces the contours of the world. What makes such a questioning possible is the evenemential structure of a serious world, what we have examined under the rubric of the striking blind of the poet. Every question implicitly or explicitly refers back to this grounding event, this violence by which the distinction between what is proper and improper to the world is forged. What we have found, however, is that this necessary questioning—to *be necessary*—must also be able to sustain its own self-questioning. Otherwise, it risks irrelevance. Therefore, and on the other hand, a serious world must constantly face up to its own potential obsolescence, the fact that it can, and must, question itself out of existence. It is this self-questioning that we now want to consider more substantially, because such self-ironisation leads to a situation very much reminiscent of the man who kills himself in order to outwit death.

What the dual necessity of questioning encourages, therefore, is a strategy that will indeed outwit death, but can forego the killing part, as well. Rather than kill—to see

how serious death really is, no doubt—a philosopher turns to someone for whom death has proved non-fatal, that is to a blind poet.<sup>87</sup> By having survived the event that blinded him, the blind poet is effectively the walking dead. The event that blinded him probed him in his very essence—just think of the earth-shattering shock experienced by the poor released prisoner—and as such, he is henceforth immunised against the dissolute effects of self-questioning. By turning to a blind poet, a philosopher is able to engage with self-questioning, while suspending his own. He is able to take seriously an attitude that otherwise brings itself into question as serious, and to project hope where one might otherwise identify nothing but despair and trepidation.

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A model for this relationship between philosophical thought and artistic self-questioning might be seen in Heidegger's notion of *Gottes Fehl*, a notion called upon in order to elucidate none other than the vocation of the poet:

‘Error [*Fehl*] means to miss [*Ver-fehlen*]. In this lies a desire to be on target and therewith the anticipating connection with the setting of goals. But this missing is no failure to reach in the sense of not-arriving, of falling short of a goal, but rather missing in the sense of over-shooting, of over-revving, and indeed not once, but as attitude’.<sup>88</sup>

At first glance, such an attitude of futile obstinacy would seem more likely to engender disappointment, or even derision, than to sustain hope. And yet, it is hope that Heidegger finds in it, because such an attitude questions itself without allowing

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<sup>87</sup> It is tempting to view this gesture on the part of a philosopher as that of an ironist pairing himself with a blind poet. We will resist the temptation to say so, however (and not for the first time), since such a claim would require us to make very unironic decisions as to who was being ironic when. Nevertheless, if there is an irony in the pairing of a philosopher with a blind poet, it is precisely that it makes it very difficult to disentangle who is the artist and who is the philosopher. Something of this is captured in Heidegger's notion of the ‘poetising thinker’ and the ‘thinking poet’. (*Hölderlin Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 226).

<sup>88</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 236: ‘Fehl meint Ver-fehlen. Darin liegt ein Treffenwollen und damit die vorgreifende Bindung an das Zielgebende. Aber dieses Ver-fehlen ist kein Nichterreichen im Sinne des Nicht-hin-kommens, des Zurückbleibens vor dem Ziel, sondern das Verfehlen im Sinne des Über-schießens, des Über-Dranges, und zwar nicht einmalig, sondern als Haltung’. Unfortunately none of the word play on *fehl*, and only some of that upon *über*-, survives translation.



this questioning to be cut short by an answer. That is, it neither gives into frustration, nor connives by means of calculation or manipulation to nominally achieve success.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time, however, Heidegger's attachment to such an attitude involves a certain distance. In other words, he surmises its strengths on the basis of observation rather than introspection. This couldn't be otherwise. For if one imagines for a moment what could be the state of mind of someone endlessly over-shooting a target, in spite of a 'desire to be on target', one would have to design a portrayal of deranged obsession. And even this would be an external picture in that if asked what *he* was experiencing, the unfortunate marksman would, at best, be able to mumble 'target, target, target'. Thus, the hopefulness of such an attitude only has any real meaning when observed, that is, only as a gesture.

This would seem to doom it to a certain superficiality, a kind of hopeful gloss. And in fact, to the extent that this gesture corresponds to the poetic vocation, it exposes the latter to the critique of being nothing more than rhetorical flourish. For this reason, it is no surprise that Heidegger goes on to substantiate this gesture in terms of an event:

'The error—the missing out of overabundance and excess, overwhelms the demi-gods. Thus can the error be named, *Gottes Fehl*: the over-shooting missing-out-of-excess of determination transferred from the gods'.<sup>90</sup>

In this, we find a replay of the originary scene of blinding, an event in which the poet, in the guise of a 'demi-god', is 'overwhelmed' and his vocation 'named' such that what should and should not be said is distinguished. However, in the spirit of the poet's own self-questioning, we have to ask why we would believe in such an event. If Heidegger is relating an experience that neither we *nor he himself* could ever have, why should we believe the poet had it? In other words, without the philosopher's

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<sup>89</sup> This 'success' would not, of course, be successful since it would make a mockery of the failure that preceded it, thus leaving room for the self-questioning, which would set the marksman upon a new round of attempts.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*: 'Der Fehl—das Verfehlen aus Überfülle und Über-Maß, das von den Götter her die Halbgötter überfällt. Daher kann der Fehl genannt werden: Gottes Fehl, die überschießende Verfehlung aus dem Übermaß der von den Göttern übertragenen Bestimmung'. To appreciate this passage's significance one must be aware that Heidegger develops a strong association between the 'demi-gods' and the poet. This is something that was introduced in chapter one and taken up again in this chapter during our discussion of Heidegger's lectures on *The Ister*.

readiness to name it, the poet's gesture remains ambiguous. So ambiguous, in fact, that we have to reconsider the philosopher's interest in it in the first place.

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For if we are disinclined to be generous toward a philosopher's intentions, we can accuse him of taking advantage of a blind poet, of using him for philosophical ends. Certainly a blind poet, with his unseeing gaze fixed (depending on the philosopher) on the brightness, the Forms, or the abyss, is in a vulnerable position vis-à-vis a philosopher. If the latter wants to philosophically appropriate the poet's insight, the poet is unlikely to put up much resistance. However, such an interpretation suffers from the fact that it evades the very question it is meant to address. We asked why a philosopher might be interested in a blind poet, so saying that he wants to use or appropriate him just begs the question why. For this reason, we should set aside the search for guilty intentions, and at least for a moment, entertain the possibility that when a philosopher stops to observe a blind poet, he does so *in all innocence*. Perhaps the blind poet just caught his eye. This is a very important, and yet philosophically challenging, possibility: *that* things can catch our eye, *that* things amuse us. And in fact, before we can ever bring to bear the kind of thinking that would allow us to determine what it is that catches our attention, something must first arrest it. One may want to subsequently hold that what it is that catches our eye is either a mirror image of our philosophical prejudices, or indeed, the traces of an originary scene. However, this secondary task, by which we would distinguish between blind poets and clowns, only underlines the fact that indeed a blind poet does not simply *resemble* a clown, he *is* a clown. His 'clownish traits'—to return to the language of Adorno—are part of who he is. *That* he catches our eye, *that* he amuses us and holds our attention is the non-seriousness of seriousness. A blind poet is a clown, because the first thing he must do is to get us to stop and look, to suspend our own self-questioning in order to observe his.

If we want to give this phenomenon a name, we might again refer to Adorno, who identifies it as art's 'lightheartedness'. For him, lightheartedness 'holds for art as a whole, not individual works... What is lighthearted in art is...*its demeanour, the*

*abstract fact that it is art at all.*<sup>91</sup> We should not, in other words, misunderstand the association between artists and clowns, between art and amusement: artists do not have to make us laugh, and works of art do not have to be enjoyable. Nevertheless, they do have to offer a 'promise of happiness'; they do have to present themselves favourably to our attention just as 'in Beckett's plays the curtain rises the way it rises on the room with the Christmas presents'.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, by focusing on the way in which art must be 'a source of pleasure for people, in however mediated a form',<sup>93</sup> that is, by focusing on its attitude, we can understand why it is the self-questioning of *art*, or of a blind *poet*, that is said to constitute a necessary aspect of a serious world: With its lighthearted attitude, art is uniquely able to implicate us in its self-questioning. The moment we stop to observe a work of art, or giggle at the antics of a blind poet, we are already taking seriously, we are already being plunged headlong into the questioning of questioning, that is, into a serious world, because *already* we don't know why we are looking, why we are laughing. *That* we are amused, *that attitude* of a blind poet, is the initial question mark of a serious world.

Based on this, the originary scene of blinding, which all three of these thinkers imagine in some form or another, could be re-read, not as some sort of mythic moment, but more prosaically as an indication of a necessary first 'Wow!' What could *not* be said, however, is that these thinkers are open to people being 'wowed' by just anything. All three want to exclude those things which might compete with their visions of seriousness. And this is the problem with the notion of a serious world—as well as its primary denizens, the tragic heroic artist and blind poet—it is exclusive. Tragic heroic artists and blind poets do not tolerate competitors for the crown, and even if there is jesting in the court, a serious world is a kingdom. As such, the only way to offer an alternative to it, is to overthrow it. Serious worlds can only *be* historically, and as such, the singular history which traces them forces us to perform ever more elaborate ironic acrobatics to maintain the—in fact, constitutively impossible—position needed to think them. All the while, they exclude the quite reasonable possibility that we can, and even must, inhabit multiple histories and a plurality of worlds, that we cannot always be at work constructing the ideal state,

<sup>91</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Is Art Lighthearted?', p. 248 (my emphasis).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

because to do so would be to neglect all those that don't share our political vision.<sup>94</sup> It would be to abandon all hope of reclaiming anything proper that did not already belong to the homeland. Rather, to maintain the latter hope and to aspire to the potential plurality of our existence, we must, as Nietzsche suggests, be able to 'freeze ideals'. We must place seriousness in suspense and observe that *as ideals*, the tragic heroes and blind poets have a lot in common, and that their claim to singularity indeed depends upon the universal history we just put on hold.

It is in order to think this latter possibility that we will now turn to Part Two. Rather than think the question of why a philosopher would take an artist seriously immanently, in relation to a serious world, we will think it in terms of the model-like character of art and artists—their potential to be examples. According to this approach, Heidegger on Hölderlin, Nietzsche on Wagner, and Adorno on Schönberg would be examples in a dual sense: On the one hand, the artists concerned would be the examples taken by the respective philosophers. To the extent that we think of it in this fashion, Part Two's approach is continuous with the first's: the artists can be thought of as examples of what they would have to be for there to be a serious world, and even, what they *are, as if* such a world existed. On the other hand, Heidegger on Hölderlin, Nietzsche on Wagner, and Adorno on Schönberg are themselves examples, the examples we have taken in order to understand why a philosopher would take an artist seriously. As has already been said, we cannot exhaustively defend the choice of just these examples. Any historical account offered to locate them decisively would reinstate the necessities of a serious world, and the pretence of the singular narrative—with this investigation as its culminating moment, no less. Rather this philosophical effort, like those it takes as its examples, can only hope that others will stop and take it seriously.

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<sup>94</sup> This is to refer to the problem of introversion that haunts this manner of thinking. Thinking in terms of a serious world encourages a focus upon *self*-questioning that carries with it the risk that the singular history one is in the process of tracing, as proper as it might be to oneself, may turn out to be irrelevant to others. Heidegger's almost exclusive focus upon the fate of the *German* people in his writings on Hölderlin is a case in point.

**Part Two**  
**Exemplarity**

## chapter four

### The exemplarity of an artist

*In this chapter, we will develop the idea that an artist is an exceptional sort of example, who stands at the locus of a world dominated by examples.*

#### Just an example

If any of these thinkers were asked about the examples of artists in their writings, they would balk at the question. Heidegger might exclaim (though in German, of course): ‘Hölderlin is not *just* an example!’ Moreover, it is this ‘just’ of ‘*just* an example’ that would most incisively signal his vexation, because if something is *just* an example, it is *just* one example among many. In a very trivial way, one could say that one takes such an example seriously; however, it would not be a very substantial claim, given that it leaves open the option to discard the example at any moment and take another seriously instead. That said, Wagner, Hölderlin and Schönberg are composers, poets, and artists, that is individual creators amongst others, and described as such. As a consequence, their exemplarity is inherently a problem for Nietzsche, Heidegger and Adorno, respectively.

Heidegger explicitly grapples with this problem at the outset of ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’. He admits that ‘Hölderlin’s poetry is merely one sample of poetry among many’,<sup>1</sup> that is, it is just *an example*. Nevertheless, he seems to make this admission with the sole thought of refuting its significance. For as we discover, the significance of Hölderlin lies precisely in the *rejection* of him as *just an example*.<sup>2</sup>

Hölderlin’s work is not chosen because it embodies, beside the work of others, the general essence of poetry. It is chosen because Hölderlin is

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 456.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that a similar procedure—of mentioning a false exemplarity with the sole aim of refuting it—can be found in the first pages of the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein* (see pp 19–20), as well as, interestingly enough, in ‘What are Poet’s For?’ where Heidegger tries to make the transition from an introduction based on Hölderlin to a discussion of Rilke (see p. 96 in *Poetry, Language, Thought*).

concerned in his poetry solely with the essence of poetry. He is for us emphatically the *poet of poetry*'.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between Hölderlin as *just an example* and Hölderlin as the *poet of poetry* hinges, then, upon the difference between two notions of essence. A first, 'general' notion is 'indifferent' to particularity; it is a rootless essence which only appears through the accumulation of examples. In fact, we might relate it to Giorgio Agamben's notion of an example as an 'exclusive inclusion'.<sup>4</sup> What Agamben means by this is that if an example is usually considered *included* in the class of things it exemplifies, it is also the case that, in order to exemplify, it must refer to that class and thereby be *excluded* from it. What an example does, in other words, is simultaneously to be part of a class and to show 'its belonging to [that] class'.<sup>5</sup> Just the same, by showing its belonging, an example also '*shows its own signifying and, in this way, suspends its own meaning*'.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, any essence that depends upon an accumulation of examples is similarly vitiated. Heidegger wants to oppose such a hollow notion of essence with a unique essentiality. His notion of essence is wholly particular; it is the site of a decision; it is an historically determined 'sphere', or source, of signification.<sup>7</sup> He wants to establish Hölderlin as the *poet of poetry*,<sup>8</sup> but as the phrase itself suggests, doing so will not allow him to escape from the notion of exemplarity altogether. Rather, he must portray Hölderlin's essentiality as an essential exemplarity, as an exemplarity that negates the empty accumulation of examples. .

Before we substantiate this argumentation, however, we must pause to address an objection that is almost certainly in the minds of some: namely, can we really speak of the exemplarity of the *poet*, when what more nearly seems at stake is the exemplarity

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, G. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* (latter emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 457: This is a reference to a sentence we looked at in great detail in the first chapter: 'And we are inquiring into the essential, into what forces us to decide whether we will henceforth take poetry seriously, whether we accept our being placed within the sphere where poetry can affect us'.

<sup>8</sup> When David Halliburton takes up the issue of Hölderlin's exemplarity in a section entitled, no less, 'The Example of Hölderlin', he makes a connection between Hölderlin as the 'poet of poetry' and the existential problematic of *Dasein*: 'There is, to begin with, a parallel between the poet and Being-there, as described in *Being and Time*. Just as *Dasein* is that being for which its Being is at issue, Hölderlin is the poet for whom poetry is at issue' (*Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger*, p. 79).

of the poet's *poetry*? As we have seen, for Heidegger, it is a question of dissuading us from considering Hölderlin's *poetry* as 'merely one sample of poetry among many', and not Hölderlin as one *poet* among many. Part of the problem we face in trying to respond to this objection is that Heidegger almost exclusively speaks of poetry as the poetry of *Hölderlin*. Even in 'What Are Poets For?' where he does make an exception and writes about the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, Heidegger still places the latter in relation with Hölderlin—the philosopher's undertaking is to decide whether Rilke can be understood in accordance with Hölderlin's notion of 'poets in a destitute time'. Furthermore, in that Hölderlin's relation to 'poets in a destitute time' is that of a 'pre-cursor', whom 'no poet of this world era can overtake',<sup>9</sup> what is implied is that no poet 'of this world era' would know what to do as poet—or in other words, that there would effectively be no poets—without the model of Hölderlin to indicate 'what poets are for'. And it is here that we see why it is the exemplarity of Hölderlin, rather than his poetry, which is essential. For what is at stake with Hölderlin is less the works of art that he has given us than the *work* that he has made possible. It is his poetic activity, his *poetising*, which makes him essential.

But what is this poetising? There are two false interpretations we could make at this juncture. One would be simply to equate it with the poetic activity of the historical person born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1770 in Lauffan am Neckar. This activity by itself, though perhaps of some interest to a history of art or ideas, is of little philosophical interest. As strange as it may sound, it is an entirely contingent detail that Hölderlin's poetising was undertaken by a man named Hölderlin born in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Just the same, we cannot completely forget Hölderlin the man either, because if we err to the opposite extreme and think of poetising as something completely abstract and divorced from artistic activity as it occurs in the concrete production of works of art, then we have no way of explaining how works of art appear except by reference to divine intervention. Thus, we must think of Hölderlin's poetising as some sort of *event* whereby Hölderlin leaves his works to us. This event is Hölderlin's work, his poetising, and it is only to the extent that his *works* exist first and foremost as testimony of this *work*, that *he* can found *our* history. Furthermore, we only belong to this history to the extent that each of us, if you will, repeats

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, M. 'What are Poets For?', p. 142.



Hölderlin's *work* and 'bears witness that he too belongs to this inwardness by his creation of a world'.<sup>10</sup> It is because of the importance of creative work—as founding, as bearing witness—that we must not confuse the *poet's* exemplarity with any possible exemplarity of his works of art.

Now those familiar with Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' will probably experience some sort of tension between what is argued here and the emphasis upon the work of art in the 1930's essay. We will be addressing this essay in the following chapter, but provisionally I want to re-emphasize the degree to which Hölderlin is *exceptional* in Heidegger's philosophy. Like Paul de Man, I believe that 'Heidegger's attitude [toward Hölderlin] differs fundamentally from the one he adopts toward all metaphysicians',<sup>11</sup> and that means also toward all other poets. As a result, general notions about Heidegger's philosophy of art, which one might gain from a reading of 'The Origin', cannot simply be applied to the case of Hölderlin. In this light, Christopher Fynsk's readings of 'The Origin' and the texts on Hölderlin are quite helpful. He recognises that it is precisely as concerns 'the question of the human Dasein'—such as it is necessary to the task of poetising, for instance—that the latter texts find their greatest salience: 'Heidegger may well turn aside from the question of the relation between Being and human being in "The Origin of the Work of Art."' But in the reading of Hölderlin that begins to take shape at approximately the same time...Heidegger addresses forcefully the question of the human Dasein in relation to the problem of art'.<sup>12</sup> As it is, then, and possibly surprisingly, the thinking about the artist that Heidegger evidences with Hölderlin does not come fundamentally into conflict with an insistence upon '*human* labour as the source of literature and music',<sup>13</sup> such as Peter Uwe Hohendahl sees it developed by Adorno. In fact, this insistence upon the human, rather than require that Adorno stand 'in clear opposition to Heidegger's assumptions about the origins of poetry',<sup>14</sup> as Hohendahl would have it, instead indicates a point of connection between the two thinkers. Even the thinking

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 459.

<sup>11</sup> De Man, Paul. 'Heidegger's Exegesis of Hölderlin', p. 254, footnote 3.

<sup>12</sup> Fynsk, Christopher. *Heidegger: Thought and Historicity*, p. 174. Fynsk also pursues a notion of the exemplarity of Hölderlin; however, we will have to leave off a discussion of it until chapter six, since Fynsk develops this exemplarity in such a way—namely, in relation to (the exemplarity of) the work of art—that it more nearly a *counter-exemplarity* of the artist.

<sup>13</sup> Hohendahl, P.U. *Prismatic Thought*, p. 150 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

of the work of art evidenced in 'The Origin' depends upon Hölderlin's *human activity* as 'pre-cursor'. Heidegger needs this 'pre-cursor', because he never questions the existence of works of art, taking them, more or less, for granted. The role of this 'pre-cursor', of the exemplary poet Hölderlin, is precisely to grant works of art, to guarantee their existence by offering them in 'gift'.

### The 'exemplars'

He can give this gift, moreover, because he himself is gifted. The artist is endowed with a sort of Midas touch, by which he can raise to philosophical attention even things which do not usually sit in the category of art objects. In Heidegger, the exemplarity of Hölderlin means that the poet's letters hold the same interpretative rank as his poems—most notably the letter to Casimir Böhlendorff from 4 December 1801, which will occupy us at some length later in this chapter. Furthermore, similar remarks can be made with regard to Nietzsche on Wagner—who freely mixes observations about the composer's music with citations from the latter's theoretical writings—and about Adorno's approach to Schönberg—according to which he is as likely to talk about *Erwartung*'s place in the Schönbergian revolution as he is to cite Schönberg's belief that courage was 'the attribute of "those who accomplish acts which exceed their confidence"''.<sup>15</sup>

Adorno, moreover, is instructive, because he explicitly addresses this Midas-like exemplarity of the artist in his writings on Schönberg. What he argues is that it is not so much the latter's works as the movement between them—the way in which the composer's activity determines a history of works—which is most essential to our understanding.<sup>16</sup> As he points out, individual works and their technical innovations can be, and have been, imitated, and for this reason, these individual works can only

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<sup>15</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Arnold Schönberg, 1874-1951', pp 150-51.

<sup>16</sup> There would seem to be some contradiction between what is argued here and a passage cited in the section called 'The sidekick' in chapter two. There, in an evaluation of Schönberg's importance, Adorno would seem to put the emphasis upon works of art. However, it is important to note that, as in the passage here, the emphasis is determined by Adorno's wish to reject any hypostatisation of the composer's activity according to 'categories of development and the organic'. Furthermore, the emphasis upon works of art is presented there in the context of an issue we are presently deferring (until chapters five and six)—namely, the role of the philosopher with regard to the artist's production—and in whose light appears the *counter-exemplarity* of the artist.

form a part of what he describes as the challenge, or 'difficulty', of Schönberg's music:

'What is difficult, rather, is the movement itself between the extremes [of Schönberg's development]. For just as it fails to provide a safe center for enjoyment, it also radically refuses to submit to the categories with which intellectual history, no matter how progressive it would like to seem, inevitably and in a banal way seeks to create unity in the variety of an artist's work—[based on] categories of development and the organic. Although each work by Schönberg follows the previous one in a compulsory way, they by no means grow out of each other'.<sup>17</sup>

What we should recognise here is a formulation akin to Heidegger's argument against 'indifferent' essence. The banal unity established by intellectual history is very much like an indifferent essence in that it considers works only in relation to general notions of style and influence—and thus as *just* examples—and does not consider them in their particularity. Like Heidegger, then, Adorno wants to assert an understanding which would acknowledge this particularity. To do so, however, he cannot abandon the notion of unity altogether, since it is required in order to establish the necessity of the movement between works. To establish this necessity, then, a different sort of unity is posited, one which corresponds with the activity of the artist himself.<sup>18</sup>

Adorno puts this unity into practice in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, where he develops a history of modern music, which would avoid the banalisation wrought by a history of the spirit. In this history, Schönberg's development *is* the development of modern music—as progressive, we might note, since in *The Philosophy of Modern Music* it is also a question of a history of regression in the person of Stravinsky. The way in which Adorno expresses this is to say that the development of modern music occurs in accordance with 'objective demands' made by music upon the composer.

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<sup>17</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'The Dialectical Composer', p. 203 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the discussion undertaken in this chapter focuses on those texts in which a privilege is accorded Schönberg. As with Heidegger on Hölderlin, Adorno's thought on Schönberg stand out from his more general considerations of works of art. Unlike Heidegger, however, Adorno evolves in such a way as to move beyond a privileging of Schönberg. The culmination of this development is *Aesthetic Theory*, and is something we will touch on below in a reading of essays from the 1950's and 60's.

The composer of modern music, then, is to be obedient to these demands—ironically, and dialectically, by being disobedient to them—and thereby advance the ‘total *niveau* of technique’.<sup>19</sup> Schönberg, for reasons that are never elucidated,<sup>20</sup> is always at the extreme point of this advancement. In fact, it is interesting to contrast this claim with what would be the case if it were works of art, rather than the artist, that were exemplary. If it were works of art that were exemplary, a philosophy of modern music would have to zigzag through the works of a variety of composers, rather than simply following the trace of Schönberg’s touch.

Furthermore, if we return to Heidegger, we recognise a similar gesture with regard to Hölderlin. Heidegger does not name specific works when he claims the latter’s essential role. Instead, he proposes doing something very similar to what Adorno does: namely, to ‘interpret Hölderlin’s poems in closed sequence’.<sup>21</sup> *Who* created these works, and not their content or style, determines their inclusion in an investigation of the essence of poetry. The poet is the way in which we identify which poetry is essential, and not the other way around.

However, even if it is the poet, rather than the works, who is closer to the essential, we still have to ask whether it is really possible to consider him an example. It would seem, based on Heidegger’s explicit exclusion of exemplarity, that this could not be the case. And yet, *this explicit exclusion is precisely the point*. For if on the one hand, it excludes us thinking of Hölderlin as *just as example*, on the other, it makes it the *rule* that we think of everything other than the poet as indifferent instances of general concepts and notions, that is, as *just* examples. In other words, Hölderlin’s essentiality is his *exceptionality* with regard to the rule of exemplarity. What he is

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<sup>19</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> The introduction to *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, where one would expect such an elucidation, is notably unhelpful on this point. Basing himself on Benjamin’s notion of “the history of philosophy viewed as the science of origins”, Adorno explains his approach as follows: ‘Such an investigation, restricting itself essentially to two independent protagonists, can even be founded within the subject of music itself. For only in such extremes can the essence of this music be defined; they alone permit the perception of its concept of truth... It is for this reason and not in the illusion of grand personality that only these two composers—Schönberg and Stravinsky—are to be discussed. For if the total product of new music—as defined by its inner qualities rather than by chronology—were to be scrutinised in its entirety, including all transitions and compromises, the same extremes would again be encountered’ (pp 3-4). In other words—and in more clearly circular fashion—Schönberg and Stravinsky’s technical innovations define new music’s inner quality, and for this reason only in them can new music’s concept of truth be perceived.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry’, p. 457.

excluded from is a representational realm, in which appearance and essence are forever separated, in which only *examples* of essential concepts ever appear, and never the concepts themselves. Against this background, the event of Hölderlin is a moment of essential poetising, by which *essence itself appears*. As a consequence, in order to privilege Hölderlin's activity, we must also accept that we ourselves inhabit a realm of representation from which the essential is constitutively excluded—that if 'man as such lives *Geworfenheit*, the poet lives a kind of *Hinausgeworfenheit*', as David Halliburton puts it.<sup>22</sup> Only if we accept the rule of empty exemplarity, can we see Hölderlin as its essential exception.

Moreover, the rule of *exemplarity* is not just any rule. Unlike other rules, which might be said to have areas of competence—specific domains in which they apply—the rule of exemplarity is total,<sup>23</sup> and this means that Hölderlin does not simply subtract himself from the dominance of empty exemplarity, rather he only exists because he is both its *cause* and *consequence*. He is what Agamben calls a 'sovereign exception'. Whereas, we might usually think of an exception as an '*inclusive exclusion*'—as being included in the rule precisely by being excluded from its application<sup>24</sup>—Hölderlin's exceptionality is what allows there to be any rule at all:

'Here what is outside is included is not simply by means of an interdiction or an internment, but rather by means of the suspension of the... order's validity—by letting the... order, that is, withdraw from the exception and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Halliburton, David. *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger*, p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> This is evident in the Heideggerian version of things to the extent that we are doomed to everydayness, to its indifferent representationality. Such existentialism assumes (as Agamben himself does) that we exist in a homogenous order, in which 'the exception is situated in a symmetrical position with respect to the example', and with it 'forms a system' (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p. 21). In such a system there are only examples and their exception.

<sup>24</sup> As Agamben puts it, 'what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule's suspension. *The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it*' (pp 17-18).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. Agamben who is in this case looking at sovereign power over bare life is concerned with the 'juridico-political order'. This order is total to the degree that it impinges upon all 'bare life'.

Thus, whereas all *Dasein* is submitted to rule of empty exemplarity, to the condition of 'Being-with-one-another', with its implications of the publicness of the 'they' and the emptiness of 'idle talk',<sup>26</sup> Hölderlin is the *Dasein* that stands and speaks sovereignly. What he says is not a hollow repetition of the already familiar; it is a unique and authentic disclosure.

Moreover, we can hope to hear this disclosure because of Hölderlin's own exemplarity. In order to be the sovereign exception to the rule of empty exemplarity, Hölderlin must *himself* be an example, the model of an *exceptional* exemplarity. This latter exemplarity does not boil down to a barren system of reference—the Agambenian exclusive inclusiveness that shows its belonging to a class at the cost of its significance—rather it retains its significance by directing itself to those who aspire to the same essentiality, to those who 'bear witness that they too belong to this inwardness by their creation of a world'.<sup>27</sup> That is, the poet's exemplarity depends upon our receptiveness to it; we must hear his call in order for his exemplarity to ever appear.<sup>28</sup> In the language of Stanley Cavell, such essential exemplarity is that of an 'exemplar', a term, which is in its turn a translation of the Kantian notion of 'archetypes'. According to Cavell, 'the acceptance of an "exemplar"... is not grounded in the relation between the instance and a class of instances it stands for but in the relation between the instance and the individual other—for example, myself—for whom it does the standing'.<sup>29</sup> Because of the particularity of this relation—the fact that it links to individuals rather than indifferent specimens—the exemplarity of an 'exemplar' cannot be generalised as can everyday examples. Though its content may vary, the fact of its relation remains unique. For this reason, an exemplar must always appear in sovereign isolation, must always be appealed to as the only possible example. For once competing candidates are suggested, an exemplar is reduced to being *just an example*, just one possible instance of a class of instances.

Moreover, this is why we take exemplars seriously. If we recall, the reason examples that are *just* examples fail in this seriousness is that they can be replaced at any

<sup>26</sup> See sections 34-38 of *Being and Time*.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, M. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 459. In that this is the second citation of this passage in not so many more pages, I have taken the liberty of pluralizing the phrase.

<sup>28</sup> As we will see in the section devoted to Heidegger and Hölderlin, there is some reason to doubt whether Heidegger always allows Hölderlin to be open to this receptivity.

<sup>29</sup> Cavell, Stanley. *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, pp 50-1.

moment with other examples; their exemplarity is neither decisive nor truly hopeful. But if we do not have the option of replacement—such as is the case with exemplars to the extent that, as with friends, we cannot simply replace one with another—then an example has a chance of being truly serious. By pointing to their own pointing, examples always stand out as centres for our thoughts, but in the case of exemplars, this self-referential pointing appears as an entirely unique and singular act. It is for this reason that there is a tendency for thinkers to want to arrive at exemplars without having to first *take* them as examples. They strive to convince us that an artist is to be taken seriously by claiming that he is the only possible example in a world where something is at stake.

### Mythical exemplarity

We should not fail to re-emphasize, however, that if an artist is to be taken seriously in such a fashion—if he is to be seen as an exemplar—it must follow, not from his personality or character, but from his artistic activity. When Heidegger states that for Nietzsche, '[a]rt must be grasped in terms of the artist',<sup>30</sup> he is not suggesting that Nietzsche wants us to familiarise ourselves with artists' biographies. He is saying that for Nietzsche, an artist's creative efforts—and not works or histories—must provide our access to art. That is, Nietzsche hopes that we experience the mythical dimension of an artist's greatness, indeed that we experience it as the creation of myth itself.

For this to be possible, it must indeed be the case—as we have already seen with Hölderlin and as is inherent in Cavell's notion of an exemplar—that our experience of an artist's greatness—that is, his exemplarity—is essential to that greatness itself; in other words, that our experience contributes to the appearance of the artist's exemplarity. But how does this really work? How does our spectatorship contribute to the creation of an exemplar? To answer, let us consider the case of the ancient Greeks.

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<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, M. *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art*, vol. 1, p. 71.

Of the many curious features of Nietzsche's theory of the birth of tragedy through the Dionysian chorus perhaps one of the most notable is how it treats the ancient Greeks. In Nietzsche's theory, the ancient Greeks are not a group of individuals with differing self-interests and desires, but rather an inherent collectivity. Ancient Greeks—unlike us moderns—act as one man, and therefore, through the chorus can act as one artist, as a 'Dionysian man', who has 'the ability continually to see a living play, to live constantly surrounded by hordes of spirits', as well as 'the desire to transform [himself] and to speak from other bodies and souls'.<sup>31</sup> As 'Dionysian man', the ancient Greeks conjure myth itself on stage.

But even if this is the *basis* for Greek exemplarity, it is not by itself sufficient to make the Greek 'Dionysian man' an exemplar; rather, as Nietzsche recognises, Greek exemplarity only exists in relation to contemporary lives as they are aesthetically experienced.<sup>32</sup> In fact, this is the significance of his statement in the 'Attempt at Self-Criticism', that what this 'audacious book' was about was '*to see science under the lens of the artist, but art under the lens of life*'.<sup>33</sup> For Nietzsche, the exemplarity of the ancient Greeks does not exist in some rarefied sacred realm that would protect it from the vicissitudes of modern life. In fact, this may explain the vehemence of the criticism heaped upon this book when it first came out: Because, if the exemplarity of the Greeks is not a given, then imitation of them cannot be a goal, and it is, therefore, unclear what the purpose would be of the philological research undertaken by Nietzsche's own colleagues to establish ancient Greek culture in painstaking detail. Moreover, if the rebirth of Greek art and culture in modern times cannot occur draped in togas and lounging in neo-classical architecture, it is possible that it could occur by means of contemporary artistic efforts, such as that of the controversial Wagner. And even though Nietzsche himself comes to regret this latter claim, what bothers him about it later on is *not* that he related the ancient Greeks to contemporary aesthetic experience, but that he related them to contemporary *German* experience, and in

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp 42-3.

<sup>32</sup> More could be said on this topic, particularly as relates to Nietzsche's relationship with Schopenhauer's philosophy since the experience of life Nietzsche seems to have in mind is one very much in accordance with life as it is described by the pessimistic thinker. Richard Schacht looks at this relation in his essay 'Making Life Worth Living: Nietzsche on Art in *The Birth of Tragedy*', and even goes so far as to call the early Greeks a 'case study' made by Nietzsche with regard to the 'question of how it has been possible for "life" to manage to "detain its creatures in existence" even when the erroneous beliefs that commonly shield them are no longer in operation' (p. 188).

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 5 (Nietzsche's emphasis).



particular to *German* music, which he denounces later in 1886 as ‘romantic through and through, and the most un-Greek of all possible art forms’.<sup>34</sup> He still acknowledges implicitly, therefore, that in order for the exemplarity of the Greeks, and most importantly of them as Dionysian man, to have any significance, one must still wonder about a music ‘that was not romantic in origin, as German music is—but *Dionysian*’.<sup>35</sup>

As such, the issue of contemporary Dionysian music is not at all an academic one. As we said above, our spectatorship is essential to Greek exemplarity. Just the same, this should not be taken to suggest that modern theatres should be filled with the strains of ancient Greek lyres. Quite the contrary, such an approach suffers from the same fundamental flaw as the philological research of Nietzsche’s contemporaries: namely, to assume that its object is already constituted. The real task—the task for which Dionysian music is so essential—is this very constitution, the creation of the Greeks *as exemplary*. But once again, we must ask how this is possible, how our *contemporary* experience is able to construct the exemplarity of the *ancient* Greeks.

Certainly nothing seems likely to happen as long as we think of experience as being some sort of passive receptivity, and as such it is no surprise to find that for Nietzsche ‘experience’ is active and creative; that it is a struggle between ‘the need to look and at the same time...the longing to go beyond mere looking’.<sup>36</sup> It is only the ‘truly aesthetic spectator’—or ‘truly aesthetic listener’<sup>37</sup>—who has the keen sight that wishes for the blindness that would allow him to ‘see’ beyond Apollonian images to Dionysian wisdom.<sup>38</sup> And even more importantly, it is this experience of the ‘truly aesthetic spectator’ that is taken as the analogue to that of the artist:

‘No one who has experienced the need to look at the same time as the longing to go beyond mere looking will find it easy to imagine how

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> I can detect little difference between the use or sense of these similar expressions, and as such will read them as more or less synonymous.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 105. The phrase is as follows, and addresses ‘the attentive friend’, who is perhaps yet another expression for the ‘truly aesthetic spectator’: ‘He looks more keenly, more deeply than ever, and yet wishes for blindness’.

clearly and definitely these two processes coexist in the contemplation of the tragic myth: while the truly aesthetic spectator will confirm that of all the singular effects of tragedy this coexistence is the most remarkable. If we can translate this phenomenon of the aesthetic spectator into an analogous process in the tragic artist, we shall come to an understanding of the genesis of the *tragic myth*'.<sup>39</sup>

This positing of an 'analogous process'<sup>40</sup> in the spectator and the artist has two key implications: On the one hand, it sets up the artist as an aesthetic spectator *par excellence*, and as such the artist's exemplarity as an exemplary capacity for experience. This accords with our earlier description of the birth of tragedy through the Dionysian chorus as a conjuration, by which the Greeks are seemingly able to witness their own thoughts. It should be noted though, that what the *modern* artist would then have to conjure up would be the experience of the Greeks themselves. In other words, the experience of the modern Dionysian artist would be that of a creation of music by which he *re-creates* the experience of the ancient Greeks.<sup>41</sup> This experience would indeed make the Greeks his exemplar; however, and on the other hand, it means that in order for the modern artist to be exemplary in his turn, he must also be observed and his experience recreated. This points to a role for yet another spectator in the drama of the exemplary artist.

Before we get ahead of ourselves though, we should focus on the original Greek experience, because as we can now recognise, what is at stake here is a unique conjunction between seeing and creating, between spectator and artist. Nietzsche identifies this conjunction by likening it to the Heraclitean figure of the playing child. What he says about this figure is that it is a means for judging the 'Dionysian capacity of a people',<sup>42</sup> and what such a capacity entails is the ability to create in the fashion of 'the [Heraclitean] spirit that playfully builds and destroys the world of individuals as

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 113-14.

<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche remains rather quiet about the details of this translation of analogous experience, if for no other reason because a more detailed description would have to account for the obvious difference between a spectator and an artist: namely, that only the latter's experience leads to the creation of a work of art. We will return to this issue in the following chapters.

<sup>41</sup> This only makes sense if one keeps firmly in mind that Nietzsche makes almost no distinction between viewing and creating works of art. It is on this basis that he maintains the analogy between spectator and artist so essential to his argument.

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 115.

the product of a primal pleasure'.<sup>43</sup> That is, as 'Dionysian man' the Greeks are paradoxically able to create and watch themselves create at the same time, gaping at their own creation and destruction with the eyes of a child. What this also means though, is that when the cycle of artistic activity ceases, so does their exemplary existence.

That is, this unique Greek capacity for experience is a double edged sword. It is uniquely exemplary, but it is also if you will, *mythical*, vanishing the moment one stops creating in order to reflect upon it. This is Nietzsche's point against philologists. By only observing dispassionately, what they see in the achievement of the Greeks is a shadowy image of Greek greatness, an 'historical example'<sup>44</sup> rather than Greek exemplarity in all its mythical dynamism. Just the same, their weakness, which Nietzsche only knows so well as a philologist himself, negatively points to our hope as moderns. For this shadowy image testifies to what makes us modern: our self-awareness as historical. Because we can see this image of Greek greatness *as an image*, we are in a position to aspire to what it is an image of, to constitute the exemplarity it reflects. But we should not jump to conclusions, this image is not a simple picture of mythical exemplarity that we can hope to copy. Rather this 'historical example' is an image of a history of mythical exemplarity, in fact, of *the* history of mythical exemplarity: the history of the exemplarity of the Greeks. And what is the decisive moment of this history? *Not* the birth of tragedy as one might expect, but rather the *decline* of tragedy, because it is this latter event that allows for the passing on and re-emergence of mythical exemplarity in modern times. In other words, the Greeks are indeed an 'historical example', but only to the extent that they are *the* example of history, that they exemplify *our* historical promise, *our* hope to see mythical exemplarity reborn:

'But if we are right in our *exemplification*, to compare *the disappearance of the Dionysian spirit* [my emphasis] with a highly striking but as yet unexplained transformation and degeneration in Greek man [allusion to the disappearance of the truly aesthetic spectator], what hopes must awaken in us when all the most certain signs augur *the opposite process*,

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

*the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit, in our contemporary world!*<sup>45</sup>

In other words, the Greeks are an exemplar for us, because they were *mythically exemplary*, and we are the ones to appreciate this mythical exemplarity because we are in the process of becoming it ourselves. In this sense, the modern artist arrives at mythical exemplarity through a process of appropriation, whereby he appropriates the mythical exemplarity of the Greeks. Mythical exemplarity, in this sense, is truly an exemplarity of the artist. As Gilles Deleuze puts it, it is part of Nietzsche's effort to reclaim 'an aesthetic of creation, the aesthetic of Pygmalion'.<sup>46</sup> It is an exemplarity that exists only in the experience of the artist of his own artistic activity. In order for the artist to be acknowledged in his mythical exemplarity by another, he must expose himself to a spectator who will appropriate this mythical exemplarity for himself. This will make the artist an exemplar, but at the same time, an historical example, an example of the historical event that is the *loss* of mythical exemplarity.

Moreover, it is here that we finally breach the second point we initially made about the significance of the 'truly aesthetic spectator': namely, that the theory demands that the modern artist be experienced by a spectator just as he in his artistic activity experiences the Greeks. Nietzsche prepares us for this idea by outlining in great detail the tale of mimetic rivalry between Euripides and Socrates that led to the Greek's decline. According to this story, Socrates is the spectator who deprives Euripides of his mythical exemplarity, by seducing the artist into being the 'poet of aesthetic Socratism'.<sup>47</sup> This would make it the philosopher who has the potential of being mythically exemplary—the mooted for possibility of a 'music-making Socrates'<sup>48</sup>—and yet this potential is never realised by Socrates himself, because he 'did not understand tragedy and therefore chose to ignore it'.<sup>49</sup> Rather, mythical exemplarity has to lie dormant until the modern age, when 'through Kant and

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, p. 116.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59. When Randall Havas takes up this issue in his essay 'Socratism and the Question of Aesthetic Justification', he argues that Socrates' misunderstanding is not simply related to tragedy but even to being Greek: 'In saying that he failed properly to understand tragedy, then, Nietzsche's suggestion is that Socrates failed properly to understand what it meant to be Greek' (p. 104). In other words, what Socrates failed to understand was being that exemplary artist called 'Dionysian man'.

Schopenhauer the spirit of *German philosophy*... was able to destroy scientific Socratism's complacent delight in existence'.<sup>50</sup>

After this, however, the story gets a bit hazy, because what we should expect is that another pairing between a philosopher and artist will arise, by which mythical exemplarity will come into the hands of an artist who can engineer the rebirth of tragedy. And in fact, Nietzsche himself points to such a sequence of events when he suggests that 'we seem to be experiencing the great epochs of Hellenism in *reverse order*'.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, we can perhaps understand why Nietzsche is unwilling to spin out the latter part of the story in detail. On the one hand, if a German philosopher must be cast as a pair to Wagner, in order to create an analogue to the Greek grouping of Socrates and Euripides, it is Schopenhauer, rather than Nietzsche, who seems most likely to get the part. Certainly, Schopenhauer is the thinker that most influences Wagner's development, and Nietzsche himself underscores this fact by his frequent allusions to the thinker of pessimism. However, and on the other hand, because Schopenhauer predates Wagner, he cannot act as a spectator to the composer's works in the way Socrates did Euripides', and therefore cannot be the model of the 'truly aesthetic spectator', which Nietzsche sees as so essential to the rebirth of tragedy. As Nietzsche puts it, 'the rebirth of tragedy also means the rebirth of the *aesthetic listener*'.<sup>52</sup> The need for a contemporary spectator would suggest the possibility that Nietzsche is the more appropriate philosopher to Wagner's artist, but it also means that it is no longer a situation of Wagner appropriating mythical exemplarity from Schopenhauer, but rather Nietzsche appropriating it from Wagner. This passing of the torch would allow Wagner to be recognised as an exemplar, but would also point to the composer's *loss* of mythical exemplarity. In other words, at the very moment Nietzsche can experience Wagner as mythically exemplary, the latter is no longer such, and the much hyped rebirth of tragedy is already in decline. At the same time, this is what we should have expected based on the logic of 'Hellenism in reverse'. In that it is Greek *failure* which augurs German *success*, Greek *success* augurs German *failure*. Nevertheless, Nietzsche's move to assert himself as the candidate for the role of a 'truly aesthetic spectator' can also be seen as

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

a last ditch effort to salvage the rebirth of tragedy: in spite of its inevitable decline as an artistic phenomenon, if mythical exemplarity can be diverted from the artist by a philosophical spectator sympathetic to tragic myth, the *rebirth* of tragedy can hope to avoid the fate of its *birth*.

It is tempting to propose that this is evidence of Nietzsche's mythical exemplarity, his turn as the creative bearer of the Dionysian spirit, but that would be to underplay the difficulties mythical exemplarity poses for a philosopher. This is an exemplarity *of* the artist in the dual sense of the genitive, and this puts a philosopher in the awkward position of both coveting and denying it. On the one hand, the exemplarity of an artist signals the artist's capacity for creation, and to the extent that a philosopher also sees himself as creative, he craves this artist's exemplarity. However, and on the other hand, such an exemplarity implies a self-denial as philosopher, because exemplarity in the style of an artist excludes the privileged, speculative position of a philosophical spectator. Nietzsche's approach to this dilemma is to renounce his claim to mythical exemplarity in favour of his relation with the artist: 'Whither does the mystery of the union of German music and German philosophy point, if not to a new mode of existence of which we can only gain an inkling through Greek analogies?'<sup>53</sup> But like all such marriages of convenience, this one flirts with the likelihood of divorce, and its first casualty will be mythical exemplarity. Like love become hatred, the exemplarity of the artist becomes a counter-exemplarity for Nietzsche after his famous split from Wagner.<sup>54</sup>

### The twist

Nevertheless, we do not want to put too much emphasis on this well-known parting of the ways. For if we instead focus upon what this relationship says about the philosophical seriousness of an exemplary artist, what we find is actually an enormous degree of continuity. That is, both before and after the split, Wagner stands

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> My reading of this split, therefore, more nearly resembles that of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who finds it reasonable to ask 'Why wasn't [Nietzsche] aware of his opposition to Wagner from the very outset?' (p. 133), rather than someone like Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche who wants to identify specific events and mistakes as the cause.

as the artist Nietzsche most takes seriously and most persistently acknowledges in his exemplarity. When Nietzsche most vehemently denies Wagner as counter-exemplary—such as he does in his denouncement of the composer as *décadent*—he is still taking Wagner very seriously; and even when he most ridicules Wagner as not to be taken seriously—as with *Parsifal*—he is still thinking of the composer as exemplary, even if negatively so. To put it another way, Nietzsche always treats Wagner as his exemplar. Regardless of whether he is struggling to accept or reject the composer, Nietzsche is always asking the question of whether he takes Wagner seriously.

The situation is quite different with Heidegger. He more nearly tries to manage the trick we mentioned earlier of presenting Hölderlin as an exemplar—as an exemplar for *us*, and not just himself, we should note—without having to first take him as an example. What this means for Hölderlin's seriousness is that Heidegger wants to place it more or less beyond question. That is, Hölderlin is emphatically presented as the sovereign exception to a serious world, to a world in which empty exemplarity is the rule. In this world, surrounded by individuals who take their idle talk and sweeping generalisations all too seriously, what makes Hölderlin so exceptional is his being unmoved by all these claims to seriousness. Unlike all these others who clamour for their ten minutes of fame, Hölderlin as he is portrayed by Heidegger does not ask that we take him seriously. Rather what is asked of us—or more exactly, what we are *called* upon to do—is to take *poetry* seriously.

But as appealing as this apparent modesty is, there is a problem with the insistence upon works of art: namely, the fact that Heidegger's philosophy of art offers us no sure method for identifying these works that we are to take so seriously. Rather than provide us with an approach that would distinguish works of art from non-works, Heidegger simply assumes that there are such things as works of art and that they are readily recognisable. It is this assumption that we want to probe because it has some odd effects, most notable of which being that the question of art boils down to the issue of *who* creates the works. This is to return to the notion of an artistic Midas touch, which we mentioned earlier as characteristic of the exemplarity of the artist. As we will see, Hölderlin represents an extreme version of this notion. This is particularly evident as concerns Heidegger's understanding of the poet's letter to

Böhlendorff from 4 December 1801. According to the notion of an artistic Midas touch, a letter can serve the needs of interpretation just as well as a poem, and as such it is perhaps not surprising to find that this letter has been scrutinised not only by Heidegger, but also by Peter Szondi, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Andrzej Warminski.<sup>55</sup>

But why is this letter of such interest? For Heidegger, at least, the key moment in it lies in the relation it establishes between the Greeks and the Germans. For one of the 'odd effects' of taking works of art for granted as Heidegger does, is to restrict oneself from venturing outside the range of the most commonly accepted instances of work of art. If he is to speak about Hölderlin as a *poet*, he must be able to relate the latter's poetry to works of art which are, more or less, uncontested in their identification as such. Greek art fits this description, and it is for this reason that Heidegger takes up the well-worn task of relating modern German art to classical Greek productions, a task that was already a bit old fashioned in Nietzsche's day. Moreover, it is the reference to Nietzsche that we must keep in mind, because Heidegger clearly believes that he can overcome the shortcomings of the earlier philosopher's theory of the birth of tragedy. However, as we will see, even if Heidegger makes this Greek-German story work, he makes it quite difficult for the artist himself to do so. And without the artist's work, there is no room for our own work, no room for bearing witness, no room for hope.

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So to turn to the letter: What Heidegger achieves in his reading of it is to operate a twist on the relation between the Greeks and the Germans such that we are saved from an endless cycle of birth and rebirth. If one recalls, the problem with Nietzsche's structure was that even if Greek *failure* augured German *success*, Greek *success* would augur German *failure*. Heidegger's solution is elegantly simple: deny the Greeks the success that points to German failure. Even if the Greeks accomplish *their*

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<sup>55</sup> See, respectively, 'Hölderlin's Overcoming of Classicism' (*Comparative Criticism* 1983, 5), 'Hölderlin et les Grecs' (*L'Imitation des Modernes*) and 'Hölderlin in France' (*Readings in Interpretation*).



‘highest’ in the ‘construction of Being’ in exemplary works of art,<sup>56</sup> this ‘success’ is their *failure* to achieve the ‘free use of the proper’ that Hölderlin sets forth in his letter to Böhlendorff as the essential task of the poet. What this means is that exemplarity pertains to the Greeks *only* as regards works of art. Moreover, Heidegger avoids other complications—though as we will see, this approach also has its weaknesses—by not explicitly pairing artists and philosophers as Nietzsche does. Rather, philosophy seems to be implied by art itself, with the exemplarity of Greek art comprehending the failings of Greek philosophy—and in particular Platonic philosophy—to pose the question of Being, and thus grapple with what is ‘proper’.

But what is it about ‘the free use of the proper’ which dooms the Greeks to such a spectacular failure? We might first note that the notion of the ‘free use of the proper’ arises in the letter as a response to the difficulty of creating a properly German tragedy. When Hölderlin asserts the importance of such ‘free use’, he is responding to Böhlendorff’s tragic work *Fernando*, and although he kindly calls it ‘on the whole, an authentic modern tragedy’, he also says that he needs to study it more thoroughly before he can ‘say something interesting about it’.<sup>57</sup> His polite reserve explains why, in the same letter, he tries to elucidate the essential dilemma of the German tragedian (and thus implicitly to admit *Fernando*’s failure to overcome it):

‘However, the proper [*das Eigene*] must be learned just as much as the foreign. For this reason the Greeks are indispensable for us. We will not follow them directly into our proper, [our] national [*Nationellen*], because, as said, the *free* use of the *proper* is the most difficult’.<sup>58</sup>

To attain to the ‘free use of the proper’, then, the modern German poet must look to the Greeks, not as models or examples, but as his other, as the ‘foreign’ he must learn. This makes some sense of the failure of the Greeks: namely, since they came first, they were denied any confrontation with their other, the Germans. However, for this explanation to have any philosophical weight it must be more than a coincidence of world-historical time that things happened in precisely this order. To this end,

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 293.

<sup>57</sup> Hölderlin, F. *Hölderlins Werke und Briefe*, Bd. 2, p. 941.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

Hölderlin offers an *ahistorical* basis for the differing destinies of the Greeks and the Germans, according to which these two peoples exist in a relation of inverted mimesis as regards their innate and assigned or learned characteristics:

‘We do not learn anything more difficult than to freely use the national.  
And as I see it, the clearness of representation is as natural to us as the fire  
from heaven is for the Greeks...

‘It sounds paradoxical... the truly national will become the lesser trait with  
the advance of cultivation. For this reason are the Greeks less masters of  
the holy pathos [i.e. the ‘fire from heaven’], because it is innate to them,  
whereas they excel in their ability to represent...

‘For us it is reversed...’<sup>59</sup>

The problem for the Greeks, therefore, is that their innate openness to the ‘fire from heaven’ dooms them to a naïvety that bars them from ever learning to ‘freely use the proper’. Instead of learning, they express the heavenly fire in representational works of art, as would be expected from their assigned nature. Inversely, the Germans have a natural propensity towards a ‘clearness of representation’, and thus the possibility to succeed in the necessary learning, if they would only cease treating the ‘fire from heaven’ as something learnable. The implications of the latter’s projected success, however, depends upon one’s interpretation of the letter. According to Heidegger’s, this success will *never* be to ‘exceed the highest of the Greeks’.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the German poet’s task is to become authentically German by learning to freely use his flair for representational clarity. But if this excludes writing a German tragedy to rival Homer—since this would be to rival the Greeks’ artistic ‘highest’—what does it mean? To answer this we must realise that in Heidegger’s hands the relation between the Greeks and the Germans ceases to be reserved to questions of tragic art, and rather comes to embrace the destinies of the peoples themselves.<sup>61</sup> On this basis, the

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 940.

<sup>60</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 293.

<sup>61</sup> Christopher Fynsk notes this difference, as well. As he points out, ‘Hölderlin’s primary concern [is] with his *craft*, and it is Heidegger’s shift away from this emphasis, which allows him to ignore

differentiation between Greek and German character comes to resemble that between artists and philosophers—or as Heidegger puts it, poets and thinkers. This is not to say that Heidegger considers the Greeks artists, and the Germans thinkers. It is more nearly the case that he considers the Greeks as artists who are *artists*, and the Germans as artists who are really *thinkers*. In fact, he understands Hölderlin in precisely this way when he says at the outset of the lectures on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein* that ‘Hölderlin is one of our greatest, that is, our most futural *thinkers*, because he is our greatest *poet*’.<sup>62</sup>

This double positing, where the question of the relation between the thinker and the poet is inseparable from the question of the destinies of historical peoples, follows what Susanne Ziegler notes in her book, *Zum Verhältnis von Dichten und Denken bei Martin Heidegger*: ‘Regardless of whether the relation between poetising and thinking is viewed by Heidegger as indicating identity, neighbourhood, or a springing-out-of-one-another, it appears in connection with the futural beginning of history such that the relation between poetising and thinking is one side and the history of man the other’.<sup>63</sup> That is, by working out the relation between poetising and thinking through the respective destinies of these two peoples, Heidegger is able to project a futural beginning of history in which self-realisation—the free use of the proper—is possible. Whereas a work of art may be the ‘highest’ for the Greeks; for the Germans, their innate ability to comprehend (*Fassenkönnen*), or as Hölderlin puts it, their ‘clearness of representation’, will permit them to realise themselves historically. However, this ability, this ‘proper’, will lead to no more than empty speculation if it cannot be used freely, that is, unless it is liberated from subjective manipulation and transformed into an ‘assigned’.<sup>64</sup> For this to occur, there must be essential contact with the foreign, with the ‘fire from heaven’ innate to the Greeks.

Or, at least, this is the story. Or should we really say history, as Heidegger wants us to? We have reason to be reluctant. Because when Heidegger transforms the ‘free

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Hölderlin’s insistence upon the task of *translation*, and thus the impossibility of the sort of pure founding Heidegger proposes’. (*Heidegger: Thought and Historicity*, p. 179)

<sup>62</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ziegler, Susanne. *Zum Verhältnis von Dichten und Denken bei Martin Heidegger*, p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Heidegger puts it as follows: ‘Die geschichtliche Bestimmung ist immer, das Mitgegebene, das “Nationelle”, in das Aufgegebene zu verwandeln’. (*Hölderlins Hymnen ‘Germanien’ und ‘Der Rhein’*, p. 292)

use of the proper' into the historical destiny of the German people as poetic thinkers, he does it without sufficient respect for two important distinctions. One, perhaps unexpectedly, is that between thinkers and poets. By linking the relation between thinking and poetising to the destinies of peoples, Heidegger makes that relation so totalising as to eliminate the particularity that would ever allow poets and thinkers to become exemplars either for themselves or for us. In Heidegger's version of things, individual thinkers and poets vanish in the overwhelming glow that emanates from their belonging to a given people. Heidegger's comment about Hölderlin being both the German's greatest poet and their greatest thinker is symptomatic, because what this really acknowledges is that the latter possesses the innate and assigned characteristics of all Germans—this people of poets and thinkers—but fails to acknowledge his particularity, or what it means to be either a poet or a thinker.

The second neglected distinction is that between the poetic and the real or world-historical. This is a tension we identified at the beginning of this chapter when we warned against thinking of the exemplary artist either as some sort of mythical conduit for the hand of god or as identical with his world-historical life. To attempt a reconciliation of these two extremes, as Heidegger does by blithely mixing the poetic and world-historical, is to make the poetic seem banal and the world-historical a lie. This is what occurs in the lectures on *Andenken*, when Heidegger explains *with a straight face* that nineteenth century France stands for ancient Greece in the case of Hölderlin.<sup>65</sup> And not just figuratively. It is *only* if Hölderlin is truly 'one struck by Apollo'<sup>66</sup> on his return from France in 1802 that it is at all believable that he 'experiences Being in its entirety out of the ground of its suffering', and thus can 'see the essence of Greek existence in its essential opposition to the essence of the Germans'.<sup>67</sup> In other words, without this experience—of France, of Greece?!—as the guarantor of Hölderlin's insight, the whole structure of inverted mimesis between the Germans and the Greeks comes into doubt, and with it the founding work of the poet with regard to what is 'proper'.

<sup>65</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins 'Andenken'*, p. 184: 'Dieses südliche Land und sein Feuer steht für das Griechenland'.

<sup>66</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 290.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

The effect of these neglected distinctions—a neglect, we might note, that is continuous with Heidegger's inability to differentiate works of art from non-works—is to make it nearly impossible for us to relate to Hölderlin as an exemplar. That is, how are we ever to bear witness that we *too* belong by our creation of a world if our only model for doing so is a nineteenth century poet and thinker seemingly capable of time travel? Or of miracles? Or of charlatanism? Or of madness? Whatever Hölderlin's experience in France, whatever his experience of poetising and thinking, his experience cannot serve as a model, because what it implies is that before we can bear witness by creating a world we already have to be living in it, we already need to have stepped out of world-historical time and into the pages of popular myth.

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Heidegger would probably challenge us at this point by arguing that such a leap is necessary at some stage if we are to have any hope of a new beginning; saying that, of course a new beginning will always appear as nothing more than myth when presented before its time. Yet, as sound as this idea may be, we still have every reason to ask why (or even how) we would leap after *Hölderlin* when what Heidegger does in the story of Hölderlin—such as it is related in the lectures on *Andenken* and elsewhere—is to deny us any chance to do so.

That we are to be disappointed by this story is not immediately obvious. For as a whole, Hölderlin's story is an endearing tragic-heroic tale, in which a brave poet sets out to liberate his 'homeland' from being 'closed up, unilluminated and unfree'.<sup>68</sup> After journeying to a foreign land, where he is threatened with consumption by 'the heavenly fire' proper to it, the poet returns home out of this other.<sup>69</sup> What happens next is admittedly a little unclear; there is some ambiguity as to whether this homecoming has any significance—as to whether it is really a homecoming at all, would be a more Heideggerian way of putting this. For, in an echo of the *Odyssey*,

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<sup>68</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins 'Andenken'*, p. 190: 'Im Beginn ist die Heimat noch in sich selbst verschlossen, ungelichtet und unfrei und so noch nicht zu sich selbst gekommen'. Note the biblical tenor of this phrase.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Heidegger says that 'the poet has returned home unnoticed by the majority'.<sup>70</sup> In addition, unlike in the *Odyssey*, where there is ultimately the triumphant victory over the suitors, no such heroism appears to be imminent in the case of the poet. However, as inauspicious as this situation is, for Heidegger, the poet's anonymity is precisely what demonstrates his 'success', his 'free use of the proper'. How is this possible? It is, because by Heidegger's logic, if the majority *had* noticed the poet, it would be because they could see that there was something different about him, that he wasn't like 'normal' Germans, like the rest of them—or more to the point, that he was *properly* German, and they were not. As such, then, their myopia is more nearly evidence that they themselves are becoming proper than any indication that the poet has failed to change anything; their myopia indicates that the poet has indeed freed them for the proper. After the poet's homecoming, their properness can express itself properly, and the Germans achieve the historical self-realisation that we mentioned earlier as their projected destiny.

There is a question mark, though: Is this really a *new* beginning? In other words, what exactly happens at the point the Germans are freed for their proper? Isn't this simply the moment that the Germans become.... well, German? To answer, we might return to the Greek-German pairing that motivates this moment. What we have been saying is that German self-realisation is essentially related to the Greek accomplishment of their 'highest' in works of art. But what exactly is this relation? We have said that it is a relation of *inverted* mimesis, and that, as inverted, it means that neither Greek works of art nor the Greeks themselves can serve as models for German self-realisation. Just the same, it is a mimetic relation, and what is mirrored in the two peoples is a moment of realisation. That is, German *self*-realisation mirrors Greek realisation *in works of art*. Moreover, if we also recall that one of the 'odd effects' of Heidegger's lack of criteria for works of art is that it is *who* created the works and not anything about them that is significant, what we also now see is that the Greek accomplishment cannot be limited to just *some* Greek works of art. Because every Greek work of art is Greek, every Greek work of art is a *example* of the Greeks' innate openness to the 'fire from heaven'. By the same token and the logic of inverted mimesis, therefore, once freed for their proper, every German

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

becomes an *example* of what it is to be properly German, without exception...except for the poet, of course. And this is a situation we should recognise. It is yet again the domination of the rule of exemplarity—this time, the rule of exemplary Germans—made possible by the exceptional exemplarity of the poet, and this is not a genuinely new beginning. As Alexander García Düttmann expresses it in his writings on Heidegger and Hölderlin, ‘the beginning must already bear a name’ and that name is Graeco-German.<sup>71</sup> Just as every Greek work of art is an example of the Greeks’ innate openness to the ‘fire from heaven’, the post-Hölderlinian necessity for the Germans to be properly German means they can be nothing but.

Rather than embodying hope, therefore, this ‘beginning’ sows the seeds of despair. Not because of what it does or does not promise, but because it does not promise at all, it tells. Perhaps because he never allows himself to take Hölderlin as an example, because he never really reaches out from his particularity to Hölderlin’s, Heidegger never entirely lets Hölderlin stand as an exemplar. Rather than treat Hölderlin as an exemplar from whom we still have something to learn, Heidegger says what Hölderlin is there for—what the poet is there for. Rather than ask whether Hölderlin should be taken seriously, Heidegger takes it for granted that he is.

### **Taking for granted**

This last criticism may seem to miss its mark, since Heidegger, of course, doesn’t intend to take Hölderlin in any fashion at all—not for granted, not as serious, and certainly not as an example. He wants to see Hölderlin as he *is*, and that is the motivation behind the elaborate historical narrative about the Greeks, the Germans and works of art. And yet, as I am sure some have noticed, this whole story is circular. Greek works of art provide a foundation for the modern German poet, but at

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<sup>71</sup> Düttmann, Alexander García. *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, p. 172. This is a reference to Düttmann’s thesis that both Adorno and Heidegger ‘name the name’ in their respective reflections on Auschwitz and the ‘Graeco-Germanic mission’. For Düttmann, ‘Heidegger *names* what is Greek and what is German’ (p. 170), but he is only able to do this because this power to name—which constitutes the beginning or homecoming—is already named, already Graeco-German. The significance of this naming with regard to exemplarity is that it implies an exceptional capacity—the exceptional capacity of the poet—to name the entire German people and all Greek works as inexcusable examples.

the same time, it is only if the founding work undertaken by the latter realises the link between the Germans and the Greeks that Greek art becomes so essential at all.

Heidegger allows this circle to stand because for him it is more nearly a challenge than a problem that such a circle violates logic. In fact, if there is something that Heidegger *does* take seriously, it is circles such as this one; Hölderlin's dance with the Greeks is only a reflection of the circular relations underpinning both the work of art and *Dasein* itself.<sup>72</sup> However, by starting with a circle, with a set of self-referential relations, Heidegger cannot pose questions that might threaten the circle itself. And this is how Hölderlin gets taken for granted. Because his work, his founding, is part of what founds the circle itself, it can never be placed in doubt. As a consequence, his work is both serious and non-serious—both real and mythical—and at the same time, neither the one nor the other. It exists in a sort of philosophical limbo—as an activity that is not active, as work without works—it exists, in other words, only as an idea. And once artistic activity, the work of the exemplary artist, becomes an idea, it risks becoming nothing but an abstraction, something that potentially has great philosophical significance, but little regard for anything or anyone else.

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We see a similar risk at play in Adorno's critical assessment of Schönberg's heirs, Webern and Berg. In this assessment, the artistic activity of Schönberg becomes such an overwhelming idea that it absorbs that of his heirs. Their artistic activity, limited as it is to providing examples of Schönberg's exceptionality, denies itself as artistic activity, the composers themselves seeming nothing but placeholders in an artistic development that occurs somewhere other than in their efforts:

‘With Schönberg the creations of his followers are necessarily the stage on which his own are linked to the broad stretch of musical history. This is attested by their close adherence to his music; they owe him not a vague variety of style and technical means, but the strict basis of musical knowledge. At the same time he demands the greatest independence so that they may concretely fulfill what he offers as a possibility, realizes but

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<sup>72</sup> The identification of a hermeneutical circle is one of the first moves of both *Being and Time* (see § 2 and 32) and ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ (p. 18).



once, and which can survive only when their own substance fills in the outlines of his pattern'.<sup>73</sup>

If Schönberg's music exists for his heirs, not as a set of rules or technical means, but as the basis for 'musical knowledge', and most notably the knowledge of what is to be created, then his heirs are no longer in a position to drive their own artistic activity forward. Their activity is directed toward *substantiating* Schönberg's exceptional exemplarity rather than establishing their own. As Adorno puts it, 'Berg and Webern both may be said to present commentaries on Schönberg', and even if 'by reason of this are assured of a place in the totality of history',<sup>74</sup> the certainty of their 'place' is the most decisive denial of their artistic activity. For according to Adorno's *own* philosophy, it is an artist's ability to stand *against* history—to found it anew—that is most essential.

Moreover, one essay in which Adorno develops this philosophy of historical renewal is that which records his reaction to Schönberg's death. When Adorno calls 13 July 1951—the date of the composer's death—a 'caesura in the history of new music',<sup>75</sup> he is speaking of a history that proceeds only by leaps and overcomings. And yet, even if this caesura is apiece with a history of renewal, it also threatens it with permanent cessation. For if the situation during the composer's life is that his artistic activity constitutes the exception to the rule of exemplarity—to the rule of the most advanced material, according to which every work serves as an example of its material moment, and Schönberg is the only one who can advance the moment itself—after his death there are nothing but examples of the most advanced material as it exists on 13 July 1951. Or to put it another way, if Schönberg's heirs depend upon him for 'musical knowledge', his mortality points to a historical delimitation of that very knowledge. What is surprising is that Adorno himself doesn't immediately see the problem. Rather he continues to tie the development of new music with the development of Schönberg, almost as if the latter's self-knowledge were the knowledge of new music itself: 'For each of his works it behoves the artist to heed the demand which Rilke

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<sup>73</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Berg and Webern—Schönberg's Heirs', pp 446-47.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>75</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Entwicklung und Formen der Neuen Musik', p. 118.

attributed to the archaic torso of Apollo: You must change your life'.<sup>76</sup> Yet, unless one imagines death to be the next phase of new music—which is precisely the possibility that comes to haunt Adorno later on—the passing away of the composer marks the expiration of the possibility for new music to continue as a program of self-development. That is to say, once Schönberg's exceptional example is no longer available—his work no longer at work, so to speak—new music itself is brought into question. It is this bringing into question in Adorno's essays from the 50's and early 60's that turns Schönberg's artistic activity into an idea so philosophically powerful, so as to no longer be indebted even to the artist himself.

In these considerations, an important shift seems to occur in 1955, for in this year Adorno develops a notion of new music which firmly distinguishes it from traditional music without *necessarily* privileging Schönberg. At first it doesn't seem a dramatic transformation of Adorno's thought. What he says is that any music 'that has not measured itself against the experience of the radically modern, as it is represented by the Viennese School of Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, is clearly something scarcely suitable'.<sup>77</sup> In other words, he still identifies Schönberg (though in a more equal partnership with his heirs) as *the* example of new music. Just the same, he also offers a description of what makes this school *the* example—that is, the experience of the radically modern—and by naming this experience, he at least opens the possibility that others can measure themselves upon it, as well. Certainly it is much more possible than when Schönberg's own development is the measure.

But this new possibility also inaugurates a new critical task: namely, to relate new music to music in general.<sup>78</sup> As long as it is Schönberg's activity that identifies new music, then the composer himself is the link, Adorno going so far as to attribute to the

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Neue Musik heute'. Adorno does try in this essay to understand why contemporary musical production does not live up to this standard and offers the suggestion that composers of this generation 'are perhaps all too much exposed to the chaos of reality to look it aesthetically in the eye' (p. 130). This notion of an increasingly inhospitable environment for composition, such as would block the necessary experience, is echoed in the 'Aging of New Music' from 1954, where Adorno says that 'the anxiety that gave shape to its [i.e. new music's] great founding works has been repressed. Perhaps this anxiety has become so overwhelming in reality that its undisguised image would scarcely be bearable' (p. 98).

<sup>78</sup> Other essays which form a part of this effort to distinguish music from new music include 'Music and New Music' from 1960, where Adorno concludes that 'music in general will be absorbed into the new music' (p. 268), and 'The Criteria of New Music' from 1957, where Adorno undertakes an abortive attempt to arrive at criteria for new music.

latter an almost mystical ability to grasp and renew the total state of musical material.<sup>79</sup> Once some sort of experience of the radically modern comes into play, however, then it is more nearly the case that something must happen to divide new music from music, that something must call for music's renewal. What happens, apparently, is that music itself calls for its own renewal, and even if it is Schönberg who heeds this call, his role is determined less by his actions than by the history of inverted mimesis—in the mould of Heidegger—that informs it.

According to this story,<sup>80</sup> music begins with Bach when he brings together two contradictory tendencies:

‘On the one hand, [music] is tied into a system, the system of triads, keys and their relationships. On the other hand, the subject is trying to express itself in it; instead of every norm that is merely imposed externally, it wants to generate the regularities from within’.<sup>81</sup>

As one should expect, however, Bach's success in founding music in this fashion is not total, and as such also constitutes music's failure. That is, there remains in music as Bach conceives of it—and in spite of subsequent developments—an inadequacy felt in its ‘external, compulsive moment’.<sup>82</sup> Bach himself was aware of this inadequacy, and for this reason

‘drew on the polyphonic arts of the medieval Low Countries, which were already archaic in his era, in order to overcome [*aufheben*] the gravity of [music's] schema by dint of the complete integration of all the voices... so that the music, as it were, owes nothing to anything except what it is itself, here and now’.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See in particular the reading in chapter two of ‘Arnold Schönberg (I)’.

<sup>80</sup> Based on Edward Said's reading of Adorno's writings on music entitled ‘Adorno as Lateness Itself’, it could be argued that there is an alternative version of this story, where it is Beethoven, rather than Bach, who plays the role of originary lack. However, this shift of actors, even if it changes the focus to music in the modern era, does not substantially change the structure of the story.

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, T.W. ‘Toward an Understanding of Schönberg’, p. 633.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

What we need to recognise is that this eighteenth century failure to completely integrate voices is precisely the disruptive inadequacy that calls for Schönberg's twentieth century attempt to totally organise musical material.<sup>84</sup> In the two hundred years that intervene, this integrative task lies dormant—disappearing 'immediately after the death of Bach'—with only 'a tendency to dissonance'<sup>85</sup> to even mark its existence.

According to Adorno, Schönberg is the composer who rediscovers this fundamental task, but he doesn't have to be, and none of Adorno's explanations—no matter how outlandishly persuasive—can ever disguise this structural implication of the story.<sup>86</sup> That is, because new music is called for by music itself, it only requires from the modern composer a kind of artistic midwifery, and not artistic activity as it can only be undertaken by an actual artist. The story of inverted mimesis takes an *idea* of artistic activity—here, an idea of an integrative activity which can overcome the divisions of subject and object, freedom and necessity—and treats it as a philosophical certainty immune from the vicissitudes of empirical activity. And in fact, in an odd reversal, this certainty becomes the measure of artistic activity itself, replacing the earlier mooted for possibility of an experience of the radically modern. This allows philosophy to become the gatekeeper of the modern, denouncing deviations from the historico-philosophical script. This is what Adorno is doing when he declaims Schönberg's twelve tone works as a betrayal of earlier promise.

But the question is: what promise? Or even whose? That is, what happens when artistic activity ceases to be artistic and becomes a philosopheme? Answer: it ceases to offer the promise that made it so revolutionary in the first place. Only as long as artistic activity remains uncertain, and its potential dubious, can it still promise. The history of inverted mimesis would betray this promise by assuring itself of art's potential, with the irony that the greater this certainty, the less there is anything to be certain about. And once the idea of artistic activity entirely disassociates itself from

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<sup>84</sup> See Adorno, T.W. 'The Function of Counterpoint in New Music', p. 124 on this 'total organisation'.

<sup>85</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Toward an Understanding of Schönberg', p. 633.

<sup>86</sup> These 'explanations' contain the expected dose of mythology, attributing to Schönberg an otherworldly relation to music and history: he apparently 'bore within himself the entire heritage of romanticism', and that the romantic 'urge [*Drang*] to let pass [or express] only those things that he was able to feel entirely from within himself' was in him developed 'to the extreme' (p. 634).

the uncertainty that comes from the real life actions of an artist, it disassociates itself from life itself and becomes an abstraction. It becomes something taken for granted, a strategic move in a philosophical argument, so autonomous that it has no need for the artist as example.

### *Vers une musique exemplaire*

In spite of the lost promise, however, an optimist could read the foregoing paragraphs as a portrayal of a philosopher's *liberation* from the exemplarity of an artist. And certainly if there were a candidate for such an undertaking Adorno would be one of them—along with Nietzsche, no doubt.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, even after this hard-won separation, a philosopher has not reached the frontiers of artistic exemplarity. This may indeed be the last word on an artist's exceptional or mythical exemplarity, but it is just the initial outline of the exemplarity of his works of art. Moreover and as we will see in the following chapters, the separation of the artist from his works—a move both essential to philosophical liberation and the basis for the exemplarity of works of art—never comes off without a hitch. That is, even when an artist is neglected in favour of his works, that neglect itself has philosophical significance, and even when a philosopher might respond to the question of whether he takes an artist seriously by emphatically saying 'no', this does not mean that the question itself can be ignored. Indeed, the very fact that the artist *must* be neglected indicates that the latter's seriousness is still very much at stake. As we will see, by continuing to question an artist's seriousness we gain insight into how things should *not* be and how things should *not* be done. After his exemplarity, in other words, an artist become a counter-example, an example of what *not* to do.

But before we turn to this, we should put the story of the exceptional exemplary artist to rest. As we have seen, his seriousness very often depends upon a history of inverted mimesis, whereby past failure is transformed into futural success, a history which is both for and because of the artist, and as such means that everything in it is

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<sup>87</sup> As we have already noted, this 'liberation' has very real philosophical significance in Adorno's case and allows him to move from *The Philosophy of Modern Music* with its privileging of Schönberg to *Aesthetic Theory*, in which no particular artist or school is taken as *the* example.

exemplary of and for his exceptional role. But as we have also seen, the more airtight the story becomes, the less it has to do with the artist, the less his artistic activity is really artistic. And when the latter is taken so far as to become philosophical, it is taken for granted; the artist becomes excluded from the history that he himself initiates in favour of his works.

In the case of Schönberg, this occurs at the moment Adorno sets aside new music in order to project the *naissance* of a new type of exemplary work of art: namely, *musique informelle*. *Musique informelle* does not exist in the sense that most music would be said to do so—it does not exist as compositions and performed collections of sounds. And yet, it would be a mistake to completely dismiss it as imaginary, because, as prescriptive music, as music that *should* be, it exists in relation to the very real experience of ‘musical emancipation’ which Adorno associates with the works of the Schönbergian revolution of new music. In fact, *musique informelle* could be said to relate to Schönberg in the same way that Schönberg is said to relate to Bach in the earlier essay ‘Toward an Understanding of Schönberg’. What Adorno says exactly is the following:

‘Such informal music had been a real possibility once before, around 1910. The date is not irrelevant, since it provides a demarcation line, dividing the age from the vastly overrated twenties. The beginnings can be seen in the period when Schönberg wrote *Erwartung*, *Die glückliche Hand* and *Herzgewächse*, and Stravinsky the *Three Poems from the Japanese*. But this age, the age of synthetic Cubism, soon drifted into other directions’.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, and as it turns out—though really it should not come as much of a surprise—the Schönbergian revolution was a failure. Success, that is to say, *musique informelle*, will only come when we take up the task ‘to resume the process which Schönberg throttled at the very moment when his brilliant innovation appeared to give it fresh impetus’.<sup>89</sup> At this moment, the composer is made an example of, denounced as an example of what not to do. In response, we are challenged by Adorno to

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<sup>88</sup> Adorno, T.W. ‘Vers une musique informelle’, p. 273.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

appropriate the composer's gift, 'his brilliant innovation', and treat it like an autonomous operation that can be put to work in other contexts and for other ends.<sup>90</sup> However, even if we are successful in taking the composer's gift for granted, we are still dependent upon his works of art as examples, for as has been said, *musique informelle* stands directly in relation with the experience of 'musical emancipation' elicited by these works. It is for this reason that Adorno looks to these works all the while warning against 'a repeat of the style of 1910'.<sup>91</sup> These works form a *musique exemplaire* that is exemplary in its failure—just like Euripides' plays, just like Greek works of art,<sup>92</sup> just like Bach's experiments with the archaic music of the medieval Dutch.

The implication of this, of course, is that *musique exemplaire*, or any other exemplary work of art, is always also a failure. However, this failure only appears when we consider a work of art in relation to the *working* of another artist—in other words, only as long as we read history as a history of inverted mimesis with an exceptionally exemplary artist as its tragic hero. Once this story is brought into question, we are able to consider other exemplarities of the work of art.

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Buck-Morss identifies this tendency in Adorno's thought when she says: 'Indisputable at least is the significance for Adorno of correct cognitive procedure understood as a structure, or "model", which could be translated into different modes and different realms of intellectual discourse. Hence, for example, he could see parallels between the structure of Schönberg's composing and Freudian analytical procedure. Or he could discern echoes of Schönberg in the structure of Benjamin's writing' (p. 131). Moreover, as Buck-Morss goes on to develop throughout *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, perhaps the most important model is indeed that of Schönberg's composing. (See, for example, p. 129)

<sup>91</sup> Adorno, T.W. '*Vers une musique informelle*', p. 275.

<sup>92</sup> One might protest here that Heidegger, who is being referred to, did not consider Greek works of art a failure, and in fact described them as the 'highest' of the Greeks. Nevertheless, these works do represent a certain failure in that they indicate the inability of the Greeks to attain the 'free use of the proper'.

## chapter five

### The exemplarities of the work of art

*By introducing the problematic of the philosophical voice, we will investigate in this chapter how a concern for instrumentality gives rise to various exemplarities of the work of art.*

### The question concerning the philosopher

At the outset of the fourth stanza of his poem *Andenken*, Hölderlin asks, '*Wo aber sind die Freunde?*' 'Where are the friends?' It is a question whose colloquial character reasonably elicits much curiosity in the context of a poem whose language otherwise challenges our understanding. As Heidegger points out, '[t]his question is the only question of the poem and perhaps even *the* question of the poem'.<sup>1</sup> But rather than consider Heidegger's reasons for saying this, we might take a cue from the gesture itself, and ask what could be *the* question of Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin. That is to say, when Heidegger proposes to read *Andenken* so as 'to think the poeticised in Hölderlin's word',<sup>2</sup> what question could we pose that would disclose the thinking of this thinking? This is to ask with Véronique Fôti, 'why Heidegger's thought is constrained to articulate itself through appropriations, rather than straightforwardly and in a genuinely dialogical manner'.<sup>3</sup> Or to pose with Robert Bernasconi, 'the question of Heidegger's own access to the work' of art.<sup>4</sup> It is to ask, in other words, '*Wo aber ist der Philosoph?*'

Where is the philosopher? What is his position with regard to the works of art that he does not create and yet claims for his own philosophy? Heidegger's extensive reading of Hölderlin's poems obviously begs this question, but so does Adorno's apparent insight into Schönberg's compositions. That is, what are we really to make of Adorno's claim that the rules of twelve-tone technique are 'configurations of the

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's 'Andenken'*, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Fôti, Véronique. 'Heidegger, Hölderlin, and Sophoclean Tragedy', p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. 'The Greatness of the Work of Art', p. 104.



historical force present in the material’?<sup>5</sup> Aren’t we in our rights to wonder how he can be so sure about what’s going on in these works? Nietzsche would seem to give answer to our scepticism when he proposes the union of philosophy and art,<sup>6</sup> and yet his suggestion glosses over the very issue at stake here—the cumbersome materiality of the work of art. As we have seen, it is relatively straightforward to imagine partnerships between artists and philosophers, and yet precisely what becomes a challenge in such partnerships is to account for the work of art. Think, for instance, of the aesthetic spectator in *The Birth of Tragedy* and the difficulties of imagining a form of spectatorship that would actually create works. Or Hölderlin’s existence as both poet and thinker: Are his letters really works of art? Otto Pöggeler would say that this last question misses the point, that ‘Hölderlin’s poems are not an object determined by Heidegger’s philosophy as a work of art,’—and thus that it would be pointless to quibble about whether something was a poem or a letter—and that rather ‘Hölderlin’s poetry is the partner of Heidegger’s thinking, and in this partnership thinking gains a new language’.<sup>7</sup> Just the same, isn’t this simply to displace the problem of the work of art to this ‘new language’? Isn’t our willingness to acknowledge this ‘new language’ predicated precisely upon our belief that it is the product of a genuine encounter between thought and art, between a philosopher and a work of art? That is, what is at stake with the work of art is precisely the possibility of such an encounter, and in fact, positing a ‘new language’ can actually obscure it.<sup>8</sup> As such, our task is to scrutinize the movement by which, for instance, ‘Heidegger’s language is saturated by Hölderlin’s’<sup>9</sup> as Andrzej Warminski puts it. We want to examine what philosophers see in works of art, and thus do not consider benign, as Beda Allemann does, that Heidegger’s *Erläuterungen* render ‘the poem transparent as regards its unsaid’.<sup>10</sup> We want to address what occurs before a work becomes transparent, before a philosopher’s language becomes saturated with that of an

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp 63–4.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 95 (already cited earlier): ‘Whither does the union of German music and German philosophy point, if not to a new mode of existence of which we can only gain an inkling through Greek analogies?’

<sup>7</sup> Pöggeler, Otto. ‘Heidegger on Art’, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, in fact, even thinks of this obscuration as a goal of interpretation: ‘The goal of true interpretation consists only in making itself superfluous. The more complete an interpretation’s construction is, the more decisively it has in the end dismantled, and thus denied itself, so that only the poet’s word speaks’. (*Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘Andenken’*, pp 38–9, already cited in chapter one)

<sup>9</sup> Warminski, Andrzej. ‘Heidegger Reading Hölderlin’, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Allemann, Beda. *Hölderlin und Heidegger*, p. 166.

artist—before, in other words, philosopher, artist and work of art are *superseded* by the ‘word’, to use Heidegger’s own terminology, with all its theological undertones.<sup>11</sup>

Notions such as that of the ‘word’ or the union of philosophy and art hide a philosopher’s voice, his position with regard to the works of art that he takes so seriously. And yet, as we noted in the second chapter, the question that immediately imposes itself about the work of art is indeed *who* decides *which* works, and once this question is breached, the position of the philosopher must be taken into account. Very often the philosopher would have us believe that the work of art is not *chosen* but presents itself as exemplary just as supposedly does the exemplary artist, and yet because the latter has to be expropriated of his works in order for this to be possible, the claim falls very easily into suspicion. Our suspicion, however, is not that the work of art is not necessarily exemplary, but simply that it is exemplary in ways different from that the philosopher is claiming. It is only if we think about where the philosopher is, that is to say, only if we take his voice into account that we can perceive these other exemplarities.

### The question concerning the work of art

In this examination, it would seem that Nietzsche’s notion of a ‘physiological’ aesthetics, of an aesthetics that is an ‘applied physiology’, would provide a good starting point, since it would seem that a philosopher’s voice remains very much in focus as long as his objections are ‘physiological objections’, and he sees no purpose being ‘served by disguising the same under aesthetic formulae’.<sup>12</sup> And yet, there exists a question mark as to how these ‘physiological’ reactions really relate to works of art. For instance, how much can Nietzsche really be registering about works if his

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<sup>11</sup> The theological implications of Heidegger’s writings on Hölderlin were not at all lost on his own contemporaries. Max Kommerell questioned it in 1942. Responding to Heidegger’s lecture ‘*Wie wenn am Feiertage...*’, Kommerell asks: ‘Where is the transition, where your own philosophy flows into Hölderlin, and where it, starting as a description of the human situation, becomes in such a decisive way a metaphysical declaration and absolute, ultimate certainty—where does it find this certainty in itself, and compares itself on this point with Hölderlin—and finally where it approaches poetry in the specific nature of its declaration?’ (pp 400-01).

<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, p. 416. The full phrase runs as follows: ‘[m]eine Einwände gegen die Musik Wagners sind physiologische Einwände: wozu dieselben erst noch unter ästhetische Formeln verkleiden? Ästhetik ist ja nichts als eine angewandte Physiologie’.

reactions only alternate between overwhelming endorsement and merciless condemnation? That is, according to a physiological aesthetics there are only two kinds of works of art: those which make one ill, such as Wagner's—'My "issue", my "*petit fait vrai*" is that I no longer breathe properly when this music first works upon me, that almost immediately my feet become angry against it and revolt'<sup>13</sup>—and those which make one productive, like Bizet's *Carmen*—'Bizet makes me productive. All that is good makes me productive'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, even this distinction seems rather self-serving in that the claim that '[e]verything good makes [one] productive'—that one 'has no other thankfulness', and 'no other proof of what is good',<sup>15</sup>—echoes the philistine complacency that runs: 'I know what I like, and I like what I like'. Nietzsche roundly criticises the *décadent* desire for 'emotion at any price';<sup>16</sup> and yet it is difficult to see how his demand for stimulation is any different. And even if there is a distinction, doesn't it reside more nearly with the spectator—with the philosopher—than with the work? In sum and contrary to expectations, if a physiological aesthetics is to have any philosophical significance, it must involve very important presuppositions about the relation between a philosopher's voice and works of art.

In order to probe this further, we might examine the increased productivity that Nietzsche sees as the physiological mark of a 'good' work of art. At one point he describes it as follows:

'Has one noticed that music *makes* the spirit *free*? gives thoughts wings? that man becomes ever more a philosopher, the more he becomes a musician?—As with lightning the grey sky of abstraction flashes throughout; light strong enough for all the filigree of things; big problems near to grasp; the world overseen as if from a mountain.—I even defined philosophical pathos—And suddenly *answers* fall in my lap, a small hail of ice and wisdom, of *solved* problems... Where am I?—Bizet makes me productive...' <sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

To even suppose that this experience of mental quickening is some sort of effect of the work of art is already to posit certain analogies between the work and the nature of philosophical thought. But rather than think of it as an effect whose cause could be located in the work of art—since this would be yet again to disguise the philosopher's voice, by supposing a work of art that could already anticipate its own reception—we might see this experience as a doubling or mirroring between the work of art and the philosopher, such that the former makes possible the *self*-transcendence of the latter. In fact, Nietzsche signals the self-reflexive character of his experience when he poses the very question we are demanding of philosophers: namely, 'Where am I?' Where is the philosopher? The answer in Nietzsche's case is that a philosopher is *with himself* when he listens to music. In other words, the 'good' work of art does not decadently tempt the philosopher to escape from himself, but rather to do the opposite, to realise himself as philosopher. With himself, he can grasp at the 'chances' for thought that music makes possible. These 'chances' are not messages that can be gleaned from an interpretation of the work of art, and certainly are not the product of artistic intention.<sup>18</sup> They are the openness of the work of art to the philosopher's experience.

Just the same, this openness does *not* mean that a physiological aesthetics errs to the other extreme and is simply a philosopher's way of hearing his own voice in a work of art. That is, just as we should not see the analogy between philosopher and work of art in terms of a simple philosophical message relayed from work to philosopher, we should also avoid the temptation to see it as a mere self-imposition made by a philosopher upon a work; the work of art can no more become philosophy than a philosopher can transform his voice into art. As such, the analogy between philosopher and work of art depends upon a *mutual* openness—as it is, a mutual openness to self-overcoming.

That said, though—and as we will see, very significantly—we cannot more elaborately describe this openness except negatively, except by reference to Wagner. The contrast is very neatly expressed in the distinction between the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* The relevant passage runs as follows: 'ich zittere vor Gefahren, die irgendein Wagnis begleiten, ich bin entzückt über Glücksfälle, *an denen Bizet unschuldig ist*' (my emphasis).

‘solved problems’, the ‘*gelöste Problemen*’, that fall in the lap of the self-overcoming philosopher and the ‘salvation’, *Erlösung*, promised by Wagner’s operas. This contrast is more than just a play on words, a play on the notion of *lösen*, it is all the difference between hope and false hope. That is, in Nietzsche’s view, Wagner may at first make us hope, but his opera, this ‘opera of salvation’,<sup>19</sup> rather than offer the infinite possibilities of transcendence, actually deals in nothing but morbid finitude. If we take, for instance, the ‘case in the “Flying Dutchman”’, what we find is not salvation, but its pale reflection. In this piece ‘the eternal Jew himself is [supposedly] saved... when he marries’,<sup>20</sup> but as Nietzsche incisively asks, ‘What happens with the “eternal Jew”, whom a wench (*Weib*) worships and ties up?’ Answer: ‘He simply ceases to be eternal’.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the hope offered by Wagner’s operas is false. Rather than offer salvation, it offers an image of salvation such as it appears in the light of particular prejudices and points of view; that is, the ‘salvation’ of the ‘eternal Jew’ in *The Flying Dutchman* is an *example* of Jewish salvation as seen by an anti-Semitic, bourgeois society. Such salvation annuls its own content because it is *just an example* of salvation, an example that may seem strange to us, but that is really no stranger than contemporary ones.<sup>22</sup> As an example, such a *case* of salvation excludes precisely that which it exemplifies; it is an exclusive inclusion that excludes its own signifying, its own ability to save. By contrast, what Nietzsche searches for is salvation itself, a ‘saving power’<sup>23</sup> by which works can open themselves to self-transcendence.

What is intriguing is that in this search Nietzsche himself has recourse to an example. That is, he does not simply theorize about a work that would allow him to ‘take leave of the damp north, of all the foggy of Wagnerian

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> The anti-abortion movement abounds in such examples. In the name of salvation it has justified all forms of violation of individual integrity, including murder, and this is not to mention the basic fact that it promotes involuntary child-bearing as intrinsic to women’s salvation.

<sup>23</sup> This is actually Hölderlin’s term, a phrase that Heidegger picks up and makes much use of. We will be turning to it shortly. I am suggesting here, and provisionally, that there is a connection between Nietzsche’s desire for self-transcendence and the notion of a ‘saving power’ as it is developed by Heidegger, and that we see this relation through an understanding of the exemplary work of art.

ideals',<sup>24</sup> he specifies one. He makes Bizet's *Carmen* his clear example of what a work of art *should* be. As such, he transforms the task of praising Bizet at Wagner's expense into the task of distinguishing between two sorts of examples, into explaining how *Carmen* is *not* an example of salvation *à la Wagner*. As we have developed,<sup>25</sup> he sees Bizet's opera as a sort of vehicle for self-transcendence, and that the very mechanism by which it will save him from Wagner's influence will subsequently allow him to save himself from Bizet's. That is, the opera exemplifies a kind of self-transcendence, a kind of love which saves one for love, which brings one to oneself rather than into the possession of another. However, this sort of exemplarity cannot sufficiently distinguish itself from Wagner's, because one could argue that this version of self-transcendence is simply an example of transcendence as seen from a philosophical point of view, and thus that Nietzsche just repeats Wagner's mistake—finding examples to suit his own needs. As a consequence, to truly be able to save, *Carmen* must not merely exemplify self-transcendence, it must itself transcend; it must simultaneously exemplify transcendence and transcend itself as this example. That is, it must be an example of what it is an example of. It must, to appeal to Andrzej Warminski's existential notion of exemplarity, be an 'example and an example of example'.<sup>26</sup>

Warminski comes to this formulation in an attempt to answer the question, 'What is the example?' What he concludes is that: 'An example can never represent or exemplify itself enough *as* example to recover its own excess, the excess of example "itself", for there will always be one more (or less) as yet unreflected and forever unreflectable and unmediatable example left over or missing'.<sup>27</sup> What this means in terms of the work of art, is that a work of art which is an example and an example of itself as an example is also an example of itself as an example as an example, and so on. One can never get to the bottom of things and say what such a work of art was an example of, except to

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>26</sup> Warminski, Andrzej. 'Reading for Example: Sense-Certainty in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*', p. 178.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* It is critical to this logic that Warminski comes to it in the context of a discussion of Hegel's notion of 'sense-certainty', because only in an existential context, where being itself is at stake, would we speak of an example exemplifying its own existence.

suggest that it is an example of the self as excess, as unquenchable source for itself. In this light, the mistake committed by Wagner would be to have had his works become examples of things that they themselves clearly were not, examples of things other than the self. By relying upon external sources, they risk exhausting them. Nietzsche refers to this exhaustion, and the boredom it engenders, when he sarcastically comments on 'how richly [Wagner] varies his central theme' of salvation.<sup>28</sup> According to this logic, *Carmen* is a 'good' work of art because it is an autotelic work of art; it carries its own 'emergence' with itself for all to hear.

Moreover, it is precisely this that Nietzsche claims to hear. When he is brought to himself by the work of art, it is not that the work of art points to the philosopher's self and thereby indicates it as the latter's goal; rather the work of art, by pointing to *itself* as source, models the self-transcendence that the philosopher himself must practice. What this implies is that when Nietzsche takes himself as the source of his own self-overcoming, he stands in the same 'place' as the work of art—that, at and as origin, work of art and philosopher perfectly mirror one another. This is what Nietzsche is speaking of when he says that he must 'bury [his] ears in under this music' and 'hear its cause'.<sup>29</sup> At such moments, when he is with himself, he is also with the work of art, experiencing 'its emergence'<sup>30</sup> as the model of his own.

The stumbling block in our whole-hearted embrace of this experience is, of course, our willingness to accept that *Carmen* does indeed transcend itself, that it is indeed an example of itself in the existential sense required by Warminski's understanding. If we are not, and it is not such an example, then we are back to *Carmen*'s uncanny similarity to Wagner's *décadent* works. The latter are *décadent* because they point outside of themselves, refer to other things as models of what they themselves want to say. When they exemplify they are *using* other things, and by so doing, they use them up in the way that *The Flying Dutchmen* uses up the notion of the 'eternal Jew'. The self-transcending work would avoid such instrumentality by referring only to itself, by

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<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, pp 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

being its own model, the model of the self as origin. Nietzsche offers very little to convince us of this self-transcendence, and rather is more concerned with describing his own experience. As a consequence, we can't help but suspect that *Carmen* is no more than an example chosen and *used* by Nietzsche—that no matter how much Nietzsche imagines a parallelism between himself and the work of art, that the contact which makes this parallelism possible remains firmly rooted in the kind of instrumentality that such self-immanence would reject. As such, even though Nietzsche brags at the outset of *The Case of Wagner* that he has just seen Bizet's 'masterpiece' for the 'twentieth time',<sup>31</sup> such a frequency of attendance does not exclude the possibility that Nietzsche will eventually tire of it, bringing an end to its utility, and its claim to a unique existential exemplarity.

As a consequence, the question of why Nietzsche takes *Carmen* so seriously imposes itself quite forcefully. If the opera is not really a model of the self as origin, but more nearly an example of self-transcendence *à la Wagner*, then we indeed have to wonder why Nietzsche tries to turn it into an exemplary partner of his own development as philosopher. The short answer, of course, is his opposition to Wagner, because it is only if he can come up with an alternative to the latter's *décadent* works that Nietzsche can hope to overcome his *first* partnership with the German composer, and thereby recover his own voice as philosopher. Moreover, there are, according to Nietzsche, qualities in Bizet's opera which make it the perfect contrast to Wagner's. Whereas, Wagner's works cater impersonally to the masses via 'effects', Nietzsche feels that *Carmen* approaches him as a person. The latter is 'charming' and 'courteous', and 'does not sweat',<sup>32</sup> as Wagner's music apparently does. This refined intimacy sets it off from the crass instrumentality of the marketplace that makes 'money from sick music'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, even if Nietzsche cannot succeed in convincing us that *Carmen* is some sort of existential example, he does introduce the notion that an example that is nothing but an example—an example that is simply open to our experience of it—distances itself from everyday instrumentality. The seriousness of such an example is that its *only* utility *is* this openness, *is* its very exemplarity.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17: 'Man macht heute nur Geld mit kranker Musik; unsre großen Theater leben von Wagner'.



## The 'question concerning technology'

It is this possibility of opposing common instrumentality with a kind of exemplary utility—with the utility an example has simply *as example*—which will dominate the remainder of this chapter. For whereas Nietzsche only seems concerned with the vulgar aspects of instrumentality—and thus less likely to reject it outright—both Heidegger and Adorno take aim at instrumentality itself. For both of them its threat—whether through the dominance of technology or instrumental reason—determines their orientation toward the work of art. At some level, Gadamer expresses this shared belief when he says that 'the path of the West' is 'also the path leading to science', a path that 'has forced upon us the separation and a never completely achievable unity of poetising and thinking'.<sup>34</sup> As such, it is not surprising to find Heidegger, for his part, turning to an exemplary work of art at the very moment he is trying to elucidate the essence of one product of this science: namely, equipment.

To understand the full import of this move, however, we must begin at the outset of the essay in which it occurs, 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. This essay's problematic is clearly referred to in its title: how do we understand the origin of the work of art? In some ways, the answer seems too self-evident, but it is precisely this apparent simplicity which plunges us into a hermeneutical situation:

'As necessarily as the artist is the origin of the work in a different way than the work is the origin of the artist, so it is equally certain that, in a still different way, art is the origin of both artist and work. But can art be an origin at all?... Art—this is nothing more than a word to which nothing real any longer corresponds. It may pass for a collective idea under which we find a place for that which alone is real in art: works and artists'.<sup>35</sup>

The question of the origin of the work of art, in other words, compels us to move 'in a circle'. Logic would tell us that such circles are something we want to avoid; nevertheless, and in full awareness of logic's dictates on the subject, Heidegger

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<sup>34</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 'Thinking and Poetising in Heidegger and in Hölderlin's "*Andenken*"', p. 145.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 17.

believes that '[t]o enter upon this path is the strength of thought, [and] to continue on it is the feast of thought'. For him, such circularity is thinking as 'craft', thinking as it forms a partnership with poetising.<sup>36</sup> What is interesting for us, however, is not this partnership *per se*—it risks, as we are now aware, obscuring the very philosophical voice we want to hear—but what must occur to initiate it. This initiation occurs when craftlike—or should we say, crafty—thinking enters into the hermeneutical situation *properly*. For as Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*, 'What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way'.<sup>37</sup> 'But what is the right manner to enter into it?' we might ask with Françoise Dastur. The answer: 'To spring into it...and the spring or leap consists precisely in the selection of a definite *example of an art work*'.<sup>38</sup> The example of the work of art, in other words, is the proper response to the problem of origin. We have already seen a similar link between exemplarity and originality in Nietzsche—between an existential exemplarity and the autotelic work of art. Moreover, as with the latter, who praises the good-manners of his exemplary work of art, Heidegger extends comparable courtesy by proposing—in an implausible anthropomorphism—that we 'go to the actual work and ask the work what and how it is'.<sup>39</sup> It is shortly thereafter that Heidegger makes his first reference to a 'painting, e.g., the one by Van Gogh that represents a pair of peasant shoes',<sup>40</sup> that is, to *Shoes*, the example which will concern us here.

But how does the exemplarity of this work of art relate to the question concerning technology, and thereby to instrumentality? To answer we might note what happens when Heidegger first mentions the painting. He is immediately struck by its 'thingy character', the way it can be 'shipped like coal from the Ruhr and logs from the Black Forest'.<sup>41</sup> However, what he discovers after a fairly lengthy meditation is that the most common way for us to approach this 'thinginess' is according to a matter-form schema, which is itself based on the 'equipmental character of equipment'. In fact,

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>37</sup> Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> Dastur, Françoise. 'Heidegger's Freiburg Version of the Origin of the Work of Art', p. 123 (my emphasis). We might note that the example Dastur is thinking of is actually that of the Greek temple; however, we are going to focus on the painting by Van Gogh, because it more explicitly illustrates the relation between the work of art and instrumentality. Furthermore, the latter is the example actually mentioned by Heidegger shortly after his exposition of the hermeneutical situation.

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

the everyday manner of speaking which would refer to *mere* things is one that can only understand a thing in terms of what remains after 'the removal of the character of usefulness and being made'.<sup>42</sup> It is because of the inescapable predominance of instrumentality, then, that Heidegger must relate the exemplary work of art—even to the extent that it is simply a thing—to the question concerning technology. In fact, the example of the work of art, its leap, is the only way we can approach technology *as a question*.

The reason the work of art can undertake this unique critical task is because it itself is technology or equipment. This is evident in the Greek term *techne*, which embraces both works of art and equipment, but also to the extent that *Shoes* both *are* and *is not* shoes. To explain: Heidegger's infamous and strange exercise in example-taking actually starts out as an attempt to 'simply describe some equipment without any philosophical theory'.<sup>43</sup> To this end he suggests that '[w]e choose as example a common sort of equipment—a pair of peasant shoes'.<sup>44</sup> But for such immediate perception to be possible, not only a type of equipment but also a specific instance of it is required, and it is this added requirement which leads us to the painting. As such, if we ask what *Shoes* is explicitly an example of, we must answer 'shoes', but, of course, a painting is not simply what it represents, it is also the showing of this representation. And it is this dual relation that forges the exceptionality of *Shoes* as an example of shoes. The painting not only belongs to the category of 'shoes' as an example of it—the whole peasant idyll, which follows the reference to the painting, indicates to what degree Heidegger thinks of the represented shoes as undistinguishable from some 'real' pair of shoes in use<sup>45</sup>—but also, as a painting, *Shoes* shows *shoeness*, and as such points to its belonging to the category of shoe equipment in a way that a simple pair of shoes cannot. Any other example of shoes would only point to its belonging to the relevant class of equipment; whereas, *Shoes* can point to its very existence as such an example. *Shoes* points to the very equipmentality that makes it an example of equipment; it is that exceptional equipment which can establish the rule of equipment, that is to say, its essence.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> In *La vérité en peinture* Derrida makes this point in a very clear, if not also amusing, manner.

We will shortly return to the issue of what Heidegger specifically identifies as the essence of equipment, but we first want to note how the painting reveals this essence. According to Heidegger, it does so by sweeping us away 'suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be'.<sup>46</sup> In other words, this work's exceptional exemplarity allows us to leap out of the everyday dominance of technology. It is this leap which puts us into a position where we can grasp technology's essence, but as such, also into a position from which we can confront it. Thus, because of the disjunctive aspect of works of art, because of their exceptional exemplarity, we can ask the question concerning technology.

### **A more reliable technology**

There are many reasons to read 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and 'The Question Concerning Technology' together. Robert Bernasconi even calls the latter essay 'at least Heidegger's fourth attempt to write a conclusion' to the earlier one.<sup>47</sup> In our case, the significance of the pairing lies in their shared gesture of example-taking. For, whereas in 1936 we are taken aback by Heidegger's surreal gesture of using a Van Gogh as an example of a pair of shoes, in 1953 we have equal reason to be confused by the philosopher's choice of a silver sacrificial chalice as an example of technology. Heidegger's thesis is that we are living in an age dominated by technology, and yet he chooses an example of it that most of us will have never even seen, much less seen in use. And despite this fact, Heidegger thinks of the chalice as being something that might indeed be used, making reference to the 'sacrificial rite in relation to which the chalice required is determined as to its form and matter'.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, in this odd useless usefulness doesn't the silver sacrificial chalice strangely resemble Van Gogh's *Shoes*? In other words, doesn't the chalice also withdraw from the very realm of technology to which it belongs, thus potentially showing this belonging in an exceptional fashion? To the extent that this is the case, there is a parallelism in the exemplarities of *Shoes* and the silver sacrificial chalice:

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<sup>46</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 35.

<sup>47</sup> Bernasconi, Robert. 'The Greatness of the Work of Art', p. 112.

<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 6.

the exemplarity of both of these objects depends on their withdrawal from their own utility—either formally or historically.

Furthermore, what this withdrawal from utility allows is a disjunction which, in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, identifies the essence of equipment, identifies what utility itself depends upon:

‘The equipmental quality of equipment consists indeed in its usefulness. But this usefulness itself rests in the abundance of an essential being of the equipment. We call it reliability’.<sup>49</sup>

The reason it must be reliability rather than utility that is the essence of equipment is that usefulness is its own dissipation; that is, a useful object ‘falls into disuse’ in the very fact of being useful. Being useful, in other words, exposes an object to being ‘worn out and used up’ and thereby turned into ‘mere stuff’.<sup>50</sup> In this process equipment ceases to be equipment and turns into the ‘mere thing’ mentioned earlier. To make it possible for equipment to survive such a fate, and to remain equipment even in its uselessness<sup>51</sup>—such as must be the case for *Shoes* and the silver sacrificial chalice—Heidegger imagines an essence that even the most beaten up pair of shoes could possess. Such shoes could indeed be useless, but that does not entirely deny them their reliability. In fact, their very moth-eaten appearance stands as a testimony to their reliability, to the fact that they have been with us through thick and thin like a close friend. By virtue of shoes’ reliability, for instance, a peasant woman can be made to feel that she is not alone, but rather ‘privy to the silent call of the earth’.<sup>52</sup> The notion of reliability, therefore, allows Heidegger to oppose a self-destructive usefulness with the possibility of a ‘deeper origin’ that would survive the vicissitudes of wear and tear.

Such a ‘deeper origin’ would seem to point back to the Greek notion of *techne* and its dual reference to both equipment and works of art—to both the useful and apparently

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p. 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> This weakness in the notion of equipment might also explain Heidegger’s shift between 1936 and 1953 from it to the question of technology. Technology does not simply refer to objects, and thus cannot be used up as equipment can.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p. 34.

useless. And yet, even if *techne* involves the proper reference, it in no way excludes utility and material wear in tear as Heidegger needs it to. For instance, as *techne*—that is, as a product of human labour—the Van Gogh is as much exposed to wear and tear as the shoes it depicts. Moreover, this insufficiency in the notion of *techne* has important implications for Heidegger's thought. On the one hand, it encourages a de-emphasization of the materiality of works of art, which bars Heidegger from addressing the 'brush-made surface of the picture as a painted work',<sup>53</sup> and thus opens him to Meyer Schapiro's critique that he is insensitive to the work as art as a made object. And on the other hand, it initiates a shift—both in the latter part of 'The Origin of the Work of Art' and in much of the writing that follows it—towards works of art that are apt to withstand their own use, that is a shift towards poetry (*Dichtung*). The comparative immateriality of language allows Heidegger to more plausibly put forth an analogy between what occurs in a poem and the unconcealment of truth itself. As he puts it, '[t]ruth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed, as a poet composes a poem'.<sup>54</sup>

This brings us back to 'The Question Concerning Technology', because, as it turns out, another reason the silver sacrificial chalice may have been chosen as an example of equipment—other than the useless usefulness it shares with the Van Gogh—could be its implicit reference to the Hölderlinian passage featured in the latter part of the essay. Like these other examples, Hölderlin's word—'But where danger is, grows / The saving power also'—is an example of *techne*, but unlike them, it does not withdraw from its usefulness into a sort of useless usefulness. Rather, by withdrawing into its very own essence, it becomes the exact opposite: something of the ultimate usefulness, *something that saves*. That is, since "'[t]o save" is to fetch something home into its essence',<sup>55</sup> Hölderlin's word goes beyond mere references to salvation to its actual performance. It does not simply offer examples of saving, it itself saves—summoning us to do our part to 'foster the saving power in its increase'.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, by saving, it fundamentally distinguishes itself from other works of art and examples of technology. Its naming—something not submitted to the wear and tear of pigment and canvas—can reclaim the claim made twenty or so

<sup>53</sup> Schapiro, Meyer. 'The Still Life as Personal Object—A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh', p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 72.

<sup>55</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

years earlier about reliability. In so doing, this work of art establishes reliability—that is, the gathering ‘within itself of all things according to their manner and extent’<sup>57</sup>—as the essence of equipment, as the grounds for all utility.

Additionally, this naming serves as a response to Nietzsche’s dilemma of even a half a century earlier: namely, to elucidate a manner for the work of art to free a philosopher for his voice. In other words, if Hölderlin’s poem does indeed save, it constitutes the kind of existentially exemplary work of art able to model the task of the philosopher. As Heidegger provocatively asks in ‘The Question Concerning Technology’:

‘Could it be that revealing lays claims to the arts most primally, so that they for their part may expressly foster the growth of the saving power, may awaken and found anew our look into that which grants and our trust in it?’<sup>58</sup>

His response is to disingenuously suggest that ‘no one can tell’ ‘[w]hether art will be granted this highest possibility’,<sup>59</sup> and yet there really can be no doubt: simply to pose the question of our wakefulness is already to confirm that we have indeed been awoken. Moreover, for Heidegger works of art can only renew by renewing philosophical questioning. That is, for Heidegger poetic revelation and the voice of the philosopher only speak to the extent that they speak together, each the double of the other.

This sounds harmonious, and yet we cannot fail to recognize the price of this consonance: namely, the critical blindness it requires as regards works of art. If our renewal as philosophers—our salvation or self-transcendence even—necessitates that we be perfectly in tune with poetic revealing, we are in no position to question those works of art which operate this revealing, in no position to ask ourselves why we take them so seriously. Rather we have to take poetry at its word—have to assume its reliability—and turn our questioning whither it points us. That is, the naming of the

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<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

‘saving power’ is also the naming of the danger it addresses—it is, if you will, both diagnosis and cure—and as such, there is no measure by which to judge the seriousness of its claims. We either do or do not heed them. If we do *not*, there is no revelation, nothing lost, but nothing gained. We stay under the sway of technology. If we *do*, we open ourselves to hope but also to the obligation to consider the seriousness of technology’s danger, the obligation to engage in ‘essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it’.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, at least for the moment, we must heed if indeed we want to fully grasp Heidegger’s logic. For only in heeding the work of art, do we confront the triumph of instrumentality—the situation where everything will only be ‘challenged forth’ as ‘standing-reserve’: ‘Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering’.<sup>61</sup> Heidegger names this condition ‘Enframing’ (*Gestell*), and calls it a mode of destining revealing opposed to *poiesis*, that mode of destining revealing, which as a ‘bringing-forth’ would *not* instrumentally challenge-forth.<sup>62</sup> However, we cannot simply think of this opposition as a confrontation between those forces in support of instrumentality and those which reject it; it is not simply the case that technology as Enframing is useful and *poiesis* is not.<sup>63</sup> If for no other reason, because the utility of Enframing itself suffers from a certain futility. That is, because of the lack of freedom within its mode of destining revealing—because it strives to dominate—Enframing is unable to live up to its own usefulness. As Otto Pöggeler puts it in ‘*Heideggers Begegnung mit Hölderlin*’, ‘the world as Enframing wants thus to be total’.<sup>64</sup> We experience Enframing’s totalitarian impulse when we observe the impossibility for us ‘to prepare a free relationship to [technology]’<sup>65</sup>—the stated goal of the essay. Even though we may believe that we can achieve such a relationship by

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 24-5: ‘Enframing is an ordaining of destining, as is every way of revealing. Bringing-forth, *poiesis*, is also a destining in this sense’.

<sup>63</sup> An example of such a view can be found in Walter Biemel’s essay, ‘On the Relation between Art and Philosophy’, where he puts forth the notion that ‘art, unlike the general field of technology, is no longer under pressure of the attitude of utility’. However, and contrary to his intention, this same distinction between art and common utility also serves to indicate art’s more essential utility: Because relieved of the ‘attitude of utility’, art ‘is able to disclose new ways of being-open’, and man ‘able to find himself in art and through art and to gain insight into his essential possibilities’ (p. 136).

<sup>64</sup> Otto, Pöggeler. ‘*Heideggers Begegnung mit Hölderlin*’, p. 40.

<sup>65</sup> Heidegger, M. ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, p. 3.



becoming masters of technological means, in fact, exactly the opposite is the case: We are more nearly its servants than its master. Because 'man becomes truly free only insofar as he belongs to the realm of destining and so becomes one who listens and hears, and not one who is simply constrained to obey',<sup>66</sup> we cannot be free as long as we do not engage in this listening belonging. As such, as long as we do not heed the exemplary work of art, technology, in spite of its apparent utility, will never be truly useful to us.

It is in this light that we should come to understand the more essential usefulness of the work of art. That is, rather than project the end of technology in his idea of the saving power—for this would be also to reject that *techne* which is the work of art—what Heidegger wants to see is the establishment of *poiesis* as that *techne* which guides. Whereas technology as Enframing offers no more than temporary means to temporary ends, the saving power of *poiesis* would be able to found 'anew our look into that which grants and our trust in it'. Whereas the instrumentality of an instance of technology is plagued by futility, the usefulness of the exemplary work of art would stand unquestioned in its superiority. And thus, as it turns out, the most reliable equipment would indeed be *Shoes*; that is, the work of art *as example*.

### No more examples

However, we cannot help but wonder whether this particularly reliable equipment, which is the work of art, is not more useful for some than for others. That is to say, it is quite unlikely that it will ever be more than a minority who will have the wherewithal to look beyond instrumentality toward a higher utility of exemplary works of art. Moreover, such a likelihood of 'unequal access' becomes a form of structural elitism<sup>67</sup> when Heidegger asserts that 'admission' to the saving power is

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Some might be tempted to shrug their shoulders and ask 'Well, even if it were elitist? What difference does this make?' My response is to point out the degree to which works of art must be open to the existential possibility of universal experience. Without this potential universality, Heidegger's social critique falls impotent; it becomes, at best, the call for an alternative society, purified of technology, to spring up beside the one inhabited by the vast majority constitutively unaffected and unconcerned by either works of art or the danger of technology.

'blocked' by technology as Enframing.<sup>68</sup> At this point it becomes obvious that only a privileged few, only philosophers such as Heidegger himself, will ever achieve the kind of 'piety of thought'<sup>69</sup> needed to overcome the easy ubiquity of technology. This criticism is strengthened, moreover, by two other aspects of Heidegger's argument. On the one hand, Heidegger would have us believe that his examples are self-evident; however, they are nothing of the sort—in his writings, works of art are taken as examples of equipment and works of technology appear as art objects. As such, access to their true character only occurs by means of a privileged position, from which one can illuminate sharp distinctions where otherwise there is nothing but obscurity. This authoritative point of view, moreover, echoes a criticism that Adorno might have levelled against his near contemporary. For on the other hand, if what Heidegger's discernment reveals is that the exemplary work of art is the more reliable equipment, doesn't this mean that Heidegger is less opposed to domination *per se* than to the fact that it is not rather *poiesis* that is dominant? Adorno is sensitive to this distinction precisely because he shares with Heidegger a concern with the ascendancy of instrumentality. Even though Adorno rejects Heidegger's romantic attachment to pre-industrial ways of living,<sup>70</sup> he does indeed see instrumentality—as it manifests itself in instrumental rationality—as both dominant and menacing. Moreover, like Heidegger, he does not believe that works of art can simply be excluded from the sphere of instrumentality's dominance. As he says in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, 'art in its entirety, and music in particular, feels the shattering effects of that very process of enlightenment in which it participates and upon which its own progress depends'.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, Adorno would take exception

<sup>68</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 26: 'Since destining at any given time starts man on a way of revealing, man, thus under way, is continually approaching the brink of the possibility of pursuing and pushing forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards on this basis. Through this the other possibility is *blocked*, that man might be *admitted* more and sooner *and ever more primally* to the essence of that which is unconcealed and to its unconcealment, in order that he might experience as his essence his needed belonging to revealing' (my emphasis).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>70</sup> This is not to say that Adorno is not critical of technology. For example, in the aphorism 'Do not knock' in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno identifies a loss of civility that comes with the development of modern technology: 'Not least to blame for the withering of experience is the fact that [modern machines], under the law of pure functionality, assume a form that limits contact with them to mere operation, and tolerates no surplus, either in freedom of conduct or in autonomy of things, which would survive as the core of experience, because it is not consumed by the moment of action' (p. 40). Just the same, Adorno does not advocate some sort of return to earlier mannered practices, if for not other reason because he recognizes their oppressiveness as well.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 13.

to Heidegger's response to this situation. Whereas the latter seems to imagine, or at least hope for, a dominance by works of art that could displace that by works of technology, Adorno recognises such a possibility as being no more than a trade off of one dictatorship for another, similar to the kind of trade off that he resists in the realm of thought.<sup>72</sup> 'Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character'.<sup>73</sup> As such, any attempt by exemplary works of art to oppose instrumental rationality by rising above it would in the end only expose them to greater submission; by setting themselves up as the *means* to achieving a certain *end*, they would glorify the very instrumental logic they opposed.<sup>74</sup>

But here is the dilemma: how is any opposition possible that does not *at least tacitly* hope to eliminate or overcome what it rejects? In Adorno, this problematic energizes his writings without ever being decisively resolved. If we take, for example, the case of Schönberg in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, we find one technical rationality pitted against another in a pharmacological fashion, according to which—to use the expression of Karla Schultz—new music 'acts as a vaccine'.<sup>75</sup> As a vaccine, new music must both participate in as well as exceed the dialectic of enlightenment:

'The technical procedures of composition, which objectively make music into a picture of repressive society, are more advanced than the procedures of mass production which march beyond new music in the fashion of the times, wilfully serving repressive society'.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Krzysztof Ziarek would almost certainly object at this point in order to defend Heidegger from such an imputation. According to Ziarek, and based on until recently unpublished essays from the late 1930's, Heidegger was aware of the danger of art becoming just another form of oppression, and it would be for this reason that he developed the notion of *das Machtlose*, the 'power-free'. Such a *Machtlose* 'resists', not by means of opposition or critique, but 'by operating otherwise than power', and it would be this rethinking of the potential for radical art that would be at work in his notion of *poiesis* ('Radical Art', p. 354).

<sup>73</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 150.

<sup>74</sup> It is because of this logic that one must be wary of interpretations, such as that offered by Max Paddison, that describe the relation between works of art and instrumentalised society in terms of an overcoming or emancipation: 'The sphere of art and of aesthetic experience is seen by Adorno as offering a model for emancipation from the dominant mode of instrumental rationality in Western society'. (Adorno, *Modernism and Mass Culture*, p. 49)

<sup>75</sup> Schultz, Karla. *Mimesis on the Move: Adorno's Concept of Imitation*, p. 179.

<sup>76</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 113. We might make a connection between what Adorno says here and Carl Dahlhaus' book *The Idea of Absolute Music*. According to the latter,

However, even if the advanced state of new music assures it of its resistive force against instrumental reason, it also exposes this music to the problem of its very success. New music's technical superiority means it risks outdoing the very mass produced products it opposes. It risks becoming, in its turn, itself a 'victim of technique',<sup>77</sup> just another tool of instrumental reason's triumph. If such became the case, Schönberg's twelve-tone works, which Adorno here praises for their 'didactic exemplary character', would become fetishistic,<sup>78</sup> and the statement that 'twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music'<sup>79</sup> would announce the catastrophe.

As we have already seen, Adorno does indeed come to believe that reification is twelve-tone's fate, and in fact, it is the very phrase he uses here in praise of it that most incisively identifies what is wrong with it. To say that twelve tone works have 'didactic exemplary character' is to say that such works are models, that they are examples to be imitated just as they imitate the forms of repressive society that they succumb to. As models, they claim for themselves the very iterative processes of mass production they should oppose. In order to avoid such commodification, works of art must instead resist imitability, and to do this, they must be more than strictly technical, more than simply the product of the most advanced material.

The exemplarity of such latter works would still rely upon their resemblance to repressive society, but also upon their protest against this resemblance, their self-conscious assertion of their *aesthetic* difference. It is this difference that makes them inimitable, makes them of the 'same essence as the dialectic exterior to them but [resembling] it without imitating it'.<sup>80</sup> The challenge of this difference is that the

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Adorno conceives of music as a 'language above language', a language of 'absolute music'. As he puts it, basing himself on Adorno's essay 'Fragment über Musik und Sprache', 'Adorno endows fleeting intuition, such as music supplies at some moments, with a trust he withholds from an "instrumentalized language corrupted by decayed social practice"' (p. 116).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115. One might object, as Tom Huhn argues in 'Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic', that Adorno makes a distinction between *technology*, as 'the application and increasing centrality of instrumental rationality to human praxis' and *technique*, whose appearance feels 'like the magic of not being subject to means-end rationality', such that makes it impossible to be a victim of technique as I am understanding it. However, this objection is flawed since it itself imagines *technique* as 'the dialectical over-coming of technology', and thus as a potential new coercive force (p. 251).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 115 and 111, respectively. The latter reads: 'The self-determined law of the row truthfully becomes a fetish at the point when the conductor relies upon it as the source of meaning'.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 67-8.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5.

more these works come to resemble society, the harder it becomes to determine whether this resemblance is a resented similarity (and thus, protest) or a flattering likeness (and thus, reconciliation). Adorno's consciousness of this dilemma leads him to insist again and again that we must have 'the faculty of the ear to perceive what is right or wrong'<sup>81</sup> in works of art, and thereby the ability to aesthetically distinguish between serious works of art and those willing to reconcile themselves with modern society. Such an aesthetic distinction saves the former from simply being instrumentalised society's latest achievement and model for further dominance. It is, as Peter Osborne puts it, an "'aesthetic identity" [that] is of a *qualitatively different order* to the repressive identification inherent in conceptual thought'.<sup>82</sup>

We should note, however, that what this 'aesthetic identity' relies upon, is a 'second-order', and somewhat indescribable, ability to recognise necessity—and more specifically the necessity of the ascendancy of instrumentalised society. That is, just as we are to recognise any given chord as 'a vehicle of the total context—indeed, for the total direction',<sup>83</sup> we are to hear in new music the necessity of the dominance of instrumental rationality itself. In fact, works of art are precisely what would allow us to recognise that there was any dominance at all. Very much in the way Hölderlin's work can be said to establish the rule of empty exemplarity, serious works of art would reveal to us the dominance of instrumental rationality.<sup>84</sup> And if everything—including works of art—exemplified this dominance, it would only be serious works of art which, by their critical character, could offer us the hope that there could be an exception to its rule.<sup>85</sup>

In this perspective, twelve-tone works betray hope by no longer requiring the receptivity to necessity. Rather than hear necessity in them, all we make out are the instrumental demands of matter and form. Rather than strive for an exceptional

<sup>81</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 36.

<sup>82</sup> Osborne, Peter. 'Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a "Postmodern" Art', p. 31 (my emphasis).

<sup>83</sup> Adorno, T.W. *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 36.

<sup>84</sup> It is important to note the asymmetry of this analogy in terms of naming, because it reveals a difference between Heidegger and Adorno's thought. Whereas, Heidegger tends to undermine the exemplarity of Hölderlin's work by naming it in advance, Adorno is more likely (though, not certain) to keep the relation of exemplar open to our receptivity to it.

<sup>85</sup> It is precisely the fact that serious works of art must also conform to this necessity—rather than trying to evade it—that would attest to the full extent of instrumental reason's dominance.

exemplarity, they settle with simply being exemplary. They fall victim to the very longing for dominance that Adorno would reject in Heidegger. This danger of 'exemplary didactic character' causes Adorno to turn against twelve-tone technique, and in 1964 to call it 'the first great phenomenon of relief in new music', denouncing it for helping 'to accomplish what the ear could not achieve at every moment'<sup>86</sup>—that is, for denying the need for our aesthetic appreciation of necessity.<sup>87</sup> By this shift, Adorno highlights his position as philosopher with regard to works of art. He responds directly to changes in his perception, and rather than try to disguise his voice, he openly questions his relation to works of art, reconsidering, for instance, the historical necessity that could have led to the development of twelve-tone technique:

'Still, the attempts at relief have their sound reason—precisely that the difficulties of composing out of pure freedom, out of a kind of all-sided actuality of hearing, are now scarcely surmountable. That was possible, evidently, only during the short period of the explosion, during the heroic period of the new music, as it comprises the middle works of Schönberg'.<sup>88</sup>

What this passage presents is two directions Adorno's thought takes after twelve-tone technique's exposure as only didactically exemplary. As we know from the previous chapter, one strand stays focused on exemplary works, and tries to revive the tension of the 'heroic period' in the form of a projected *musique informelle*, which could be exemplary in the fashion of 1910. However, such a direction leaves unchanged the dynamic between exemplary works of art and instrumental reason, such that works of art continue to run the risk of becoming victims of their own success in the ambiguous manner of twelve-tone technique. For this reason, in this chapter we are rather going to consider another strand in Adorno's thought, one that takes into account the 'scarcely surmountable' difficulties presented by late modernity. It addresses the rejection by works of art of their very exemplarity. For if serious works of art are indeed 'windowless monads', whose 'dynamic, [and] immanent historicity... is of the

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<sup>86</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Difficulties: 1. In Composing', p. 655.

<sup>87</sup> Basing himself upon Adorno's links to the Kantian project, J.M. Bernstein proposes even giving this need for aesthetic appreciation an ethical dimension. See 'Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics'.

<sup>88</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Difficulties: 1. In Composing', p. 654.

same essence as the dialectic exterior to them',<sup>89</sup> the most illuminating situation would not necessarily be the existence of exemplary works (whether exceptionally so, or not) as much as their *lack*. This potential absence of examples would point negatively to the crisis that Adorno sees facing modern society as a result of the ascendancy of instrumental reason. For him, what we face is a 'crisis of semblance', in which the very possibility of works of art falls into doubt.

### Crisis of semblance

The crisis of semblance characterises a situation inhospitable in the extreme to works of art. Furthermore, in accordance with Adorno's notion of 'increasing nominalism', the gravity of this situation deepens with each passing day, such that it seems only a matter time before works of art will no longer be possible at all. Whether this catastrophe will arrive today, tomorrow or at some point in the more distant future is obviously not a question Adorno is able to address. Nevertheless, its menace explains why it must be 'a principle of method' that 'light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of the most recent artworks'.<sup>90</sup> This is not simply a caveat thrown in by Adorno to defend his ideas from their own ageing, nor simply an entreaty to others to continue his work by supplementing it with ever new examples. It is fundamentally a warning: if we do not examine the most recent works, we may miss the chance to catch sight of the catastrophe, with the consequence that we will continue to believe that there are exemplary works of art when in fact there are none. It is in this cautionary spirit that the section entitled 'The Crisis of Semblance' in *Aesthetic Theory* is suffused with negative examples. Failure rather than success marks engagement with the constraints of the crisis. But how could it be otherwise? It is only in failure that the crisis of semblance allows any development at all. Gregg Horowitz addresses this aspect of the dialectic of works of art in his essay 'Art History and Autonomy', tracing it back to the notion of the autonomy of aesthetic judgement as it is first conceived of by Kant. According to Horowitz, it is 'the failure to win [the dialectical war] that keeps art in motion, keeps it unreconciled, thus battling against the realm of external determination, which itself grows more obdurate

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<sup>89</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 359.

with each failure. Art, far from dying of failure, would die of success'.<sup>91</sup> What this means is that we can only ever really experience exemplary works of art *as their loss*. Only in the traces of works—traces, which are themselves very much like the fading sparkles of the fireworks that Adorno calls models for works of art<sup>92</sup>—can we ever perceive a kind of exemplarity that fully acknowledges its own impossibility.

In this sense, the crisis of semblance is an end of art scenario, whose culminating moment comes when a work's rejection of semblance is so complete that the rejection itself determines the work's appearance. At this moment, a work of art ceases to be a work of art and becomes either mere fantasy or a simple thing. That is, at one extreme of the dialectic, works of art flee into phantasmagoria; they attempt to elude the dialectic that would call them illusions by becoming nothing but. However, even though this flight into fantasy occurs as a protest 'against the bourgeois maxim that everything must be useful',<sup>93</sup> it risks falling impotent by turning works of art into mere kitsch. As a reaction against this danger and at the other extreme, then, works attempt, not simply to outwit their illusory character, but to go so far as to relieve themselves of it altogether. But if they 'succeed' and 'display outwardly what cannot become art—canvas and mere tones—[they become their] own enemy, the direct and false continuation of purposeful rationality'.<sup>94</sup> For in this elimination of their own illusoriness, works of art become mere things, easy pawns of instrumental rationality. Because works of art cannot indefinitely elude these extremes, their only hope is that their aesthetic appearance can bear witness to the crisis itself, that even in succumbing, their scars can silently testify against the dominance of instrumental rationality. By these scars, works of art show their detested belonging to modern society, protesting against it by mirroring its cruelty. This mirroring effect constitutes

<sup>91</sup> Horowitz, Gregg. 'Art History and Autonomy', p. 276.

<sup>92</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 81: 'The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks, though because of its fleetingness and status as empty entertainment it has scarcely been acknowledged by theoretical consideration'.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103. It is interesting to note that the type of works Adorno uses to elucidate this regression are precisely those most contemporary with *Aesthetic Theory* itself: happenings and conceptual art. We can either read this as the failure of Adorno to live up to his own 'principle of method', or take it as evidence of the catastrophe projected by Adorno's thought. However, the latter would also open up the possibility that Adorno's notion of the catastrophe is today's idea of pluralistic post-modernity.



‘[t]he difference of artworks from the empirical world, their semblance character’.<sup>95</sup> Because of this special character, works of art are not simply indifferent examples of instrumentalised society, but rather examples that protest against their very exemplarity. Their fading existence reflects the hope that instrumentalised society itself will also wane.

Thus, and somewhat paradoxically, works of art can only really be exemplary in the radical sense projected by Adorno’s theory at the moment they cease to be exemplary. Rather than see works of art as exemplarily reliable, Adorno rejects Heidegger’s hope of an artistic overcoming of instrumentality. Accordingly, we cannot imagine that works of art have the last word any more than we can solve ‘the antinomy of aesthetic semblance by means of a concept of absolute appearance’, that is, by means of a transcendence of art over reality.<sup>96</sup> Instead, and much like the quiet that accumulates at the end of *Erwartung* as the voice of each instrument volatilises into a bubble of tones, the most exemplary work lies in the echo that follows the last sounded note. Such mute resonance speaks volumes in spite of its inability to speak, and for Adorno what it speaks of is the ‘powerless hope’ that alone ‘allows us to draw a single breath’.<sup>97</sup>

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It is not irrelevant that a piece of music provides the most fitting evocation for this peculiar exemplarity of works of art—this exemplarity that anticipates a lack of examples. For music occupies an extreme position in the crisis of semblance. Its distance from mimesis and representational illusion means that a ‘measure of the intensity of the crisis of semblance is that it has befallen music’.<sup>98</sup> Music serves, in other words, as a sort of limit case in the crisis of semblance, and it is for this reason that we should not be surprised to find Adorno beginning and ending his consideration of the latter by speaking of music. In fact, these introductory and

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* The ambiguity of mimesis in Adorno’s thought is considered by Martin Jay in his essay ‘Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe’. He sums it up by saying Adorno ‘practices a *trauerliche Wissenschaft*’ in which mimesis plays a necessary but insufficient part’ (p. 45).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Minima Moralia*, p. 121.

<sup>98</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 100 (my emphasis).

concluding passages provide us a manner of summarising the exemplarities of works of art.

The initial concern in 'Crisis of Semblance' is none other than the problem of integrally constructed music as it is posed by the works of Schönberg: 'The emancipation from the concept of harmony has revealed itself to be a revolt against semblance',<sup>99</sup> he says. This revolt points to the fundamental problematic of the crisis of semblance, which is art's unwillingness to engage in the illusion that makes it resemble reality without simply imitating it. Harmony offered the illusion of the whole, which would separate a work from the reality it otherwise participates in. Without harmony music risks disintegrating into mere sounds just as when 'viewed under the closest scrutiny, the most objectivated paintings metamorphose into a swarming mass and texts splinter into words'.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, this slide into thingness is not without hope, because as Adorno points out, '[c]onstruction inheres tautologically in expression, which is its polar opposite'.<sup>101</sup> In this way, he raises the possibility that expression will still resonate even as total construction transforms music into mere collections of sounds.

Such hope arises from the pathos Adorno sees as essential to aesthetic seriousness—the pathos, if we recall from our first chapter, that results in the confrontation between the objectivity of musical material and the subjectivity of a composer, who is necessarily insufficient to those objective demands.<sup>102</sup> In other words, as long as the crisis of semblance persists, serious music will be possible, but at the point it simply appears—either as a collection of sounds or as fantastical kitsch—it will cease to be serious. What we must watch for is this moment of appearance, because it marks the disappearance of serious works, the exemplarity of a lack of examples. That is, for Adorno, serious works of music are most exemplary precisely in their moment of self-denial. And they are such because their dying word—if such a thing can indeed be overheard—would be an expression of their truth content, of their will to expression even in a society that eliminates its possibility. Adorno tries to capture this notion of

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>102</sup> Consider for example the passage cited in chapter one from the section entitled, 'Experiment (II): Seriousness and Irresponsibility': The '*serious* in art is the pathos of an objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency' (pp 38-9).

expression when speaks of its analogies with the technical term, *espressivo*, as it appears 'as musical indication'. What he notes is that the latter usage 'demands nothing specifically expressed, no particular emotional content'.<sup>103</sup> As such, if the expression of the truth content of works of art approaches *espressivo*, it is in the sense that their denial of any particular content is their refusal to negotiate their survival in instrumentalised society. For Adorno, it is this possibility for expression even in dissolution which marks the most remarkable exemplarity of works of art.

Such exemplarity goes beyond that proposed by either Nietzsche or Heidegger—or even Adorno himself in some of his other writings. It represents a utopianism that goes beyond a challenge to instrumentality to the refusal to accept anything less than its disappearance. Unlike Nietzsche who is willing to accept utility as long as it is useful to himself—that is, makes *him* productive—Adorno sees even the utility of life-affirmation as menaced by an emotional free reign that can only find its voice in phantasmagoria and kitsch. And unlike Heidegger, Adorno does not accept any dominance by works of art, since this could not be anything other than instrumentality's latest achievement.<sup>104</sup> But where, we must ask, would this hoped for disappearance leave the philosopher? Isn't the promise of utopia also the promise of his chance to become the last philosopher of art? The question may seem unfair; it is a question that requires the very instrumentality—the very question of the satisfaction of individual ends—that the theory is supposed to eliminate. And yet, we must at least provisionally keep ourselves open to such a question, because if we don't, we miss the chance to glimpse what happens to the artist when his work becomes so utopically exemplary.

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>104</sup> This is an interpretation more or less consonant with Alain Badiou's critique of Heidegger—the latter's, as he puts it, 'anti-"nihilistic" nihilism', which consists of 'the hypothesis of a return of the Gods, of an *event* wherein the mortal danger to which the annihilating will exposes Man—technology's civil servant—would be surpassed' (*Manifesto for Philosophy*, pp 57 and 51 respectively).

## chapter six

### The counter-exemplarity of the artist

*In this final chapter we will investigate the duality of the exemplarity of the artist, seeing how the exemplarity of the work of art renders the artist a counter-example, an example of what **not** to do.*

#### *L'oblitération*

In the previous chapter we posed the question: 'Where is the philosopher?' In this one, we must pose its complement, and ask 'Where is the artist?' We must ask because the types of exemplarity which occupied us in the previous chapter paradoxically require that works of art be independent from those who create them—only as autonomous do they escape being simple instances of an artist's oeuvre—and yet if their autonomy is taken too far, their exemplarity—if not their very existence—is threatened. That is, Nietzsche's argument in favour of *Carmen* requires that the focus be put, not upon what inspired Bizet to compose, but upon how the finished opera inspires Nietzsche himself to think; if he had had to concern himself with Bizet's intentions, he would not have seen the opera as being exemplary in the exceptional fashion he does. At the same time however, *Carmen's* exceptional exemplarity depends upon its very authorship; its critical import depends essentially upon the fact that it is *not* composed by Wagner. Similarly, the 'saving power' of Hölderlin's word depends upon its withdrawal into its own essence, and thus away from the poet, and yet Heidegger would never have been able to identify it as *Hölderlin's* word, and thus to understand it in terms of its essential poetising, without reference to the poet. As such, even though the exemplarities of works of art call for the suppression of the reference to the artist, they also bring this very suppression into question. Because if denied a relation to their createdness, works of art become indistinguishable from manufactured products and mere things, the separation between works and artists can never be complete. Rather, the exemplarities of works of art make the contradictory demand that artists be both present in and absent from their works. They make us wonder, 'Where is the artist?'

Moreover, it is only under the scrutiny of philosophers that this demand comes fully into perspective, because it is only in relation to the problem of a philosopher's voice that such an absent presence on the part of an artist becomes exemplary. To explain: as we discovered in the previous chapter, a central aspect of works' exemplarity consists in their relation to instrumentality, their promise that our relations with the world can be more than just means undertaken to achieve ends. As such, the hope that they offer a philosopher is that when he raises his voice, that he is not simply making use of a tool in the service of argumentation, but directly engaging the world. However, if it is exemplary works of art that offer this hope, then it is the lingering presence of artists in them that threatens to undermine it. For, this presence brings out the *made-ness* of works of art, the fact that they themselves are the end results of productive activities, which could in this light be seen as means. For this reason, philosophers search for traces of the withdrawal of artists from their works, to the point of seeing the works themselves as demanding this withdrawal. In this search, the exemplarity of works becomes inseparable from a kind of *counter-exemplarity* of artists, whereby the latter's lingering presence constitutes an example of what *not* to do, the admission of the failure of artists to create works that truly speak for themselves. A philosopher who identifies this counter-exemplarity could be said to engage in Heidegger's notion of 'genuine criticism', an effort to 'become free for the supreme exertion of thinking',<sup>1</sup> a thinking that does indeed speak for itself.

According to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in order to arrive at such a thinking, what this 'genuine criticism' must undertake is a strategy of 'obliteration'. In it, what is at stake is the voice of the author, the fact that he is a "'subject" of writing'.<sup>2</sup> The latter poses a problem because thought, as it is undertaken by a 'subject', is always essentially incomplete and incompletionable, always haunted by the saying of its saying. And as such, rather than offer a thought of Being that is safely '*anonymous*',<sup>3</sup> it reminds us that thought must be *said*, and as a consequence, must be said by a certain

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, M. *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art*, pp 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. 'Obliteration', p. 93. It should be noted that Lacoue-Labarthe develops the notion of 'obliteration' in the context of his reading of Heidegger's writings on Nietzsche, and thus it would seem misplaced to think of it as a possible philosophical strategy with regards to artists. And yet, this strategy is aimed precisely at the literary aspect of philosophy—the fact that it is writing—and thus to the extent that a philosopher recognises a thinking by art, as these thinkers do, then an 'erasure of the letter' may be the best, or even only, hope of revealing it.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

person, at a certain time and in a certain context. By means of the strategy of *obliteration*, then, what a philosopher does is to address the saying of saying, the unsaid of the said. He does so by taking up the task of thought as it is initiated by a 'subject of writing', but rather than echo it in interpretation, he returns to its origin and attempts to speak its speaking. In this way, he undertakes a kind of 'erasure of the letter',<sup>4</sup> an exclusion of the subject from his words with the hopes of freeing thought for itself. In this, the philosopher takes the subject of writing both seriously and not seriously, both as a model that must be accounted for and as the derided object of that very account. As such, what he obliterates becomes by this very obliteration, a counter-example.

### Exemplary duty

We should note, though, the creative character of this strategy, because it precludes us thinking of obliteration as a simple appropriation of artworks on the part of a philosopher. The exclusion of an artist from his works is not simple theft, if for no other reason that the exclusion itself is the acknowledgement that the artist has achieved something that would be worthy of such theft.<sup>5</sup> Rather, obliteration appears as a sort of ethical demand, a kind of 'exemplary' duty. In that, as Kant puts it, nothing is 'more fatal to morality than that we should wish to derive it from examples',<sup>6</sup> obliteration is a manifestation of that paradoxical duty, which is our duty to reject examples. Such a duty is not limited to philosophers: Adorno identifies Schönberg's engagement with it in his essay on the latter's *Serenade*, op. 24. In a defence of Schönberg against the accusation of empty playfulness, he explains: 'Schönberg the revolutionary has not sacrificed the forms in order to make himself less constrained: Revolt and unconstraint were duty to him, because the forms disintegrated'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, as the forms disintegrate, and with them all models

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Precisely the same comment would be appropriate in the original context of the notion of 'obliteration'. We cannot think of reading another philosopher for his ideas as simple theft, because it is only in our adoption of these ideas that the latter have any life.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Schönberg: *Serenade*, op. 24 (I)', p. 327: 'Nicht hat Schönberg der Aufrührer die Formen geopfert, um sich ungebundener selbst zu geben: Aufrühr und Ungebundenheit wurden ihm zu Pflicht, weil die Formen verfielen'.

for imitation, it is Schönberg's duty to step in and hasten the disappearance, to act in a revolutionary manner so as to eliminate even the possibility of their return. In *Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'*, Jacques Derrida makes similar observations as regards our duty more generally when he points out that once duty is involved in an action, it is no longer possible to simply follow examples: 'Morality, decision, responsibility, etc., require that one act without rules, and hence without example: that one never imitates'.<sup>8</sup> However, what Derrida also notes is the impossibility for duty to ever exclude exemplarity altogether. The very ritualistic and normative nature of duty means that we only know our duty by means of examples, and as a consequence duty makes the contradictory demand that we act in a way that is both 'singular and exemplary'<sup>9</sup>—singular to the extent that our actions exclude exemplarity, exemplary to the extent that they must be recognisable as our duty.

In this light, obliteration offers a particularly acute manifestation of 'exemplary' duty, of our duty to reject examples. This because obliteration is simultaneously an acknowledgement of success—of the fulfilment of duty through the rejection of the empty imitation of past models—and a condemnation of this very success as a failure—of the fact that by creating such singular works, a creator becomes, in his turn, a model of exemplary duty, a model of precisely that duty which is the rejection of models. As such, when Schönberg takes up his revolutionary duty to reject past forms, this very behaviour risks becoming itself an example, a model of our exemplary duty to reject examples. Moreover, if it does become a model for imitation, then it loses the singularity—the revolutionary force—that made it exemplary in the first place. Anyone who followed his model, would, by this very imitation, deny his model, the model of our exemplary duty to act without example.<sup>10</sup>

What a philosopher tries to achieve by means of the strategy of obliteration, then, is to preserve the *possibility* of exemplary duty by rescuing it from imitation. That is, unlike an artist who always risks undermining exemplary duty by means of his imitation of other artists—no matter how much an artist tries to follow Kant's exhortation 'that genius is entirely opposed to the *spirit of imitation*', he has no way

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, J. *Passions*, p. 31 (footnote 10).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> This is a restating of the problem of legacy as we addressed it in chapter two.

of recognising his exemplary duty except by reference to the model of another artist<sup>11</sup>—a philosopher, by contrast, hopes to recognise his exemplary duty in an artist without treating it as a model for imitation. Because he only acknowledges an artist's exemplarity negatively, only in its failure, a philosopher hopes to avoid imitating. He hopes, by engaging in philosophical thought rather than art, to avoid repeating the error of creating works that must struggle for their autonomy.<sup>12</sup> In this way, by *making an example* of the very exemplarity of artists—by means of the counter-exemplarity of an artist—a philosopher strives to preserve the possibility of exemplary duty, and with it the possibility of duty itself. Such a strategic move echoes Derrida's observation as regards Kant; that when the latter attempts to salvage duty faced with its necessary rejection of examples: 'Is it by chance that, touching on this logic, Kant quotes, but *against the example*, the very example of passion, of a moment of the sacrificial passion of Christ who provides *the best example of what it is necessary not to do* [my emphasis], namely to offer oneself as an example'.<sup>13</sup>

Solicitous to not offer himself as an example, therefore, a philosopher cites against the example. He cites the example to reject the example. By this dual movement of acknowledgement and refusal, a philosopher exposes an artist to the question of taking seriously in a way that a judgement of simple approval or opprobrium never could. That is, whether taken seriously or not, a counter-exemplary artist can never be simply dismissed as bad nor straightforwardly hailed as good. And even though the notion of counter-exemplarity entails an explicit reference to artists' failure, such failure only exists as an opening to future possibility, and never as an inadequation with regard to past expectations. In fact, any judgement of works that would want to

<sup>11</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, p. 151. Those familiar with Kant's passages on genius might want to protest that for Kant, it is not the genius, whose exemplarity must be recognised, but that of his works. For Kant works are indeed 'models' that 'ought not spring from imitation, but must serve as a standard or rule of judgement for others' (pp 150-51). However, even if works are models in Kant's thinking, this does not preclude the genius being one as well. In fact, the genial artist provides a very important model, without which 'beautiful art' would not be possible at all. Only if nature does indeed 'give the rule to art' through genius, can a work of art be beautiful '*in the mere act of judging it*' (pp 150 and 149, respectively). Without the genius to serve as a model of the unique mode of beautiful art's creation—its imperviousness to the pleasures of charms and emotions—we could never be sure of its existence. As such it is no surprise that Kant himself calls the genial 'talent' that makes this creation possible 'exemplary' (p. 162). For more on Kant and the exemplarity of the genius, see J.M. Bernstein's critique in *The Fate of Art*, particularly pp 89-109.

<sup>12</sup> Since my development depends upon Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of 'obliteration', it is important to note that his term identifies precisely the impossibility for philosophy to attain these hopes and overcome the "'subject" of writing'.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, J. *Passions*, p. 31 (footnote 10).



distinguish between good and bad art itself depends upon counter-exemplarity, just as all Christian ethics depends upon Christ's counter-exemplary death on the Cross.<sup>14</sup>

As such, the distinction between 'serious' modern composers such as Schönberg and 'bad' composers of the culture industry depends precisely upon us *taking seriously* the taboos imposed by the former. That is, only if we take seriously the notion that Schönberg makes it impossible to make music in the traditional mould can we criticise 'bad' musicians for doing so. Furthermore, we should not confuse our terms, because even though these 'bad' musicians exemplify what should not be done, they are not counter-exemplary. Their negative exemplarity is in no way singular, and in no way a fulfilment of duty.

### **The counter-exemplary artists of the Republic**

The irony, then, of the counter-exemplarity of the artist is that it allows the best of artist to be singled out for the most abuse. We have already touched on this as regards the 'case of Wagner',<sup>15</sup> but it is perhaps even more notable in the case of the most famous of counter-exemplary artists, the artists expelled from the Republic by Plato. In the Republic, it would only be those capable of creating lifelike resemblances who could be considered deserving of the philosopher's sanction. It would be silly to castigate as deception the work of a painter so inept that one could never be taken in by its illusion. Moreover, the emphasis upon successful mimesis in Plato must be understood as part of a larger effort to work out the relation between mimesis and exemplarity. Most recently, the person who has perhaps best examined this relation is (again) Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. In his book *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, he

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<sup>14</sup> It is tempting to pause here, though, and consider this relation between counter-exemplarity and judgments of good and bad, and to ask what this implies about our judgment as regards the counter-exemplary event itself. Can a Christian, for example, ever imagine the passion of Christ being judged bad? To some extent, the answer is no, because the event itself precedes and founds, and thus exceeds, any judgment that follows from it. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such an understanding depends upon the event itself being considered total, and absolutely exclusionary, and yet the event must make an exception as regards its own exemplarity (even as counter-exemplary), and as such, a remainder of singular exemplarity always persists to bring the original event into question as total, opening the possibility of other counter-exemplary events, which could in turn give rise to different judgements.

<sup>15</sup> David E. White refers to this irony in his essay 'Who is Parsifal's "pure fool"? Nietzsche on Wagner' when he says: 'Whatever faults Wagner had were, for Nietzsche, precisely on account of his greatness, not because his artistic value was superseded by that of another composer presently on the scene' (p. 204).

explains—acknowledging the simplification—that ‘at least since Plato, education or training, political *Bildung*, has been thought taking the mimetic process *as starting point*’, and as such always ‘thought on the basis of what the Romans were to understand as *exemplarity*’.<sup>16</sup> In this consideration, ‘the model (the example)’ makes the ‘ever paradoxical’ demand: ‘imitate me in order to be what you are’.<sup>17</sup> It is through this paradoxical demand that exemplarity and mimesis play their role in the two thousand year old ‘dream of the City as work of art’.<sup>18</sup> In investigating this dream, as it is initiated by Plato, what we want to highlight is the essential role of the relation between philosopher and artist. When we read Plato, what we want to question is less his political project than why he takes artists so seriously as to make them part of it in the first place.

To do so, we must initially note that in the *Republic*, Plato has recourse to the illustrative aspect of art in several ways, and in fact one could say that his whole argument—ultimately turned against art—bases itself on art’s exemplarity. Right at the beginning of the infamous dialogue in Book X where Plato outlines the dangerous deceptiveness of art, he starts with an example. He has no choice. The relation between the Forms and their manifestations in the real world is one of exemplarity: the Form of, let’s say Table since that is one of Plato’s first examples, encompasses the class, Table, and all of the characteristics that make up table-ness. Any particular table, then, is an example of this class, and it has in relation to its class the exclusive inclusiveness that Giorgio Agamben cites as characteristic of examples. In other words, a particular table, precisely by being a *particular* table, is excluded from the Form (i.e. class) Table, but at the same time, this particularity that excludes it is what includes in the class Table *as an example*. The implication of this is that Plato can only take for granted that there are such things as Forms, because he can name particular things that are examples of them:

‘Well then, shall we proceed as usual and begin by assuming the existence of a single essential nature or Form for every set of things which we call by the same name? Do you understand?’

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<sup>16</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art and Politics*, pp 80 and 81, respectively (his emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

‘I do.

*‘Then let us take any set of things you choose. For instance there are any number of beds or of tables, but only two Forms, one of Bed and one of Table’.*<sup>19</sup>

I include the italics in order to emphasize the fact that taking examples is an intrinsic part of the establishment of the Forms.

After this establishment, Plato’s next move is to take up the seemingly unrelated topic of producing beds and tables. However, this constitutes, in fact, the groundwork for another class of examples, namely those related to *techne*, or art. As has been pointed out by innumerable commentators, the Greeks did not make the same distinction between art and manufacture that we do today, and rather the two were linked together under the notion of making or producing, of *techne*. In this way, it is perfectly reasonable to consider the craftsman who makes a table and the painter who paints a picture of it, as examples of the same group. One sees this relation explicitly in the introduction of the artist: ‘what name would you give to a craftsman who can produce all the things made by every sort of workman?’<sup>20</sup> As such, a painter is an example of a craftsman just as a carpenter is; and whereas the latter makes a bed out of wood, the former makes a bed in his way, as described in the following:

‘There is no difficulty; in fact there are several ways in which the thing can be done quite quickly. The quickest perhaps would be to take a mirror and turn it round in all directions. In a very short time you could produce sun and stars and earth and yourself and all the other animals and plants and lifeless objects which we mentioned just now.

‘Yes, in appearance, but not the actual things.

‘Quite so; you are helping out my argument. *My notion is that a painter is a craftsman of that kind.* You may say that the things he produces are not real; but there is a sense in which he too does produce a bed’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Plato. *The Republic of Plato*, p. 325 (my emphasis).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

third by the painter'.<sup>24</sup> By means of exemplarity, then, Plato creates a chain between three levels that makes the class of craftsmen very serious indeed to the viability of the Republic.

Nevertheless, if we look at the nature of the divine craftsman's work, we notice something interesting, because all that distinguishes it from that of the others is its singularity:

'Now the god made only one ideal or essential Bed, whether by choice or because he was under some necessity not to make more than one; at any rate two or more were not created, nor could they possibly come into being.

'Why not?

'Because, if he made even so many as two, then once more a single ideal Bed would make its appearance, whose character those two would share; and that one, not the two, would be the essential Bed. Knowing this, the god, wishing to be the real maker of a real Bed, not a particular manufacturer of one particular bed, created one which is essentially unique.

So it appears'.<sup>25</sup>

'So it appears'. So *appears* the 'single ideal Bed', much as representations of beds might be said to appear in the mirror of the painter-craftsman. What Plato wants us to focus on is the notion that there is only 'a *single* ideal Bed', because in his mind, this excludes the notion that the divine craftsman is making examples like the carpenter and painter. But, in fact, isn't Bed an example of a Form? Isn't any Form an example of a Form? And mustn't we imagine that the divine craftsman is busy creating a multitude of Forms, all of which would be examples? The answer is yes, and that is why Plato must make an example of the artist.

To explain: Plato is faced with the danger of an infinite regress. If he allows that there can be something such as the Form of the Form, that a Form can be an example

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326 (my emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 326-27.

of a Form, then there is no end to the possible permutations of the type of a Form as an example of a Form as an example of a Form. For this reason, he must argue that things cannot be examples of themselves, that Forms are not examples of Forms. To do so, he sets up the three levels we have already seen—Bed-bed-‘bed’—such that the only examples of Bed possible are those made at the level below it. Bed is never an example of Bed, any more than bed is ever an example of anything other than Bed. However, the problem with this set up is that it cannot be demonstrated at the level of Bed and beds. We can never experience the exemplarity of a bed with regard to Bed—except possibly metaphorically as in the ‘Cave’—and as such, it can only be posited based on an assumption. However, with the painting Plato can show the relation convincingly. There the relation of exemplarity is as clear as the mimetic similarities between a painting of a bed, i.e. a ‘bed’, and a ‘real’ bed. By analogy, then, this same relation of exemplarity is said to operate between Bed and bed. As such, what we see in Book X is as much a militation *for* Forms, as it is a polemic *against* artists. In fact, the exemplarity of the painting or work of art could be considered *the* militation for Forms, and *the* example of their relation to things in our everyday world.

Nevertheless, it is important not to forget the argument against artists, and particularly as it appears in the light of the ‘Allegory of the Cave’. There again we see an argument in favour of Forms, but there, rather than pick on art, Plato bases himself on it. In order to convince us of the existence of the Forms, what he argues is that life itself is like a shadow play, in other words, *like art*. However, once he has made this argument, he cannot very well let artists go on freely making works of art in just any old way. In Plato’s world view, for example, it would be quite disastrous if artists developed non-figurative art. As a result, it is imperative for him to take control of what artists do and make sure they don’t do anything different from what they have done, and what better way than to *arrest* them, to stop them in their activities on the basis of some accusation. The charge, of course, is trumped up, or at the very least a Catch-22: artists can only be accused of being deceptive on the basis of the singularity of the Forms, but this singularity depends in its turn upon the model created by artists themselves. The artists of the Republic, in other words, are guilty of nothing more than the capacity to make many examples of different objects. What is wrong with such an ability is that it belies the notion that exemplary works of art—and most

importantly those of the divine craftsman—must be exceptionally exemplary, that is, unique. It is for this reason that Plato must make an example of artists, claim their counter-exemplarity, and expel them from the Republic.

In this light, the counter-exemplary artist is both the most serious and the least serious of actors in the Republic. On the one hand, he is the most serious: *both* because the works he creates are exemplary, *and* because his continued work threatens to undermine that very exemplarity. On the other hand, he is the least serious, because, once it is established, the Republic can do without him and his services. As indicated above, fundamentally artists are expelled from the Republic because of their success in fulfilling their duty, and it is this achievement that philosopher-kings want to keep quiet. What, in other words, would be the purpose of a Republic and all its mechanisms of control, if its citizens can already fulfil their duty on their own?

### **The *causa exemplaris***

Just the same, as central as Plato's account is to understanding the relation between philosophers and artists, it would seem that his antagonism depends to a great extent upon his inflated notions of what artists are capable of. Couldn't he save himself from needing to take them so seriously by believing less in the illusory likenesses crafted by them? It is a realm for questioning that has undeniable appeal. It allows us to wonder, for example, what Plato would have done confronted with modern forms of art, whether abstract or conceptual or surreal. What would he have made of modern art's assault upon representation? Can we, in other words, imagine a Republic that would not depend upon traditional figurative art forms? To some extent, the rest of this chapter tries to answer these questions, because all three of the thinkers we are concerned with share with Plato two of the most significant elements of his thesis: the exemplarity of the work of art, and the counter-exemplarity of the artist. How they fundamentally differ from the Greek philosopher, however, is in their assumptions about the prowess of artists. They respond directly to J.M. Bernstein's 'suggestion' that 'there is something deeply enigmatic in the very idea that a work can *be* exemplary... [and] *take up* the burden of human significance; and

that we unavoidably acknowledge this enigma in acknowledging the risk of failure'.<sup>26</sup> As such, none of them are willing to accept the premise that artists' seriousness depends squarely upon their success. Quite the contrary, they seem to find much more food for thought in failure, and in particular the failure of the very best of artists.<sup>27</sup>

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What, then, we might ask, could be Hölderlin's failure in the eyes of Heidegger? It would seem that for the latter Hölderlin can do no wrong. In that the poet is able to found the very *Dasein* of a people, it is hard to see how there could be anything lacking in his conduct. And yet, there is. Because even though Hölderlin's word is 'establishing', it can only do this establishing *futurally*.<sup>28</sup> Hölderlin, in other words, is unable to speak to us today. And even though Heidegger most often portrays this as *our* problem, our inability to measure up to Hölderlin's poetry, it is still reasonable to see in Hölderlin the particular kind of failure we identified in chapter three as '*Gottes Fehl*'. If one recalls, '*Gottes Fehl*' is not, as the implication of '*Fehl*' would make us believe, a 'failure to reach in the sense of not-arriving, of falling short of a goal'. Rather '*Gottes Fehl*' implies a missing due to 'over-shooting' or 'over-revving'.<sup>29</sup> In terms of Hölderlin's word, it is a failure on the part of the poet which keeps us from hearing his word properly in the present—both his and our own. Moreover, because '*Gottes Fehl*' is not simply a single act of missing, but missing 'as attitude',<sup>30</sup> it means that we will not understand Hölderlin's word in any conceivable present.

As it is, therefore, Hölderlin's failure is not just any old slip up; it is absolutely catastrophic. It brings the whole existence of poets and poetry into question, makes

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, J.M. *The Fate of Art*, p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> As regards Adorno, Charles Rosen notes this in his essay 'Should we adore Adorno?' and sees it as a foretaste of deconstruction: 'In what seems like a forecast of the movement to come of deconstruction in criticism, it is the greatness of an artist's failure that awakens Adorno's imagination' (p. 10).

<sup>28</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlins Hymnen 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 113. Although he does not use the term 'futurally' in it, this particular passage very neatly lays out the dynamic between ourselves and the poet that we are discussing: 'Das Sagen des Dichters ist stiftend. Unsere Dichtung stiftet und gründet einen Ort des Daseins, in dem wir noch nicht stehen, wo aber das dichterische Sagen uns hinzwingen will, wohin wir uns bringen, wenn wir das stiftend gründende Sagen, das, was jetzt gesagt wird, entsprechend verstehen, d.h. wollen, daß wir auf den Grund kommen der im stiftenden Gründen gelegt wird'.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

us wonder why we listen if we are doomed never to understand, and exposes them to the glaring light of the question of why we take either of them seriously at all. We have already addressed the question of poetry's seriousness in the previous chapter, seeing that for Heidegger it is never really in doubt, but this still leaves open the question of the poet. In that the fate of poetry is not the fate of poets, the poet's future is not so clear.<sup>31</sup>

To understand this future, we must return to the terrain we opened up in the previous chapter with the two essays 'The Question Concerning Technology' and 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. Only once we understand what happens to the artists and artisans in these essays, can we understand what happens to Hölderlin himself. In chapter five, we saw how an opposition between exemplary utility and common instrumentality formed the basis of an exemplarity of the work of art—the work of art as most reliable equipment. What remains to be worked out here is the implications of this exemplarity for the artist. To do so we will consider the respective fates of the silversmith responsible for the manufacture of silver sacrificial chalices, the painter Van Gogh who creates *Shoes*, and the shoemaker who presumably made the shoes in *Shoes*.

We will start by addressing the silversmith because, unlike with the others, Heidegger spends a fair amount of time trying to identify precisely what his role is in the manufacture of chalices. This may seem a bit silly, because it would appear very straight-forward what a silversmith does—he casts things in silver—and yet Heidegger would reject our common sense ideas as missing the essential, as settling for a 'correct' instrumental understanding that 'is not yet true'.<sup>32</sup> The truth is that an instrumental understanding of technology<sup>33</sup> takes just one of the four causes at work in causality, the *causa efficiens*—usually thought of as the human activity that, as a means, results in a certain end—and lets it set 'the standard for all causality'.<sup>34</sup> What

<sup>31</sup> This is a reference to our argument in chapter one about 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', in which Heidegger doubly poses the question of taking seriously in terms of the poet and poetry.

<sup>32</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> On p. 4, Heidegger gives his version of this understanding, saying: 'We ask the question concerning technology when we ask what it is. Everyone knows the two statements that answer our question. One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity. The two definitions of technology belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity'.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.



Heidegger says we must do, by contrast, is to take all four causes into account. The four are *causa materialis*, *causa formalis*, *causa finalis*, and *causa efficiens*, and what is particularly important is Heidegger's effort to reduce the disproportionate influence of the last upon our thinking. To this end, he makes two seemingly contradictory statements about *causa efficiens*. In the first, he appears to echo the common sense notion that would equate the *causa efficiens* with the silversmith: it is that 'which brings about the effect that is the finished, actual chalice, in this instance, the silversmith'.<sup>35</sup> In the second, however, he appears to say the exact opposite, rejecting the notion that the silversmith is a *causa efficiens*:

'Finally there is a fourth participant in the responsibility for the finished sacrificial vessel's lying before us ready for use, i.e., the silversmith—but not at all because he, in working, brings about the finished sacrificial chalice as if it were the effect of a making; the silversmith is not a *causa efficiens*'.<sup>36</sup>

Now it is hard to see how we are going to find any chalices 'lying before us ready for use' if the silversmith idles about, and yet this is the notion Heidegger wants us to swallow, because for him, chalices are not 'caused' by physical work, but by intellectual effort. As he puts it, the silversmith's role is to be responsible for 'pondering' upon 'the "that" and the "how" of [the] coming into appearance and into play' of the other three causes.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, in that the silversmith's pondering does not by itself determine either the 'that' or the 'how', he, as *causa efficiens*, in no way stands above or as superior to the other causes; he is as indebted to them as they are to him in the coming into appearance of a chalice. The apparent contradiction, in other words, between the two statements depends upon a false understanding of *causa efficiens*; the silversmith is not a *causa efficiens* in a false, instrumental sense.

As such, what Heidegger is saying is that the silversmith is not so much a doer, as he is a thinker. But because this forces him into a comparison with none other than the thinker of Being himself, much in the way that Plato forces the artist into the same

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

class as that of the 'divine craftsman', this move paves the way for the silversmith's dismissal. Obviously, since the silversmith only thinks about the hows and wherefores of silver sacrificial chalices, he fares poorly in a comparison with such a thinker. His distinctive character as the maker of chalices disappears when his actions are precluded by the thought of Being.

### The artist vanishes

Moreover, the thought of Being can undertake this strategy, because it holds that the proper example for all manufacture is not to be found in manufacture at all, but in nature. That is, Heidegger's main argument about technology is that 'the essence of technology is by no means anything technological',<sup>38</sup> but rather something that should be understood according to the model of *physis*, a 'bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom'.<sup>39</sup> It is this example, which explains how a chalice can be said to arise out of a silversmith's pondering: 'what is brought forth by the artisan or the artist, e.g., the silver chalice, has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth'. Furthermore, because in the case of art and artisanship this bursting open is 'not in itself'—as in the case of the blossom—'but in another, in the craftsman or artist',<sup>40</sup> the example of *physis* has the further implication that an artist's or craftsman's creativity is much like the passive fertility of soil awaiting a seed.

Our question, then, has to be, of course, what provides the seed. However, before we answer this—and in order to answer it—we must look at the shoemaker and Van Gogh and ask what their role is in the production of *Shoes*. The answer, strangely enough, is none at all. Neither the shoemaker nor Van Gogh can be said to be at work in the case of *Shoes*, because, as we noted in the previous chapter, *Shoes* both *is not* and *are* shoes.<sup>41</sup> And as such, if we want to assert that Van Gogh has created it then we run into the objection that what we are really talking about are shoes, but if we say

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> If we recall, the painting both *is not* and *are* shoes, because it serves as an example of the latter. As such, it *is not* a pair of shoes, because it is a representation and not the things themselves. And yet, it can serve as an example of a pair of shoes, only because it also is this very representation—and thus *are* shoes.

that the shoemaker creates them, then we come into conflict with the fact that we are engaged with a painting, and not anything that can be worn on the feet. Moreover, this embarrassment with regard to who produces *Shoes* is reflected in the philosophical analysis that underpins it. As in the later essay, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art' Heidegger addresses the notion of causality; however, whereas the two essays echo each other as regards three of the causes, 'The Origin' remains strikingly silent when it comes to any notion of a *causa efficiens*.<sup>42</sup> This is the case—with the concomitant confusion about *Shoes*' authorship as its consequence—because at the time of this essay Heidegger does not yet acknowledge the model of *physis*, and instead speaks of the work of art as if it itself is endowed with a natural immediacy: speaking of the 'thrust' that 'such a work *is*'.<sup>43</sup> Such a 'thrust' signals the exceptional exemplarity of the work of art. It is the displacement that occurs when we leap into the hermeneutical circle—of the artist, work of art and art—by taking an *example* of a work of art. Only if we submit to this displacement, can we hope 'to transform our accustomed ties to the world and to earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work'.<sup>44</sup> By means of this displacement, the confusion between shoes and *Shoes* occurs, such that the artisan and artist vanish.

### Essential sacrifice

As it turns out, however, the work of art is not the only way in which truth can occur, and it is this that finally brings us to Hölderlin and the obliteration of the artist. By

<sup>42</sup> In 1953, the exposition of the four causes reads: '(1) the *causa materialis*, the material, the matter out of which, for example, a silver sacrificial chalice is made; (2) the *causa formalis*, the form, the shape into which the material enters; (3) the *causa finalis*, the end, for example, the sacrificial rite in relation to which the chalice required is determined as to its form and matter; (4) the *causa efficiens*, which brings about the effect that is the finished, actual chalice, in this instance, the silversmith' (p. 6). In 1935, however, Heidegger only accounts for the first three of these when he explains 'what shoes consist of': the *causa materialis* (wood, leather, or bast), the *causa formalis* ('joined together by thread and nails', for example) and the *causa finalis* ('such gear serves to clothe the feet') (p. 33).

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, M. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p. 66 (Heidegger's emphasis). If we read the entire passage where this excerpt appears, we see that Heidegger himself explicitly refers to the necessity of this obliteration: 'The more solitarily the work, fixed in the figure, stands on its own and *the more cleanly it seems to cut all ties to human beings*, [my emphasis] the more simply does the thrust come into the Open that such a work *is*, and the more essentially is the extraordinary thrust to the surface and the long-familiar thrust down'.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* On the hermeneutical circle and its relation to the exemplary work of art, see previous chapter.

itself it is no great surprise that truth can occur in ways other than the work of art: if truth in works is brought forth like a flower, and as such its seed must be, again if you will, planted, it would be odd if artists were the only fertile soil. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger acknowledges as much and gives an account of the various other ways in which truth can occur:

'One essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is truth setting itself into work. Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state. Still another way in which truth comes to shine forth is the nearness of that which is not simply a being, but the being that is most of all. Still another way in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice. Still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker's questioning, which as the thinking of Being, names Being in its question-worthiness'.<sup>45</sup>

Now, we can easily recognise three of these happening of truth as the triumvirate of the poet, the thinker and the founder of states from the lectures of the year before on *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*. As for the notion of a 'being that is most of all', theological interpretations are tempting, but regardless of whether such readings would hold, the notion remains compatible with that of '*die Schaffenden*'—i.e. the poet, the thinker and the founder of states—since also involving the idea of some sort of exceptional being. However, this still leaves the incongruous notion of 'essential sacrifice'. Such a notion is not incongruous as a happening of truth; it is not difficult to see how sacrifice could be construed as such. Nevertheless, 'essential sacrifice' does stick out in this context, because it is the only happening of truth that does not depend upon *being* as much as upon the *privation* of being.

Thus, the question is: What is essential sacrifice? Heidegger offers no explanation in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. Rather, his concern here is to go on and describe in greater detail how truth happens in the work of art. Nevertheless, if we look at this discussion in its basic outlines, we notice two things that helps us understand why 'essential sacrifice' must be included in this context. First, he says:

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 61-2.

‘Because it is in the nature of truth to establish itself within that which is, in order thus first to become truth, therefore the impulse toward the work lies in the nature of truth as one of truth’s distinctive possibilities by which it can itself occur as being in the midst of beings’.<sup>46</sup>

Right off, this passage confirms our suspicion that there is something incongruous about the notion of ‘essential sacrifice’: it cannot, like the work of art, ‘occur as being in the midst of beings’. However, this is not to say that the happening of truth in works of art is without conceptual hiccups. Based on this passage, we cannot help but ask: if truth does not become truth except by establishing itself in being, how does truth occur the first time? In other words, if truth and the work exist such that the existence of the one depends upon the other, it is necessary that we address the issue of the first work, and with it the first truth. Moreover, their originality is complicated by Heidegger’s second specification that the ‘establishing of truth in the work is the bringing forth of a being such as never was before and will never come to be again’.<sup>47</sup> What this means is that the happening of truth in a work of art is unique and singular. This is a problem, because if completely realised, there is the risk that we will never recognise its truth. As if speaking a language entirely its own, the truth of such works of art would appear to us as contingent and idiosyncratic. Only on the basis of a first work, a work that could provide a model of truth as it *ought* to appear in works of art, is there any hope of us thinking their truth. As a result, a first work, in addition to addressing the hermeneutical problem of origin, must also provide the basis for all subsequent works. And to do so, it must sacrifice its own development. Rather than be a seed that blossoms on its own, it is a seed whose fertility spurs the flowering of subsequent works. As such, this first work is less a work in its own right than a demand for works; its self-sacrificial *working* constitutes essential sacrifice. In its essential lack, its failure to ever entirely blossom, essential sacrifice is the call for further happenings of truth.

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreover, because of its sacrifice, because such work cannot be understood in the present, and must remain 'unheard', we need the thought of Being to recognise essential sacrifice, to recognise that there is something *to be heard*:

'To this struggle of the discord between the currently prevailing and continuing tones must the firstlings be sacrificed. Those are the poets, who in their saying pronounce the futural being of a people in its history, and for this reason necessarily remain unheard.'<sup>48</sup>

In our philosophical recognition that the poets indeed say 'the futural being of a people', we recognise the essential sacrifice that is the poets' obliteration—or more specifically, Hölderlin's obliteration, for as Heidegger goes on to say, 'Hölderlin is such a poet', the 'poet of poets'. Moreover, in that we only make this recognition to the extent that we see it as our duty to maintain the poet's 'continuing tones', we negatively model ourselves upon the poet. We say his saying; but rather than sacrifice ourselves in the process, we free ourselves for the future promised by it.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, the poet is a counter-example, an example of what not to do that points to none other than our duty to reject his example, our duty to *not* follow him into obliteration but to attempt to leap into the future.

As with Plato, therefore, Heidegger sees the poet as the most serious and least serious of beings. Most serious, because the poet's saying 'pronounces the futural being of a people'; least serious because his essential sacrifice means that he cannot help us grasp his very pronouncement. However, unlike the Greek philosopher, Heidegger does not assume that our comprehension will ever be complete. Compared with the Republic, the futural being conceived of by Heidegger remains a negative possibility, most potent in its critical edge—its question concerning technology and the technologically dominated world. For him, if the artist is indeed a counter-example, it is because in leaving his works to us, the artist is not deceiving us, but *undeceiving* us.

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<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, M. *Hölderlin's Hymns 'Germanien' und 'Der Rhein'*, p. 146.

<sup>49</sup> It might be noted that the argument of essential sacrifice outlined here points to a strand of Hegelianism in Heidegger's thinking on art. In other words, the notion of the poet of essential sacrifice begs the question of how art would continue to be possible after him, and there certainly is ammunition for such a reading in Heidegger's work on other artists. Their work can appear as nothing more than signposts to Hölderlin's more essential activity; whereas, the ontologically significant move passes from poetising to thinking, and thus via an end of art, or the capitulation of art to philosophy.

## Leaving the artist behind

This last notion, the emphasis upon the truth of works of art, distinguishes Heidegger from Nietzsche. Even if Heidegger does not, like Plato, take art's mimetic capacity as the basis for creating a positive philosophical image of the world, he never questions the notion that works of art are happenings of truth. It never occurs to him to wonder whether the counter-exemplarity of the artist might reflect back poorly upon the artist's own works, whether his failure should not make us wonder how seriously we should really take his creations. Nietzsche, by contrast, takes up this very question. Whereas Heidegger never really imagines that we might dismiss Hölderlin's poetry as pretentious or affected, as we have seen, Nietzsche exposes Wagnerian opera to ridicule, and asks: 'what? was this Parsifal meant to be taken at all *seriously*?'<sup>50</sup> For Nietzsche, the deception wrought by Wagner is part and parcel of the deceptiveness of art itself, and the composer's counter-exemplarity is able directly, and even negatively, to impact the exemplarity of his works. Yet, this possible counter-exemplary contamination (of works by artists) is insufficient to make Nietzsche turn from works of art altogether.<sup>51</sup> Instead, he undertakes a reconsideration of his relation to them. As we saw in the previous chapter, it leads him to develop a notion of 'good' versus 'bad' works of art—of Bizet's *Carmen* versus Wagner's *Parsifal*—where the former's exceptional exemplarity can be played off against the banal exemplarity of the latter. However, in that there is a certain tenuousness to *Carmen*'s exceptional exemplarity, it is not surprising to find Nietzsche elsewhere continuing to question the seriousness of works of art, and in *On the Genealogy of Morals* offering a completely different version of the exemplarity of works of art and the counter-exemplarity of the artist.

<sup>50</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Schacht notes Nietzsche's awareness of art's deceptive character, but as he points out this does not keep Nietzsche from considering art's importance as regards its creativity: 'What Nietzsche here [i.e. in the *Will to Power*] and elsewhere calls the "lying" in which art traffics is actually only the aspect borne by artistic creations when they are viewed in terms of their cognitive import. They cease to bear this aspect when that perspective of assessment is abandoned, and art comes to be construed in terms of the creativity it involves, rather than the (failing) attempt to apprehend the nature of reality and the way things actually (and merely) happen to be'. ('Nietzsche's Second Thoughts About Art', p. 233) By contrast, Erich Heller, who sees the opposition of truth and lies as central to the question of art, cannot help but deem Nietzsche the 'last philosopher of art'.

As we said earlier in this chapter, counter-exemplarity very often appears as the failure of a great artist, and in this vein, what greater failure could confront Nietzsche than that of the artistic idol of his youth? The dominance of Wagner in Nietzsche's thinking has been documented by many, and yet it is perhaps still Nietzsche's own testimony—that 'one must first be a Wagnerian'<sup>52</sup>—that most concisely addresses the fatal necessity of Wagner for Nietzsche. However, as this testimony states, even if one must *first* be a Wagnerian, one cannot *remain* a Wagnerian. One must move on from Wagner just as surely as one must first embrace him, and the reason one must subsequently reject him is because of his counter-exemplarity as an artist.

To understand this counter-exemplarity we might consider a reading of the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* undertaken by Aaron Ridley. The third essay asks the question of the meaning of ascetic ideals, and in particular their meaning for artists. What Ridley notices, however, is that in order to answer this question, Nietzsche has to construct two aesthetics: one that would address the meaning of ascetic ideals for artists such as we usually think of them, artists such as Wagner; and a second that would address their meaning for artists understood as 'artists of the soul', whose 'overfulness' allows them 'to "attain satisfaction" rather than sickness' with themselves.<sup>53</sup> Ridley dubs these two aesthetics, respectively, the 'official' and 'unofficial' versions. According to the *official* version, ascetic ideals mean 'nothing or too many things',<sup>54</sup> because artists have a bad conscience about their 'true' natures. This does not mean, however—as Plato would have it—that artists are at fault for some sort of deception. Quite the contrary, the 'true' nature of artists is precisely that they are 'unreal and false', and artists could have a good conscious about this if it wasn't for their 'typical velleity': their 'fantasy of being an actor in, rather than a beautifier of, the real world'.<sup>55</sup> An artist such as Wagner, in other words, suffers from

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, F. *Der Fall Wagner*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Ridley, Aaron. 'What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?', p. 144. In a more expanded passage, Ridley describes Nietzsche's understanding of the 'artist of the soul' in terms of the latter's notion of beauty: 'Beauty is a state of soul: it is the result of going to work on oneself, of interpreting oneself, of exercising upon oneself that artist's violence to which Nietzsche is so attached. It is a matter of resisting the seduction to *ressentiment*' (p. 140). I could spend a great deal more time on this idea of an artist of the soul, but because my concern is more nearly with its impact upon artists proper such as Wagner, I will simply refer the reader to Alexander Nehamas's essay "'How One Becomes What One Is'" and passages in Julian Young's book *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, where he deals with Nietzsche's project of self-creation (see in particular pp 29-30).

<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 77.

<sup>55</sup> Ridley, Aaron. 'What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?', p. 130.



*ressentiment* as regards his 'true' nature (as false), and as a consequence attempts to become 'relevant' by intervening in the real world. However, because of his false nature, he can only do so as a '[valet] to some ethics or philosophy or religion'.<sup>56</sup> Such an attempt is counter-exemplary, an example of what not to do: a 'denial of the self, a crossing-out of the self on the part of an artist'.<sup>57</sup>

If this, therefore, is the official version of the aesthetics at work in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it is up to the *unofficial* version to explain the effect of artists' counter-exemplarity upon the exemplarity of works of art. In this version, works of art are symptoms. In the case of Wagner, *Parsifal* is a symptom of his disease, his *décadence*. In the case of an artist of the soul, any works of art that he leaves behind are no more than the symptoms of his overfulness, and should not be confused with that overfulness itself. As an example of the latter, Ridley takes up the case of *On the Genealogy of Morals* itself, and argues that it cannot be taken as an exemplary work by an artist of the soul, because such a move would amount to 'a kind of reverse velleity', whereby an artist of the soul would try to project his self-artistry in such a way that it could have a direct impact outside himself.<sup>58</sup> The way for the artist of the soul to avert this velleity, and thus to overcome *ressentiment*, is to insist that his only material is himself, his own soul. In such a case 'the "typical velleity" of the artist is ruled out in advance':

'for when an artist's material is himself, and his work is free of *ressentiment*, the artist/man opposition from which the velleity springs is abolished. There is no longer the space across which it would be intelligible for the artist-man to yearn "actually to be" [i.e. to overcome his nature as false]. This has the effect of suggesting that the problem with artists proper is really their insistence upon creating works of art which are separable from themselves'.<sup>59</sup>

This does not mean, however, that there is no interest in considering these works of art which are separable from their creators. Quite the contrary, the fact that they are

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<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 81.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>58</sup> Ridley, Aaron. 'What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?', p. 144.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 135-36.

separable may make them all the more worthy of examination, because such works readily expose themselves to the very question which motivates us: whether we take them seriously. According to Nietzsche, 'one does well to separate the artist from his work, which should be taken more seriously than he is'.<sup>60</sup> We listen intently to *Parsifal*—yes, even the much-maligned *Parsifal*—because in it there is the possibility that we hear an artist's 'secret superior laughter at himself, the triumph of his achievement of the ultimate, highest artistic freedom, artistic transcendence'.<sup>61</sup> Such laughter would be a 'laugh not of self-rejection but of self-acceptance', 'the laugh of a good conscience from which the specter of *ressentiment* is, even if only for the moment, absent'.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, it is only to the extent that works of art are exposed to the question of whether they really should be taken seriously, and open to the possibility of their being a joke, that the enjoyment of such shared laughter, such 'overfulness', becomes possible. And it becomes possible precisely because of the counter-exemplarity of the artist, of his crossing himself out in favour of the work he leaves behind. In fact, the image that Nietzsche conjures up for this obliteration is perhaps one of the most common metaphors for self-negation and self-sacrifice: motherhood.

'The poet and creator of the *Parsifal* is not spared a deep, fundamental, even frightening growth and descent into medieval contrasts of the soul, a hostile remoteness from all elevation, strictness, and discipline of the spirit, a kind of intellectual *perversity* (if you will pardon the expression), just as a woman with child is not spared the repulsive and strange aspects of pregnancy: which, as I said, must be *forgotten* before the child can be enjoyed'.<sup>63</sup>

It is only if an artist submits to such self-sacrifice, such counter-exemplary self-abnegation—as is supposedly undertaken by mothers—that we can subsequently laugh at the antics of the work of art, and enjoy with others the 'overfulness' that we are meant to strive for as artists of the soul.

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<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> Ridley, Aaron. 'What is the meaning of ascetic ideals?', p. 130.

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 80.

## All people are created artists

In conclusion, we might note that an important shift occurs in what Ridley dubs the 'unofficial' aesthetic of *On the Genealogy of Morals*: Being an artist ceases to be the preserve of a restricted set of people trained to work in one of various media, and expands to potentially embrace anyone who devotes himself diligently to his own self-creation. Now, this may seem an invitation to conceptual chaos, but in fact, because of his rather elitist views on human nature—in terms of the weak and strong, *décadent* and healthy, with the latter very much in the minority—Nietzsche never imagines that just anyone can declare himself an artist of the soul. However, if one is disinclined to such elitism, one cannot help but wonder whether the counter-exemplarity of conventional artists—their mistake in creating works separate from themselves—does not presage precisely the condition in which all people would be artists.

In his own way, Adorno also approaches this idea. *His* notion of the alienation of the work from the artist constitutes itself in view of the relation between works of art and society. He is, as we noted in the previous chapter, suspicious of any exemplarity of the work of art, which would place the work somehow above or outside of society, and for this reason he imagines works' exceptional exemplarity as being found more nearly in the absence of works of art, than in any form they might take. However, by identifying the exemplarity of works of art with their impossibility, he begs the question of where this leaves artists. Common sense would say that they would disappear with works of art, and yet if we think about how works of art might disappear, we realise that their disappearance actually exposes a whole new set of counter-exemplary creators. That is, their disappearance puts us in the position of being the counter-exemplary creators of a society without works, a society whose only products would be those extremes traced by the crisis of semblance, fantastical kitsch and mere things. As such, asking whether we take such artists seriously would be also to ask whether we take seriously our role in the construction of instrumentalised society, and as such could be the essential first step toward overcoming it.

## Conclusion

So why would a philosopher take an artist seriously? As we now can say, there are a variety of reasons why he would. He might, like Adorno, be concerned with the predominance of instrumental reason in our modern ways of living and see in an artist's activity some hope of resistance to these conditions. Or he might, like Nietzsche, dream of a future national unity that could soar to higher and higher achievement on the wings of a tragic heroic artist. Or he might, like Heidegger, hear in the word of an artist, the song of a blind poet able to name 'the gods and [name] all things for what they are'.<sup>1</sup> Whatever his aspiration, a philosopher's gesture toward an artist implies his engagement with the world; it is the philosophical claim that our relation to the world is itself significant, is itself *serious*.

Now this may seem self-evident, and yet it is this very self-evidence that these philosophers are trying to probe in their recourse to artists. Very much like Descartes troubled by whether his existence is a dream, these philosophers worry that the very self-evidence of existence masks a fundamental constructedness: namely, that we are thrown into a preformed existence that dooms us to never being anything more than spectators of our lives in the manner of an audience to a shadow play. In this existential dilemma, the artist, at the very least, offers the hope that we can grasp this constructedness, and thus, play a role in its unfolding.

Just the same, even if an artist can offer this hope, he cannot offer sure indications as to what our role in the world might indeed be. Politically speaking, this is reflected in the disturbing ambivalence these philosophers exhibit with regard to traditional political distinctions. It is straightforward to denounce Heidegger's Nazism, but less apparent how one should react to the resonance one finds between his work and that of Adorno. For his part, Adorno aligns himself with the thinkers of the left, and yet the left itself is hesitant to embrace him. As for Nietzsche, he is perhaps the paradigm of political ambiguity. At various times, he has been the philosophical poster child of both right and left, fascists and socialists alike. And the reason this can happen is because in turning to an artist as his model, Nietzsche turn his back upon the

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, Martin. 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', p. 464.

establishment of party positions in favour of the creation of future possibilities. As Nietzsche puts it, speaking for 'good Europeans':

'We "conserve" nothing; neither do we want to return to any past periods; we are not by any means "liberal"; we do not work for "progress"; we do not need to plug up our ears against the sirens who in the market place sing of the future: their song about "equal rights", a "free society", "no more masters and no servants" has no allure for us. We simply do not consider it desirable that a realm of justice and concord should be established on earth (because it would certainly be the realm of the deepest leveling and *chinoiserie*)'<sup>2</sup>

Such openness to political possibility is also exposure to those who would try to harness political potential for their own ends; it is philosophy's inability to defend itself against those who see politics as a means. A philosophy of future possibility cannot judge the latter's ends, because to do so would be for it to assess the consequences of such ends, and thus in its turn, to treat politics as means.

As such, philosophy's engagement with the world on the model of the artist must acknowledge the paradox of commitment as it is identified by Adorno:

'Commitment as such, even if politically intended, remains politically ambiguous as long as it does not reduce itself to propaganda, the obliging shape of which mocks any commitment on the part of the subject'.<sup>3</sup>

Commitment requires that philosophy avoid becoming a simple mouthpiece for existing political positions, and yet only if it exposes itself to the judgement of these positions can it claim any commitment at all. Only if philosophy is willing to place its own seriousness in the balance, and to take the risk that it will *not* be taken seriously, can it claim any relevance and urgency for its engagement in the world. As such, the question of the seriousness of artists echoes doubly for philosophy. Not only does it model the seriousness of philosophy itself, it also reflects the limitedness

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Gay Science*, p. 338.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, T.W. 'Commitment', p. 77.

of such seriousness, its presuppositions about the nature of the world. That is, philosophy's engagement with the world on the model of art is its engagement with the world *as* a work of art, as if the world itself were something that could be grasped in its entirety. As Adorno puts it in a passage cited earlier:

'As a corrective to the total rule of method, philosophy contains a playful element which the traditional view of it as a science would like to exorcise... The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He cannot deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious'.<sup>4</sup>

In this light, philosophy's limitation—a limitation whose exposure threatens to mock philosophy's pretence with regard to the world—would be structural. Philosophy will think of the world as if it were an autonomous entity, because only on this basis can it presume to say anything about it at all.

As such, when Adorno reiterates his 'statement that it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz',<sup>5</sup> he is only saying something about commitment to the extent that he himself is committing himself to a vision of the world as post-Auschwitzean. Only to the extent that he performs commitment, that he sees himself able to grasp the world as a whole and to name what is at stake in it, does he have any hope that a philosophical gesture, that 'determinate negation', can make a difference.

Moreover, the naming of Auschwitz negatively parallels what happens in the identification of Schönberg as the dialectical composer, or Heidegger's claim that Hölderlin founds the *Dasein* of the German people, or Nietzsche's lament that one must first be a Wagnerian. They all simultaneously state *and* perform the claim that the world can be modelled, that there is a way it *ought* to be. They state it to the extent that they offer at least negative indications as to how the world should be—

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<sup>4</sup> Adorno, T.W. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

how it should *not* be dominated by instrumental reason, how it should eschew the prevalence of technology, how it should *not* be *décadent*. They perform it to the extent that the respective investigations model themselves on the activity of the artists they reclaim—to the extent that they embrace the compositional, rhetorical and theatrical qualities of the language of philosophy itself. However, in making such claims, they all expose themselves to a dual critique: one that would attack the statement and deny its vision (even if negative) of the world—that would deny that the world is indeed post-Auschwitzian, for instance—and another that would question the performance and dismiss the artistic pretensions of these philosophers as that of artists *manqués*.

We have tried to avoid approaching these philosophers in either of these fashions. Even though it is implicit in the notion of a ‘serious world’, as it is developed in the first part, that we could indeed question how plausible—and particularly how desirable—their future visions are, the goal of our examination was more nearly to suggest that this sort of critique fails to offer better alternatives for our thinking about the world. We have wanted to argue that the notion of a serious world is so persistent precisely because it is the challenge posed by taking the world seriously, by believing there is something at stake in our relation to it. Certainly, we can deny or remain indifferent to such a challenge, but this does not so much counter the demand for engagement as ignore it.

As for questioning the performance of these philosophers: By taking up the issue of exemplarity, we have wanted to go beyond a simple rejection of the model of art as inappropriate, because such a rejection—very often the claim of philosophy’s scientific nature—does not live up to the complexity of art’s model. For one thing, it does not acknowledge the degree to which the exemplarity of the artist is also a counter-exemplarity—an example of what *not* to do—and it fails in this acknowledgement because it undertakes precisely the same strategy that Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe accuses Plato of: namely, of performing a ‘reflection trick’, by means of which it speaks ‘of the producing “subject” (of the producer) in terms of the product’.<sup>6</sup> Those who would denounce the philosophy of a Nietzsche or Heidegger

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<sup>6</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. ‘Typography’, p. 90.

as literature rather than philosophy fail to see precisely to what degree these two thinkers grappled with the fact that their writings could not and *should not* be works of art. As such and additionally, those who would denounce art's model are being deaf to the challenge presented by exemplary works of art. What the latter reminds philosophers is that they too create works and as such are indeed authors of a sort. In fact, philosophy cannot even reclaim its scientific character without setting language and rhetoric in motion, and thus can never escape from its own voice. In this light, the work of art is less a standard that philosophers could be said to have fallen short of in their productions than a warning that they can only maintain their claim to scientific rigour at the cost of constant vigilance as regards their philosophical voice.

Why a philosopher would take an artist seriously, then, is more nearly a question that is significant in its posing than in the answers it yields. When philosophy is willing to admit its kinship with art, that is the moment where it is willing to risk its seriousness in order to say something about the world. Only when philosophy itself asks us to take it seriously in the way that it takes art seriously, is it potentially able to address problems that concern us all.



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