

**AT THE INTERSECTION
OF ETHICS AND AESTHETICS:
EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THEODOR ADORNO ON THE WORK OF ART**

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Abstract

This dissertation undertakes a comparative study of the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno and the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that Levinas's resistance to aesthetics and Adorno's to ethics have led interpreters to miss an essential overlap in their writings.

My first concern is to demonstrate that Adorno's theory of aesthetics, when placed side by side with Levinas's philosophy, serves to expand Levinas's conception of the ethical encounter. While Levinas provides a rich account of the ethical, he does not commit himself in any serious way to the study of aesthetics. The expression unique to ethics, for Levinas, occurs as a face-to-face encounter, and Levinas is quite emphatic that the ethical encounter is not produced by any work, including and especially the work of art. Nonetheless, Levinas finds in certain artists evidence of ethical expression. When read alongside Adorno's aesthetic theory, it becomes possible to argue that Levinas's ethics of responsibility need not be limited to the relation between two human beings. The experience of ethics described by Levinas can then be extended to include the experience of works of art.

My second concern is to demonstrate how Levinas's notion of ethical transcendence challenges Adorno's perceived confinement within a system of immanent critique. Adorno, like Levinas, criticizes a form of rationality that would elevate the subject to an absolute; and Adorno, again like Levinas, seeks ways to interrupt this subject's totalizing stance. However, Adorno refuses to outline an ethics and there is much to his writing, particularly his reliance on a negative dialectics, which makes it very difficult to imagine ethics in the way that Levinas describes. Nonetheless, I argue that the two thinkers are not as far apart as they at first seem. There are striking similarities between Adorno's account of the artwork's disorienting effect on subjectivity in *Aesthetic Theory*, and Levinas's description of the effect of alterity on the subject in *Otherwise Than Being*. By exposing these similarities, it becomes possible to attribute a Levinasian ethical dimension to Adornian aesthetic experience. In other words, Levinas helps us to push Adorno beyond his reliance on a privative description of ethics and thus allows for a productive rereading of Adorno's theory of art as critique.

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Introduction

Current scholarship on contemporary art is beset by two opposing tendencies. There is, firstly, the now familiar postmodern position that takes as its focus the set of artistic practices emerging since the 1960's. Characteristic of this postmodern current is a rejection of Modernism, both for its ignorance of contextual questions of race, gender and class and correlatively, for its defense of the autonomy of the work of art.¹ Recently, a second tendency in contemporary discourses on art has arisen, marked by a desire to revive the study of philosophical aesthetics as a unique domain with a distinct set of interests and concerns.

The first tendency can be traced back to the publication of a highly influential collection of essays on the rise of postmodern art in the late 1980's, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*.² Hal Foster, the editor of this collection, presents a series of essays on the question of how art is to move beyond or somehow reappropriate (in the case of Jürgen Habermas) the project of modernity. Foster describes in his introduction to this text an emergent group of artists set on relinquishing the aesthetic as a privileged space in favour of a critical practice aware of its political, social and historical constraints. According to Foster, the culture wars of the 1980's, combined with the AIDS crisis and the rise of neoliberalism under Thatcher and Reagan, produced a series

¹ Particularly problematic for postmodernists is the Formalism championed by Modernist theorists like Clement Greenberg and his successor, Michael Fried, which makes the claim that works of art must be judged not according to any external criteria, but according to the formal constraints of a given medium. Greenberg's seminal essays on the subject are collected in: Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). Fried adapts Greenberg's Formalism to the Minimalist art of the 1960's in his essay "Art and Objecthood," which can be found in: Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

² See Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983).

of artistic practices intent on bolstering a renewed political Left. Coupled with this turn to the political in postmodern art was a turn against the Formalism defended most prominently by art critic Clement Greenberg, whose case for aesthetic autonomy necessarily excluded contextual concerns. Foster's book helped pave the way for a trend later described as the moral turn of Postmodernism in the 1980's,³ during which issues concerning race, class and gender became important not only for political discourse, but also for art theory. According to this postmodern position, it is necessary to question, through various strategies, the authority of the aesthetic as an autonomous sphere.

The Modernist defense of the autonomous art object, and of the artist as sole provider of meaning, comes under attack from a number of different directions. The Minimalist art of the 1960's, for instance, in foregrounding a phenomenological approach to art, directly counters the notion that a work of art is a self-sufficient, meaningful whole.⁴ Put simply, the specific experience of the viewer is now considered of utmost significance, as opposed to the internal relations of an art object's form. A similar desire to engage with the viewer of a work informs both Performance and Installation Art, which dispute the Modernist claim that there are clear formal limits to an artwork and extend the parameters of artistic practice to include not only the body, but also spaces beyond the museum or gallery walls. Postmodern approaches such as these are often

³ See the essays collected in Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung, eds., *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1996). For a foundational text on the subject of ethics and aesthetics in postmodern thought, see: Robert Merrill, ed., *Ethics / Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions* (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1988) and Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

⁴ The emergence of Minimalism prompted the well-known defense of Modernist absorption by Michael Fried, against what he described as the 'theatricality' of Minimalist works. According to Fried, Minimalism engages the viewer in the perceptual experience of an object that extends beyond the specifics of a given medium, and thus breaks from the Modernist emphasis on form. See Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 148-151.

marked by their challenge to the artist's control of an art object's final meaning and, conversely, by their emphasis on the viewer's participation in the artistic event.⁵ Just as the author is refused by Post-Structuralism as a locus of stable meaning,⁶ so the artist in postmodern artworks has been refigured as secondary to the viewer-participant. In other words, the recipient becomes the site from which critique can properly occur and equally the site from which structures of power unwittingly perpetuated by a given text or work can be exposed. The turn toward the experience of a viewer-participant is evident more recently in debates over Jacques Rancière's call for the emancipation of the spectator, the emergence of affect theory, and the debate over relational aesthetics sparked by Nicholas Bourriaud.⁷ What these otherwise divergent positions share is the view that art has the potential to initiate a radical, open-ended process of exchange between spectators with implications that extend beyond the aesthetic to include the ethical and political spheres.⁸

⁵ See Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) for a compendium of essays on the collaborative emphasis of much recent art. Bishop's analysis of participation will form the basis for my discussion of contemporary art in the Afterword to this dissertation.

⁶ For the decisive essay on this question, see Roland Barthes's, "Death of an Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁷ Jacques Rancière has done much to rehabilitate the category of the aesthetic in recent years. As we will see in the Afterword below, Rancière theorizes the aesthetic as a unique mode of sensible perception. See in particular Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004) and Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). Another hugely influential figure has been curator Nicholas Bourriaud, who analyzes contemporary art's turn to sociability as evidence of a 'relational aesthetic.' See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Collection Documents Sur L'art (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002) and Nicholas Bourriaud, Caroline Schneider, and Jeanine Herman, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Steinberg, 2001). For an overview of affect theory as it pertains to the analysis of contemporary art, see: Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁸ As we will see in the Afterword to this dissertation, the case of Jacques Rancière is slightly more complicated, in the sense that he does attempt to rehabilitate the category of the aesthetic as an autonomous space. However, the aesthetic, for Rancière, even when treated as autonomous, is still primarily concerned with the affective experience of the viewer/ participant, as opposed to the work of art itself.

The countervailing tendency to Postmodernism in recent years has come to be known as ‘the new aestheticism.’⁹ Such a tendency is a direct reaction against the distinctly anti-aesthetic trend that has come to predominate in postmodernist discourse. A clear throwback to Modernism, the recent revival of aestheticism includes a defense of aesthetic autonomy, and of the potential, unique to aesthetics, for social critique. As John Joughin and Simon Malpas point out, the specificity of the aesthetic has been obscured by the postmodern challenge to universal values and by its careful exposure of art’s inextricability from dominant ideology. This is not to say that such criticisms are invalid, but that by making art irrevocably implicated in questions of politics and ethics, its singularity has been lost. As they put it, “theoretical criticism is in continual danger here of throwing out the aesthetic baby with the humanist bathwater.”¹⁰

Perhaps the biggest divergence between Postmodernism and ‘the new aestheticism’ is the latter’s revitalization of Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Adorno’s reputation as one of Modernism’s “last ditch defenders,”¹¹ along with his scathing

⁹ This term originally emerged out of what has come to be known as ‘the philistine controversy’, sparked by an article by Dave Beech and John Roberts in the *New Left Review* (See Dave Beech and John Roberts, “Spectres of the Aesthetic,” *New Left Review*, no. 218 (August 7, 1996): 102-127). For a more detailed account of the various positions put forth in this debate, see Dave Beech and John Roberts, eds., *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002). Beech and Roberts positioned themselves against those defending aesthetics as an autonomous sphere, accusing the latter of sidestepping the Feminist, Marxist or Postcolonial criticism of the past four decades. By contrast with the ‘new aestheticism’, Beech and Roberts want to revive aesthetics while also providing a more thorough grounding in contemporary social theory. Over the course of the debate, it becomes clear that those accused of abstracting art from political and ethical concerns, including Jay Bernstein and Andrew Bowie, actually do nothing of the sort. For a collection of essays from the perspective of the ‘new aestheticism,’ see John J Joughin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003). Jay Bernstein develops his own position against Beech and Roberts in his seminal text: J. M Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Joughin and Malpas, “The New Aestheticism: An Introduction,” in *The New Aestheticism*, eds. John J Joughin and Simon Malpas (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003) 1.

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman” (1986), in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 56. In the various essays collected in this book, Huyssen attempts to set Postmodernism apart from the dichotomy between high art and mass culture characteristic of Modernism. The full passage reads as follows: “Indeed, both Greenberg and Adorno are often taken to be the last ditch defenders of the purity of the Modernist aesthetic, and they

critique of mass culture, has made him a perfect target for a postmodern cultural theory centered on both defending mass culture and rejecting the elitism of Modernist aesthetics.¹² In his introduction to the *Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster, for instance, placed Adorno last in a long lineage of thinkers on philosophical aesthetics, whose admittedly ‘brilliant’ defense of aesthetics as “a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world”¹³ must nonetheless be left behind. Despite such proclamations, the proliferation of studies on Adorno and aesthetics in recent years suggests that Foster’s verdict was premature. It has become clear that Adorno is no longer as outdated as was once proclaimed.¹⁴ Diverse thinkers such as Frederic Jameson, Jay Bernstein and Andrew Bowie, as well as the art historians T.J. Clark and Paul Wood, have made numerous attempts to retrieve from Adorno the notion of art as an autonomous site of critique, and, in particular, as having the power to strengthen subjectivity against an increasingly reified consumer world.¹⁵

have become known since the late 1930’s as uncompromising enemies of modern mass culture” (Huysen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” 56).

¹² See the Introduction to Bernstein’s edited volume of Adorno’s essays on mass culture: Theodor W Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹³ Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, xv.

¹⁴ This is evident from the resurgence of interest in Adorno’s aesthetics since the 1990’s. One proponent of Adornian aesthetics is John Roberts (See John Roberts, “After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique,” *Historical Materialism* 7, no. 1 (2000): 221–39), who divides recent scholarship on Adorno into five categories. The first includes the dialogic critique of thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Wellmer; the second is represented by Peter Bürger’s critique of aesthetic autonomy as precluding social praxis; the third trend includes J.M. Bernstein, Andrew Bowie and Robert Hullot-Kentor as defenders of Adorno as “a radical aesthete” (Roberts, “After Adorno: Art, Autonomy and Critique,” 224); the fourth, represented by Frederic Jameson, rejects Habermas and emphasizes Adorno’s concepts of totality and reification; and finally, the fifth category, in which Roberts includes himself as well as Lambert Zuidervaart and Peter Osborne, defends Adorno as a “dialectical theorist of autonomy” (Roberts, “After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique,” 224).

¹⁵ See Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003); T. J Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London; New York: Verso, 1990); Paul Wood, *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, London, 1993). For a more

At the forefront of thinkers attempting to reclaim Adorno for the purposes of engaging with contemporary art is the philosopher Jay Bernstein. His recent book *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* provides a groundbreaking analysis of Adorno's aesthetics in light of recent accounts of Modernism within both philosophy and art history. Bernstein's main point is that Adorno's diagnosis of modernity, as initiating an irrevocable split between reason and sense, remains the essential problem informing artistic practice today. What contemporary art preserves, like the modernist art before it, is an "emphatic experience"¹⁶ increasingly denied by a modern form of rationality that has developed at the expense of sensuous particularity. In other words, the artwork's sheer materiality acts as a protest against the anesthetized reason of modern life. Bernstein defends this Adornian position through an analysis of a wide range of artists, from Frank Stella, Chaim Soutine and Anthony Caro to the more contemporary Cindy Sherman. According to Bernstein, contemporary art continues to be a space from which instrumental reason can be effectively complicated. And Adorno's theory of aesthetics is a critical piece in this struggle.¹⁷

Bernstein's efforts to bring Adorno's aesthetic theory up to date make a significant contribution to the debates surrounding the 'new aestheticism,' but they do not sit well with discussions of contemporary art emerging out of Postmodernism. The art praised by much postmodern discourse – art centered on 'participation,' on relationality or on the production of affect – does not accord well with Adorno's interpretation of the work of art as a material index of society's lack. Bernstein, as a philosopher turned art critic, cites

recent collection of essays on Adorno and the aesthetic, see J. M Bernstein, ed., *Art and Aesthetics after Adorno* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2010).

¹⁶ Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, 8.

¹⁷ For an overview of Bernstein's position in *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, see pgs. 1-11.

only those examples of contemporary art that continue to reinforce Adorno's mid-20th century diagnosis of the modern condition. In so doing, Bernstein does not ask the properly Adornian question of how contemporary art (in its historical specificity) forces us, within theory, to reconstitute our ideas about the aesthetic. Instead, Bernstein extends a familiar picture into the present, tending to focus his art criticism on Modernist art works. If he does venture into the contemporary domain, he seeks only those works that can be said to echo the negativity of a Modernist aesthetic.

Like Bernstein, I will here defend Adorno's aesthetics against his critics, but I do so not by defending Modernism, but by asking how his theory is applicable to recent experiments in so-called postmodern art. I argue in this dissertation that Adorno provides us with a set of terms that, if developed outside of the framework of his original theory, help to address a problem within current discourse on contemporary art. In what follows, I read Adorno alongside the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a thinker who has, despite his lack of any sustained commitment to aesthetics, become increasingly relevant for postmodern discussions of art. In making this comparison between Levinas and Adorno, I contribute to the growing scholarship on ethics and aesthetics in recent years,¹⁸

¹⁸ While the intrinsic connection between aesthetics and ethics was largely taken for granted in pre-modern philosophy, the modern era was marked, at least since Kant, by a growing acceptance of their divide. The doctrine of art for art's sake in the 19th century provided a wide-reaching defense of the autonomy of the art object and, correlatively, of the irrelevance of the ethical for aesthetic claims. It is only fairly recently that ethics and aesthetics have been brought together once again. This is true not only for continental philosophy circles, which will be my focus here, but also for the analytic tradition, in which there is a growing debate between the autonomist and the moralist positions. Put briefly, the autonomist position maintains a division between aesthetic values and / or merits, and ethical values and / or merits. In other words, the autonomist claim holds that aesthetics and ethics are absolutely separate; the moralist, by contrast, holds that all art has a moral dimension. Important contributions to the debate over the ethical and the aesthetic include: Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Berys Nigel Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding," in Jerrold Levinson, *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge, U.K.: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a general overview of the relationship between art and ethical criticism from an analytic philosophical perspective, see also

which has coincided with a growing interest in extending the ethics of Levinas into the aesthetic sphere.¹⁹ Indeed, the writings of Levinas have proven to be a rich resource for scholars interested in the ethical dimension of aesthetic encounters, and his description of the face-to-face encounter as that which ruptures a subject's self-enclosed stance has been employed to elucidate the ethical nature of a wide variety of recent artistic experiments. And yet Levinas himself was quite skeptical, even dismissive, of the ethical potential of art. As a result, almost all of these applications of Levinas to postmodern art privilege ethics over aesthetics, and leave aside the question of whether there is an ethical dimension unique to the aesthetic domain.

In this dissertation, I argue that the many affinities between Levinas and Adorno demonstrate that discussions of contemporary art need not embrace ethics at the expense of aesthetics or vice-versa. It is my view that the evaluation of each thinker in light of the other produces a set of terms applicable to recent trends in contemporary artistic practice; in particular, Adorno's notions of mimesis and shudder, as well as his unique reconfiguration of the Kantian sublime. In using Levinas's notion of the ethical encounter as a lens through which to give Adorno's aesthetics reach and salience, it is possible, I posit, to address insufficiencies in current discussions of contemporary art. With regard to the postmodern tendency in current scholarship, this insufficiency is the result of a refusal on the part of many art theorists to engage with the specificity of the aesthetic in any sustained way. With regard to the aestheticist approach, this insufficiency results from an

Noël Carroll, "Survey Article - Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics*. 110, no. 2 (2000): 350.

¹⁹ Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos present the growing scholarship on Levinas as precipitating the emergence of an 'other' aesthetics no longer divided from ethical concerns. See their "Introduction" in Dorota Glowacka, ed., *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) 1-3.

inability to explain a set of practices centered on the ethics of relationality and participation as opposed to aesthetic form. I argue herein that both of these approaches miss the ethical dimension unique to the aesthetic both at the level of the work of art and at the level of aesthetic experience, a dimension that becomes clear when Levinas and Adorno are juxtaposed. In a broader sense, my reading of Levinas and Adorno helps to form a bridge between two opposed tendencies of aestheticism and postmodernist discourses on art.

A comparison of Levinas and Adorno on the question of ethics and aesthetics is justified by what I perceive to be certain unmistakable affinities between the two thinkers. In the first place, I accept that despite the very different philosophical methods employed by each thinker – Levinas engaging primarily with a phenomenological approach, Adorno a dialectical one – their criticisms of instrumental reason and their attempts to imagine an alternative are uncannily similar. Both believe that the problem with the modern form of thinking in the West is its radical suppression of alterity; and both suggest that what is required to counter this trend is the retrieval of an irreducible otherness that is increasingly suppressed.

In making a comparison between Adorno and Levinas, I build on recent scholarship addressing their mutual concerns, particularly with regard to questions of totality and identity, alterity and transcendence.²⁰ The substantial studies of Hent de Vries

²⁰ Much comparative work on Levinas and Adorno has already been done, although very little has been written on the topic of aesthetics. Josh Cohen is an important exception, although he subordinates the question of aesthetics in Levinas and Adorno to the question of how Jewish thought may continue after Auschwitz, and thus moves in a different direction than I would like to here. See Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2003). Oona Eistenstadt is another thinker interested in reading Levinas and Adorno alongside each other from within the purview of Jewish philosophy. See Oona Eistenstadt, “Levinas and Adorno: Universalizing the Jew after Auschwitz,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14, no. 1/2 (2006): 131–51. See also Nick Smith’s work on the ultimately irreconcilable nature of Levinas and Adorno’s positions, which he bases on large part on their

and Asher Horowitz, for instance, make compelling cases for a convergence between Adorno and Levinas from within the fields of theology and social and political thought. There has been no equivalent amount of research, however, devoted to their overlap on the question of aesthetics.

This gap in the research can be explained by the simple fact that Levinas and Adorno appear completely at odds when it comes to the potential of aesthetics and ethics to initiate an effective protest against totalizing rationality. For Adorno, one of the most potent antidotes to totalizing reason is to be found in a critical aesthetics of Modernist art. For Levinas, it is ethics, and not aesthetics, that will provide the primary instance out of which totality can be opposed. And because Levinas consistently grounds ethics in the face-to-face encounter, he remains ambivalent, if not downright dismissive, of the ethical potential of both the art object and aesthetic experience in general. This skepticism toward art is confirmed by Levinas's most decisive text on the subject, "Reality and its

differing views of art. In my argument below, I demonstrate that the two are not as opposed on this question as Smith makes them seem. See Nick Smith, "Adorno vs. Levinas: Evaluating Points of Contention," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, no. 3 (2007): 275–306. Hent De Vries's work on the commonalities between Adorno and Levinas is groundbreaking in its reading of these two thinkers together and in its situating them against – as opposed to within – the traditions emerging out of Habermas and Derrida. De Vries argues that Levinas can be read dialectically and Adorno phenomenologically, and that their philosophical methods are not as opposed as they at first seem: "[T]he *dialectical critique of dialectics* (Adorno) and the *phenomenological critique of phenomenology* (Levinas) resemble each other formally, to the point of becoming *almost* interchangeable and collapsing into each other" (Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) xxii). While I agree with De Vries that Adorno and Levinas share many of the same philosophical concerns, I do not wish to bring their projects as close together as De Vries does in *Minimal Theologies*. I read Adorno and Levinas on aesthetics as complements to each other, as supplementing what is lacking in each, as opposed to 'almost interchangeable' in their respective views. In this way, my project resembles more closely the work of Asher Horowitz and Jeffrey M. Jackson, although, again, written from the perspective of aesthetics as opposed to social philosophy. See Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2008) and Jeffrey M. Jackson, "Persecution and Social Histories: Towards an Adornian Critique of Levinas," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 6 (July 1, 2010): 719–33. See also: C. Fred Alford, "The Opposite of Totality: Levinas and the Frankfurt School," *Theory and Society* 31, no. 2 (2002): 229–54, Carl Sachs, "The Acknowledgement of Transcendence: Anti-Theodicy in Adorno and Levinas," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 3 (2011): 273–94.

Shadow,”²¹ which appears to deny to aesthetics the very possibility of ethical engagement. And to complicate further any comparison between the two thinkers, Adorno refuses to engage the question of ethics in any substantial way, arguing that an explicit articulation of ethics risks becoming ideological.

In what follows, I argue that the difference between these two thinkers on the subject of aesthetics and ethics is only apparent, and that upon further consideration, significant parallels between their viewpoints emerge. Levinas’s late essays on art, for instance, are notably inconsistent with his standard position on aesthetics in “Reality and its Shadow” and demonstrate instead considerable parallels with Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Conversely, a close reading of Adorno’s passages on shudder in his most substantial text on aesthetics, *Aesthetic Theory*, reveals striking similarities with Levinas’s ethics. Based on a sustained analysis of these moments in Levinas and Adorno’s philosophical texts, I draw out an ethical dimension to Adorno’s aesthetics, on the one hand, and an Adornian aesthetic within Levinas’s ethics on the other. I argue that Levinas’s resistance to aesthetics and Adorno’s to ethics have led interpreters to miss how the one might complement the other. Equally overlooked, as a result, has been the enormous significance of this overlap for applications of Adorno’s aesthetic theory to contemporary art.

Much of this dissertation performs a close reading of Levinas’s and Adorno’s texts, and thus to a large extent respects the terms and historical framework out of which they both emerged. For this reason, Adorno’s analysis of Modernism plays a large role in expanding Levinas’s conception of the work of art. Nonetheless, in my final chapter and

²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1987).

in the afterword on the contemporary debate over participatory art, I attempt to push beyond the Modernist terms so carefully defended by Adorno and imagine how aesthetic experience and non-Modernist works of art may contain a Levinasian ethical moment. I make this argument based on select passages in *Aesthetic Theory* on the shudder and Levinas's later analysis of the ethical relation using the terms of proximity, obsession and donation.

Levinas and the Aesthetic

It has become quite common in recent years to hear Levinas's name mentioned in literary criticism circles, where, for instance, readings of poetry and literature inspired by Levinasian ethics abound.²² Similarly, in art criticism, Levinas's ethical philosophy has been applied to a wide range of artistic practice, including but not limited to: the 'participatory aesthetics' of performance art;²³ the so-called 'shock art' of the past two decades, which includes figures like Tracey Emin,²⁴ and perhaps most predominantly, the

²² See Alain Toumayan, *Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference in Blanchot and Levinas* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 2004); Gerald Bruns, "'Should Poetry Be Ethical or Otherwise?,'" *SubStance* 38, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 72–91; Gerald Bruns, "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Levinas's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Steve McCaffery, "The Scandal of Sincerity: Toward a Levinasian Poetics" in Steve McCaffery, *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001); Timothy Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Matthew Sharpe, "Aesthet (h) Ics: On Levinas' Shadow," *Colloquy Text Theory Critique* 9 (2005): 29–47; Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Leslie Hill, "'Distrust of Poetry': Levinas, Blanchot, Celan," *MLN* 120, no. 5 (December 1, 2005): 986–1008.

²³ For instance, Simon Jones analyzes the experience of absolute otherness at the heart of performance based in part on Levinas's description of the face-to-face encounter. In so doing, Jones, like Claire Bishop, criticizes the consensus-based approach to interactivity in Nicholas Bourriaud's discussion of 'relational aesthetics'. See Simon Jones, "Out-standing Standing Within: Being Alone Together in the Work of Bodies in Flight" in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, eds. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks (London; New York: Routledge, 2012).

²⁴ See Kieran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009). In this highly ambitious text, Cashell tries to make sense of the emotional impact of so-called 'shock' art in ethical terms. He employs Levinas in particular to develop the ethical

memory work of artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, Christian Boltanski and Anselm Kiefer.²⁵ Given the widespread use of Levinas in art and literary criticism, it may come as a bit of a surprise that there is still very little scholarship on the intersection between ethics and aesthetics in Levinas's philosophy.²⁶ This shortage can be explained, however, by the widely held assumption that Levinas ultimately subordinates the aesthetic to the ethical. As a result of this assumption, Levinas scholars tend to adopt his ethics at the expense of his aesthetics, which jives well with the ethical bent of much contemporary art. Other scholars take a different direction, and develop a Levinasian aesthetic while

subjectivity at the heart of Tracey Emin's work, against those who tend to misconstrue the modality of the self in her work in autobiographical terms (Cashell, 130 – 138).

²⁵ See especially Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima after Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) for a discussion of the Levinasian elements of the public art of Krzysztof Wodiczko, specifically "The Hiroshima Projection." It is noteworthy that Wodiczko's own publication *City of Refuge: A 9/11 Memorial* develops out of a consideration of Levinas's ethics. See Krzysztof Wodiczko, Mark Jarzombek, and Mechtild Widrich, *City of Refuge a 9/11 Memorial* (London: Black Dog, 2009). For other work on memorials and memory that draw on Levinas, see Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). And for an analysis of recent memory work from within the field of Holocaust Studies from a Levinasian perspective, see Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

²⁶ As we have already seen in Footnote 20 above, there are some important exceptions to this. One of the foremost texts on Levinas and aesthetics remains Jill Robbins's book, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*, which examines the role of literature in a Levinasian ethics. Robbins's position will be explored in detail in Chapter One. See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Another crucial text on ethics and aesthetics in Levinas, still from within the purview of literary criticism, is Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997). Others to explore Levinas on the question of aesthetics include Seán Hand, whose 2012 book *Emmanuel Levinas* provides an important summary of art and ethics in Levinas's writings. See Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009) 63-78. Hand's analysis in this text builds on his earlier essay "Shadowing Ethics: Levinas's View of Art and Aesthetics," in *Facing the Other: The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Seán Hand (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996). Tom Sparrow's recent book *Levinas Unhinged* (2013) examines aesthetics in Levinas from an altogether different perspective than the one I want to take here, asking after affiliations between Levinas's early writings on aesthetics and Alphonso Lingis's underappreciated phenomenology of sensibility. See Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged* (Winchester, UK; Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2013). PDF e-book. For an argument along the same lines as Sparrow's, see Graham Harman, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human," *Naked Punch*, 2012. For other accounts of the aesthetic in Levinas, see the essays collected in Part Three of Joëlle Hansel, ed. *Levinas in Jerusalem Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics* (Dordrecht; London: Springer, 2009). And finally, Jolanta Nowak, in her essay "Out From Behind the Shadows: Levinas and Visual Art" provides a helpful analysis of the contradictions inherent in Levinas's analysis of art, and addresses in detail his often overlooked appreciation of visual artists, such as Sacha Sosno and Charles Lapique. See Jolanta Nowak, "Out from Behind the Shadows," *Philosophy Today* 54, no. 3 (June 1, 2010): 265–78.

relinquishing the ethical altogether.²⁷ In both cases, an irreducible division between ethics and aesthetics in Levinas's work is maintained.

Jill Robbins, widely regarded as one of the leading scholars on the subject of Levinas and aesthetics, falls into the first category. In her text *Altered Readings*, Robbins provides a careful analysis of the role of literature in Levinas's writings, and asks whether Levinas's act of reading literary texts may have a disruptive – and thus possibly ethical – power. She ultimately concludes, however, that despite Levinas's continued appreciation for literature and his equivocation over the relationship between art and ethics in his later writings, the strict division between the ethical and the aesthetic spheres still stands. According to Robbins's reading, if an artwork is deemed to have ethical potential, then it can no longer be considered an aesthetic object. Her analysis thus accepts a basic division between the aesthetic and the ethical in Levinas's writings; Levinas may rely on literature to illuminate his arguments, but he remains adamant that ethics, and not aesthetics, is the primary dimension of human experience. Any exceptions to this rule – of which there are quite a few in his writings – Levinas treats not as works of art but as sites of ethical expression. Likewise for Robbins, it is not the literary text, or work of art, that may have ethical power, but the act of reading itself.²⁸ She thereby effectively avoids the question of whether works of art, as aesthetic objects, can be ethical. The division between aesthetics and ethics in Levinas is thereby preserved.

²⁷ Notable exceptions include Henry McDonald, "Aesthetics As First Ethics: Levinas and the Alterity of Literary Discourse," *Diacritics* 38, no. 4 (2008): 15–41 and Sharpe, "Aesthet (h) Ics;" and Bruns, "Should Poetry Be Ethical or Otherwise?." McDonald is primarily interested in how Levinas's 'tragic aesthetics' actually serves as a ground for ethics as first philosophy, whereas Sharpe develops an account of the structural similarities between aesthetic experience and ethics; both take Levinasian aesthetics in a direction different from the Adornian one I pursue here.

²⁸ Robbins, *Altered Readings*, 75-91.

The second category – that of thinkers concerned with the aesthetic in Levinas at the expense of ethics – includes thinkers like Tom Sparrow, whose recent book *Levinas Unhinged* builds on Levinas’s early writings on aesthetics in order to provide an ontological account of aesthetic sensibility. Sparrow performs what he describes as a “rehabilitation of the sensible”²⁹ based on the materialist moment in Levinas’s description of aesthetic experience. By reading the Levinasian terms of rhythm, insomnia, horror and the ‘there is’ alongside Gilles Deleuze’s materialist aesthetics, Sparrow builds an ontology of sensation that characterizes aesthetic experience as enacting a breaking up of subjectivity along the shores of sensibility. Levinasian subjectivity, according to Sparrow, is not primarily a site of ethical transcendence, but a space of immanence upon which the forces of sensation act.³⁰ In a startling reversal, Sparrow makes the aesthetic dimension of Levinas’s philosophy the ontological ground out of which ethics can emerge, prompting him to ask whether it is in fact aesthetics and not ethics that is “first philosophy for Levinas.”³¹ While Robbins draws literature closer to ethics by focusing on the act of reading as opposed to the art object itself, Sparrow chooses to relinquish the ethical in favour of the aesthetic. Aesthetics and ethics are thus either collapsed together or strategically kept apart. As a result, the unique way in which an art object may be ethical for Levinas is never pursued.

Part of what impedes the discussion of a correspondence between the ethical and the aesthetic in Levinas’s writings is Levinas’s consistent claim that the art object has an

²⁹ Sparrow, Loc. 71.

³⁰ In drawing Levinas and Deleuze together, Sparrow follows the Deleuzian trend of much recent work on aesthetics, including the growing interest in what is now being described as affect studies (*The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, is a groundbreaking collection of essays on the subject, which makes a case for the relevance of affect theory for a wide range of disciplinary fields).

³¹ Sparrow, Loc. 85.

inherently closed, static form. Even as late as 1982, in an interview with Edith Wyschogrod, Levinas is clear that the inevitable idolatry of an artwork's form precludes the possibility of ethical transcendence.³² And yet, despite the strength of his conviction that artworks are, in the final instance, idolatrous things, Levinas nonetheless claims that there is "goodness in beauty", even if "in the end the good that is in it is absorbed by the form."³³ Paradoxically, then, Levinas wishes to attribute to art – defined here as the beautiful – an ethical impulse of 'goodness', while ultimately dismissing art's ethical potential on formal grounds. Art's ethical moment can only ever be fleeting and most importantly, is ultimately subordinate to the work's compulsion toward a complete and static form. When it comes to art, Levinas finds himself confronted with the stringency of his own philosophy; ethics, for Levinas, can only ever occur through the face-to-face encounter with another human being.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is clear that any work, including artworks, cannot be a site of ethical expression.³⁴ This careful delineation between work and expression reveals a certain anxiety pervading Levinas's writings: the anxiety that something fundamentally transcendent, like the face-to-face relation, be turned into an idol—or a static and closed form. Levinas's persistent return to the face-to-face, however, begins to feel a bit forced in his later writings on art. This is a result, I argue, of a change in his approach to art that is symptomatically present in his work, but a change that he does not have the necessary theoretical framework to explain. Levinas returns again and again to

³² See Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) 294. Levinas's continued insistence on the division between aesthetic form and ethical expression provides a starting point for my discussion of artworks as complex totalities in Chapter Three.

³³ Wyschogrod, 293.

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity; An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007) 176-178.

art throughout his writings, whether simply to illustrate his argument on the ethical relation, or more explicitly (and admittedly more rarely) to indicate a possible instantiation of the ethical encounter besides the face-to-face. The latter linkage between the ethical and the aesthetic, limited almost entirely to select essays in *Proper Names*,³⁵ reveals a chronic inconsistency plaguing Levinas's view of art. Based on these later writings, and against scholars like Sparrow and Robbins who maintain that art and ethics cannot coexist, I argue that Levinas latently attributes to art an ethical dimension, but does not have the theory to draw it out.

The issue is this: when it comes to theorizing the work of art, Levinas endorses a fairly traditional view based in a classical conception of beauty. To complicate matters, Levinas maintains that any work, whether it is a work of art, of history or even of philosophy, marks the absence of the living subject who made it and thus cannot produce the transcendence unique to the ethical relation. In other words, the living expression of the Other, which denotes the transcendence of the ethical encounter, is for Levinas necessarily absent from the lifeless work of beautiful art.

I argue in what follows that Adorno's theory of aesthetics, when read against Levinas's philosophy, actually helps to expand the latter's conception of the ethical encounter to include the work of art. Adorno, who like Levinas desires to interrupt hegemonic forms of discourse and thought, helps us to resolve a potential contradiction in Levinas's writings – that Levinas both dismisses artworks as belonging to a realm of irresponsibility and yet finds in certain artists evidence of ethical expression. In so doing, I will avoid treating Levinas's writings on art as mere exceptions within his general oeuvre, because I believe that this overlooks the significance of the aesthetic dimension

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).

for Levinas's ethical philosophy. When read with Adorno, it becomes clear that Levinas's critique of art is not an attack on all art, but rather on a very traditional notion of artistic beauty. Levinas tends to equate artworks with, for example, the classical statue, which he describes as frozen, fixed and finite, and thus it is no surprise that works of art, understood in these traditional terms, cannot be ethical according to his terms. While Levinas recognizes in certain instances the ethical openness of art, his continued reliance on a conception of artworks as complete and static forms of beauty prevents him from exploring the ethical dimension of aesthetics in any sustained way. We need Adorno, I argue, to see what Levinas gets wrong in his approach to art. In Adorno's aesthetic theory, the artwork produces transcendence in a way not unlike the encounter with the Other in Levinas's ethical relation.

Adorno, Art and Ethics

The argument on Levinas and Adorno put forth in this dissertation takes as its starting point a space on the margins of Levinas's philosophical oeuvre. I begin with the exceptions to Levinas's general rule on philosophical aesthetics (most notably his discussion of the works of the poet Paul Celan) for it is here that significant comparisons with Adorno come to light. As I argue at length, Adorno provides Levinas with a theory of the work that does *not* preclude the possibility of transcendence. For Adorno, the artwork is not simply a beautiful form, nor does it act to disengage its viewers from the outside world. Rather, Adorno conceives of the artwork as fundamentally dialogical – it engages its recipient in a process of interpretation characterized by irresolution as opposed to closure. By contrast, Levinas places the artwork in a separate order, dead and

damaging, sealed off from the world around it. Because an artwork is completed unto itself, for Levinas it cannot initiate dialogue and thus engage its recipient in an encounter with alterity: An artwork is static, silent and mute as opposed to dynamic, dialogical and expressive. An artwork charms the viewer, who passively acquiesces to the work's rhythmic beauty and in the process invariably forgets the responsibility engendered by the ethical relation.

Adorno's analysis of the artwork as a complex totality entirely complicates Levinas's comparatively reductive view of the work. As opposed to an escape, for Adorno the work of art demands attention. Works are enigmas asking to be interpreted and yet at the same time refusing every interpretation as incomplete. The interpretative gesture together with its invariable failure makes artworks much more complex than Levinas will allow. For Levinas, artworks inhabit a shadowy "dimension of evasion,"³⁶ of obscurity and refusal, as opposed to provoking a subject to concede the limitations of conceptual thought. Adorno's artwork, by contrast, produces an encounter that, in its positive features, does precisely these things: the artwork – or at least the modernist artwork – consistently provokes a subject to concede the limitations of conceptual thought.

In this dissertation, I use Adorno's aesthetic theory to problematize Levinas's view of the art object in two principal ways. Firstly, Adorno makes transcendence an essential feature of the work. An artwork is a completed whole, but it also always and necessarily points beyond itself, whether this be at the level of interpretation – wherein the riddle of the artwork is perpetually unresolved – or at the level of the work itself, whose mimetic quality always points to something more than the technical binding of a

³⁶ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 12.

work suggests. In other words, if we think with Adorno, Levinas's mistake is to see the work of art as a totality lacking in complexity. Whereas for Levinas, the work's technical form inevitably overpowers its moment of 'goodness', for Adorno the moment of ethics – as the moment of alterity – exists alongside totality, in a tension, *within* the work of art. In this way, like the face of the Other in the ethical relation in which the trace of alterity appears, or like the saying that ruptures the order of the said, Adorno allows us to imagine how an absolute otherness irrupts out of the presumed totality of the work. Leaving aside for a moment the minimal differences in Adorno's and Levinas's characterizations of alterity, it is possible to imagine how artworks, very much like the face-to-face encounter, provide an alternative space for ethics to occur. Artworks are sites of resistance in a dual sense: at the level of interpretation, they resist any attempt to exhaust their meaning and thus perpetually frustrate the attempt to absorb otherness into the same; at the level of artistic production, Adorno presents the artwork as both a technically formed whole and a mimetic site of alterity. Levinas intuited this in his discussion of goodness and idolatry, but without a developed aesthetic theory, he could not draw this out as an essential element of the modern aesthetic form.

The second way in which Adorno can supplement Levinas with regard to the aesthetic is through his reworking of the categories of the beautiful and the sublime. Throughout his writings, Levinas's theory of beauty continues to act as an impediment to bringing ethics and aesthetics together. When faced with exceptions to this, such as those he finds in artworks critical of the beautiful, Levinas insists that they are ethical and thus cannot be art. Adorno's historical analysis of beauty helps to overcome the strict dichotomy between the beautiful and the ethical in Levinas's writings on art. According

to Adorno, the beautiful unfolds in the history of art as a dialectical counterpart to the category of the sublime. With the rise of modern art, which for Adorno acts to criticize a burgeoning capitalist society, traditional beauty becomes increasingly suspect. The harmony and completion inherent to beautiful forms become the ideological counterparts to the falsified uniformity of instrumental rationality. Adorno appreciates Modernist art for its turn against beauty and correlatively, totalizing reason. According to Adorno, modern art cannot be beautiful in the traditional sense. This is because what presents itself as beautiful tends to console discontented individuals and thereby reinforce the isolation and ineffectualness of the subject produced by capitalism. In the work of Modernist artists such as Picasso, Beckett and Kafka, Adorno finds a progressive art that, in rejecting beauty, is also able to reject its complicity with totality, and thus become a site of critique. Adorno argues that modern art takes on an aspect of the sublime, although not in the traditional sense. What is sublime in modern art is its dissonant, negative aesthetic, coupled with a refusal of harmony and beauty.

Adorno's theory of Modernism attributes to the work of art a level of nuance that Levinas cannot afford within the limitations of his own philosophy. I argue that Adorno's description of modern art using a reworked notion of the sublime allows us to imagine how Levinas could accept the ethical quality of certain artworks on aesthetic grounds. Levinas's reliance on a singular notion of the beautiful makes him unable to appreciate how artworks that criticize the beautiful, such as the poems of Paul Celan, are aesthetic. It is clear, however, that for Levinas an artwork that criticizes the beautiful can be ethical. Adorno's historical analysis of art, which explains why certain artists, particularly postwar artists like Paul Celan, rejected traditional beauty, allows us to imagine how

certain artworks move beyond the function of beauty and produce an ethical stance. This ethical stance, in my view, only becomes clear from reading these two philosophers side by side.

Adorno's theory of the aesthetic sublime helps to explain why Levinas could not understand art as a realm of possible ethical experience; while Levinas could appreciate the ethical quality of certain works of art he was missing a historical theory of aesthetics that was critical of traditional beauty as the criterion for all art. When Levinas is read against and with Adorno, however, it becomes clear that what Levinas discerns in the work of certain artists is an ethical character that he otherwise limits to the face-to-face encounter. From this fact, I will argue that Levinas's ethics of responsibility need not be limited to the relation between two human beings. In other words, when understood with respect to Adorno's reformulation of the aesthetic sublime, the experience of ethics described by Levinas can be extended to include the experience of modern works of art.

Levinas's ethical philosophy is equally helpful with regard to Adorno's aesthetics. I demonstrate that Levinasian ethics, particularly his attempt to ground Western philosophy in a transcendent ethical foundation, opens up possibilities for Adorno's theory of art – namely, that Levinas provides Adorno with a much richer account of the moment of transcendence in art. As we saw above, one of the biggest obstacles for the application of Adorno to postmodern art is his continued preference for the negativity characteristic of Modernism. One could go so far as to say that Modernist art is for Adorno a placeholder for the sensuous particularity that instrumental reason increasingly denies. In other words, art is an act of protest against totality – and for Adorno this is what makes it ethical – when it presents itself as a lack. Thus, Adorno's description of

art's ethical moment is almost exclusively negative. He allows that artworks produce a moment of transcendence, but only as the slightest gesture toward an alternative to totalizing reason. With the exception of select passages, he does not provide a positive description of what such an ethical transcendence consists.

Despite their exceptional status, I argue that there is much to be gained from reading certain select passages alongside the writings of Levinas on the ethical encounter. In particular, Adorno's description of the shudder of aesthetic experience in *Aesthetic Theory* shares uncanny similarities with Levinas's description of the ethical relation in his later text *Otherwise Than Being*. Both the shudder and the ethical relation are presented as shattering events that dislocate the subject's seemingly fixed stance. The move from reading the artwork in terms of lack to reading it in terms of a dislocation produced in the viewer-participant serves to expand the range of Adorno's theory of art beyond Modernism. In other words, I demonstrate how Adorno's theory of art, when supplemented with a reading of Levinas's 'ethical aesthetics,' provides an original and constructive channel through which to analyze recent experiments in art. For there is much contemporary art that cannot be understood as producing sensuous counterparts to identificatory reason. Rather, such art often performs the breakdown of subjectivity as a stable locus of meaning, a breakdown that, in Levinasian terms, is the moment in which ethics makes itself felt and heard.

My interest in this dissertation is in how these two thinkers, placed side by side, illuminate each within the other tendencies that remain otherwise undeveloped. I have for the most part performed close readings of Adorno and Levinas's texts and thus do not engage explicitly with more general philosophical debates over the relationship between

ethics and aesthetics. However, my hope is that this study of a correlation between aesthetics and ethics in Levinas and Adorno will spark further research on the topic, particularly given the remarkable shortage of work on Levinasian aesthetics.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter explains the contradiction in Levinas's writings, between his desire to limit the ethical relation to the face-to-face encounter, on the one hand, and his tendency to give to works of art expressive ethical potential on the other. Once I have introduced this tension between aesthetics and ethics in Levinas, I ask how much of Levinas's ambivalence toward art may be explained through the absence of a worked out aesthetic theory in his writings.

In my second chapter, I justify my comparison between Levinas and Adorno by examining the various congruencies between their philosophies. I demonstrate that despite significant differences in approach and in the traditions out of which they arise, they have much more in common than meets the eye, particularly with regard to their shared critique of the totalizing current underpinning Western philosophical traditions.

Once the parallel between their ethical projects is established, I spend my third chapter laying out Adorno's conception of artworks as mimetic totalities in order to address Levinas's concern that artworks, as self-contained and completed wholes, must necessarily preclude the possibility of ethical transcendence. I ask whether or not Adorno's appreciation of the artwork as containing both an element of completion and a mimetic gesture beyond itself can be understood as compatible with Levinas's description of ethics in the face-to-face encounter. I argue that it is Levinas's lack of any

developed theory of the work of art that prevents him from recognizing it as a site of the ethical.

The fourth chapter uses Adorno's dialectical reworking of the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime to supplement Levinas's seeming ahistorical equation of art with a classical conception of beauty. It becomes clear that Adorno's critique of the beautiful as an aesthetic category, and his reformulation of the aesthetic sublime, help explain why Levinas, within the confines of his philosophical project, has no way of understanding art as ethical on its own terms. Levinas criticizes art for its essential idolatry – something the face-to-face encounter always avoids – but then praises certain modern artists for breaking this idolatrous tendency. Without the tools Adorno offers us, I argue, Levinas cannot explain this discrepancy in his own philosophy because he does not explore the historical relationship between the beautiful and the sublime. As a result, the art that Levinas praises as ethical always appears as an exception within his body of work. Through these arguments, I make a case for seeing the moment of the ethical in art as simultaneous with its aesthetic form.

In the process of reading Levinas against Adorno, the latter's view of art is equally changed. My final chapter asks how a Levinasian ethics may supplement Adorno's theory of aesthetics. In other words, I ask the complementary question of whether Levinas's conception of transcendence helps to open a critical space for considering the ethical implications of Adorno's aesthetics. Based on Levinas's very different interpretation of art, I argue in my final chapter that he is able to articulate in more productive terms an ethical dimension within aesthetic experience. I argue that Levinas's ethics addresses a pervasive negativity characteristic of Adorno's conception of

transcendence. By examining Adorno and Levinas together, I supplement each in order to shed light on certain unanswered tensions within their work – in Levinas, the tension between ethics and aesthetics, and in Adorno, the tension between immanence and transcendence in his late work *Aesthetic Theory*.

In the Afterword to this dissertation, I explore the implications of my comparison between Levinas and Adorno for recent debates over the role of the aesthetic in contemporary art centered on collaboration with a viewer / participant. I argue that what is missing from current debates over participatory art is a theory of the work, one which does not force us to relinquish the aesthetic in favour of the ethical, but rather, allows the two to be thought together. In order to make this claim, I build on the position of Claire Bishop, who defends the aesthetic against her critics by employing the writings of Jacques Rancière. I demonstrate that Bishop continues to ignore the significance of the work-character of these recent artistic interventions by focusing her attention on the aesthetic experience of the viewer / participant. In short, I present my reading of Levinas and Adorno as providing one way of theorizing the autonomy of the artwork in recent discussions of collaborative artistic practice.

Chapter One: A Levinasian Aesthetic

The question of a correlation between aesthetics and ethics in the work of Emmanuel Levinas comes up against some seemingly insurmountable limitations. This is largely because much of Levinas's work strictly distinguishes the aesthetic from the ethical, characterizing the former as a sphere of irresponsibility, play and evasion. Levinas describes ethics, by contrast, as a dimension of responsibility, grounded in a face-to-face encounter with other human beings. There are, however, exceptions to this rule, for when it comes to certain artists Levinas describes the artwork as a site of ethical significance. Some, such as Jill Robbins, have argued that for Levinas these exceptions do not change Levinas's general rule – aesthetics is a realm of egoist enjoyment far removed from any ethical implications. According to Robbins, the exceptions – Paul Celan, Maurice Blanchot, Agnon, Roger Laporte, to name a few – are taken out of the aesthetic sphere by Levinas, and treated as exemplary instances of ethical expression; for Levinas, the artistic value of these works is subordinate to a larger, ethical imperative.³⁷ Put differently, Levinas never develops an aesthetic theory to explain how an artwork, on *aesthetic* grounds, bears ethical significance. Instead, he has the ethical dimension supersede the aesthetic in his discussion of artworks, and thereby avoids having to explain any convergence between the two categories. For Levinas, it seems, aesthetics has no place in the sphere of the ethical; a work of art described by Levinas as ethical is no longer aesthetic.

³⁷ Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 132-154.

While many Levinas scholars have emphasized the tension between the ethical and the aesthetic in Levinas's thought, attempts to approximate the two have been more rare.³⁸ Rather than perform a strict exegesis of Levinas's writings, I ask in what follows whether we might understand the apparent contradiction – between his critique of aesthetics and his so-called ethical exceptions to this rule – as a latent acknowledgement of an aesthetic theory that does not preclude the ethical. Such a latent theory of art stands in stark contrast to the frequent criticisms of art and aesthetics in Levinas's writings. In his most critical essay on this subject, "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas places art in an inferior role relative to philosophy and ethics;³⁹ for Levinas, the artwork is a mere copy, or shadow, of reality and inevitably distracts its observers from the call of responsibility in the ethical relation. Levinas argues in this early essay that the plastic form of the artwork may charm us with its beauty, but its hardened, speechless quality will always lack the ethical expression of a human face.

As Levinas's career unfolds, however, certain writings indicate a growing appreciation of art, although he does nonetheless continue to endorse his early critical view. In his writings on artists such as Paul Celan and Maurice Blanchot, Levinas appears to support an entirely different kind of aesthetic in which artworks are capable of

³⁸ Robbins's book, *Altered Readings*, widely considered to be the foundational text on Levinas and aesthetics, preserves such a fissure between ethics and aesthetics in Levinas's writings from within the domain of literary criticism. As we will see below, Seán Hand, despite his more extensive treatment of a possible overlap between ethics and art in Levinas, ultimately maintains the same divide (See Hand, "Shadowing Ethics: Levinas's View of Art and Aesthetics"). Part of what reinforces such a division in Levinas scholarship is the tendency to focus almost exclusively on Levinas's early writings, which lend themselves to such a reading. This is also true of Sparrow's *Levinas Unhinged*, which provides a Deleuzian reading based in large part on Levinas's emphasis on sensation in "Reality and its Shadow" and *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978). As a result of the now largely accepted division between art and ethics in Levinas, few have developed the implications of Levinas's ethics for aesthetic theory in general.

³⁹ Most commentators agree that "Reality and its Shadow" is a critical take on art from the perspective of ethics, although some scholars have taken exception to this reading, including Alain Toumayan in *Encountering the Other* and Henry McDonald in "Aesthetics as First Ethics." As we will see in more detail below, I argue that when read against Levinas's later writings, particularly his essay on Paul Celan, Levinas's early reading of art is much less sympathetic to its ethical potential.

producing an experience akin to ethical transcendence.⁴⁰ I would like to argue that this alternative aesthetic position does not supersede the aesthetic in favor of ethics, as many critics such as Robbins have claimed, but rather latently acknowledges a different aesthetic theory – an aesthetic distinct from the one put forward in “Reality and its Shadow” and more closely affiliated with Adorno's critical reappraisal of traditional aesthetic categories in *Aesthetic Theory*. In the Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation, I ask whether Adorno's theory of aesthetics, particularly his interpretation of mimesis and of aesthetic experience, helps supplement the unanswered contradiction between two descriptions of art within Levinas's oeuvre – between a view of art as fundamentally unethical, and one where art and ethics seem to converge. What is missing from Levinas's account, I argue, is a notion of aesthetics that is ethical in the way that he understands it *and* that does not supersede a work's aesthetic qualities in favor of an ethical imperative. Such a notion of aesthetics would allow the work to produce an

⁴⁰ As Robbins rightly points out in her text *Altered Reading*, Levinas most often employs examples from the realm of poetry or literature to support his view that certain artworks are ethical more than they are aesthetic. At first glance, this is not surprising, given that literature and poetry share with philosophy and scripture – the two forms singled out by Levinas as spaces capable of exposing the Saying against the Said – the medium of the written word. However, while it is true that Levinas's most substantial writings on art and ethics, namely the essays collected in *Proper Names*, focus primarily on poetry and literature, Levinas also examines the ethical dimension of the works of two visual artists in particular, sculptor Sacha Sosno and painter Jean Atlan. In each case, Levinas describes the exposure to these works as precipitating a similarly disorienting experience as the encounter with the Other in the face-to-face relation, and argues that they run counter to, and are even the opposite of, “the magical operations” of most works of art (Quoted in Hand, “Shadowing Ethics,” 84). Seán Hand demonstrates how careful Levinas is to bracket questions of materiality in his discussion of these artists (Hand, “Shadowing Ethics,” 84). I would argue that, as a result of this bracketing, Levinas is able to avoid asking how the work of art itself (as poem, as sculpture, as painting), can be ethical. Levinas's avoidance of the question of materiality here is consistent with his view in *Existence and Existents* that all works of art, no matter the medium, are first and foremost material, and as such, operate in a separate reality, both from the realm of totality and from the ethical. For Levinas's own discussion of Sacha Sosno, see Emmanuel Lévinas, Françoise Armengaud, and Sacha Sosno, *De l'oblitération: entretien avec Françoise Armengaud à propos de l'œuvre de Sosno* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1990), and for his discussion of Jean Atlan, see Emmanuel Levinas, “Jean Atlan et la tension de l'art” in Catherine Chalier and Miguel Abensour, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1991).

expression of alterity akin to that of the face-to-face encounter, and thus bring ethics and aesthetics closer together rather than pulling them apart.

The chapter below addresses why I turn to such an unlikely candidate as Levinas to draw out the lineaments of an ethical dimension within aesthetics. It is my view that, despite his reticence, his account of ethical expression helps to articulate a crucial dimension of aesthetic experience. I consider first Levinas's criticism of aesthetics, and why for him it is necessarily inferior to ethics. I then examine the exceptions to this rule, as outlined primarily in Levinas's treatment of Paul Celan and Maurice Blanchot. I argue that Levinas's eventual appreciation of art reveals a latent acknowledgment of the convergence between aesthetics and ethical expression. In other words, I argue that Levinas himself recognized a correlation between the two domains even though he resisted articulating it in any developed way.

Aesthetic Evasion vs. Ethical Expression

Levinas provides his most definitive analysis of aesthetics in his early essay entitled "Reality and its Shadow." There, Levinas contrasts philosophical thought, which seeks knowledge of reality through concepts, and art, which substitutes sensible images for actual objects, thereby obscuring understanding and preventing further knowledge of the world. Levinas echoes Plato's well-known argument on art and knowledge in Book X of *The Republic*, although, as we will see, Levinas also alters Plato's position in significant ways. According to Plato, art is three times removed from the truth of the Forms; artworks imitate objects in the world, which are in turn produced on the basis of the Idea underlying them. The knowledge produced by art is not only limited but also

deceptive, as artworks present their content as though it were true. A well-rendered bed in a painting may seem as real as the carpenter's creation; Homer's characters appear to have knowledge of military tactics and war. However, and this is the essential point for Plato, the truth of art remains at the level of the senses and is thus always illusory; as the initiates of his philosophy learn, the highest truth is acquired through reason and thus requires transcending the realm of appearances and thus also of art.⁴¹

Levinas follows Plato in pitting the shadowy image of art against the privileged domain of philosophical thought. According to Levinas, the artwork substitutes for reality an image of that reality, and thus like Plato Levinas sees art as a copy, removed from the realm of cognitive truth. Levinas goes further than Plato, however, in his division between art and knowledge. Levinas interprets art not simply as inferior to reason, hierarchically lower on a scale of knowledge, but as constituting a separate order altogether. In Levinas's view, "[art] contrasts with knowledge"⁴² and does not provide even limited access to truth about the world. Levinas describes the artwork as "outside the world... like the elusive strangeness of the exotic."⁴³ Once completed, in other words, the work disengages from human discourse and from the world at large.

Levinas argues that art is not only disengaged from reality, but also evokes a disengaged response from its audience; artistic images are rhythmic and charm the

⁴¹ In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato explains the distinction between art and truth as follows: "Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colours and figures... In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well --such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have." See Plato *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Macmillan and co., 1892) 314.

⁴² Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

spectator who passively acquiesces to their beauty. “An image,” writes Levinas, “marks a hold over us rather than our initiative, a fundamental passivity.”⁴⁴ Artistic images do not compel in the listener, viewer or reader a sense of ethics or responsibility, which would require a dialogue of sorts; rather, they have as their archetype the statue, which hardens reality into a single, unchanging image.⁴⁵ In his description of artworks as plastic and unchanging, another echo of the classical view of art can be heard; artworks are complete once a harmonious balance is achieved and there is nothing left to add. As completed wholes, artworks can no longer engage with social, political or philosophical questions: “The work is completed *in spite of* the social or material causes that interrupt it.”⁴⁶ Artworks, for Levinas, are determinate, unchanging things and thus lack the power of ethical expression.

The rigidity of the image, according to Levinas, contrasts with what he describes as the fluid dialectic of concepts, and brings both time and thought to a halt. The plastic quality of art renders its social value dubious because the individual, charmed and muted by the beauty of this petrified instant, evades responsibility, and becomes ignorant of the dictates of his or her own conscience. Levinas writes: “[A]rt, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion.”⁴⁷ It is not surprising, then, that Levinas supports Plato’s exile of the poet in the *Republic* as a valid

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁵ Levinas here employs a Greek aesthetic, traditionally understood as ocular, as opposed to a Hebraic approach based in the prohibition on visual representation in the second of the Ten Commandments. Levinas limits himself to the former in his account of art in “Reality and its Shadow.” As we will see in the coming chapters, Adorno’s account of Modernism is Hebraic in the sense that it focuses on the way in which a work gestures toward a possibility that cannot be shown. Adorno’s resistance to a so-called Greek aesthetic, like Levinas’s here, is essential to my case that his theory of art is complementary to Levinas’s theory of ethics.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

attempt to expel the threat of artistic images;⁴⁸ for Levinas, artistic enjoyment is at once “wicked and egoist and cowardly”⁴⁹ in contrast to the responsible initiatives of philosophical thought.

Levinas only vaguely addresses the question of what *is* engaged in “Reality and its Shadow,” but takes it up at length in his seminal text *Totality and Infinity* (1961).⁵⁰ Whereas in “Reality and its Shadow,” aesthetics is pitted against philosophical thought in Platonic fashion, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas develops a more systematic opposition between totality, to which now both art and philosophy belong, and the demand for responsibility in the ethical relation. The details of Levinas’s opposition between ethics and philosophy will be addressed in Chapter Two; what is most relevant for us here is the contrast set up in *Totality and Infinity* between the ‘plastic’ artwork and ethical expression. From this contrast, it will become clear that Levinas continues to refuse the possibility that ethical expression may be mediated through a work of art.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas makes expression fundamental to the ethical relation, here described as a face-to-face encounter with another human being. In such an encounter, a subject is literally interrupted by the expression of the Other’s face. This expression infinitely exceeds, or transcends, what can be contained in the thinking of the subject and thereby makes it impossible to represent the Other person within any category. For Levinas, this relation is ethical because it interrupts the subject in his or her

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 23.

⁴⁹ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 12.

⁵⁰ I am limiting myself in this section to a discussion of *Totality and Infinity* and not his equally important text *Otherwise Than Being* in order to demonstrate the division between Levinas’s early and late views of art. Levinas maintains in *Totality and Infinity* a suspicion of the artwork already expressed in “Reality and its Shadow,” and reading them alongside each other thus helps to clarify what remains only latent in his earlier essay. As we will see below, Levinas’s position on art will radically change by the time *Otherwise Than Being* is published in 1974. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or, Beyond Essence* (Boston: M. Nijhoff; Distributors for the U.S. and Canada, Kluwer Boston, 1981).

desire to eliminate alterity, or to totalize the infinity of the Other. He describes this phenomenon as follows: “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly; to have the idea of infinity.”⁵¹ It is only in the encounter with the expression of the Other that the ‘I’ exposes itself, and becomes open to the ethical demand of responsibility. What Levinas describes as a person’s “final reality”⁵² is recognition of the fundamentally ethical nature of one’s being – which is the demand placed on the ‘I’ to be attentive to the Other and absolutely responsible for their life.

In Levinas’s writings from this period, there is no work, especially not a work of art, which can produce ethical expression and force the individual to question his or her totalizing impulses. Levinas argues that any kind of work precludes the possibility of ethical expression, as the person who is *present* in speech is always *absent* from his or her work, whether that be a piece of writing, a painting or any other product of labour destined for exchange. According to Levinas, “to be expressed by one’s life, by one’s works, is precisely to decline expression.”⁵³ Later in the text, he adds: “The work is always in a certain sense an abortive action.”⁵⁴ Levinas describes works as belonging to the realm of phenomena, for they are precisely things whose *being* is absent. “The *who* involved in activity is not *expressed* in the activity, is not *present*, does not attend his own manifestation, but is simply signified... as a being who is manifested precisely as absent

⁵¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

from his manifestation: a manifestation in the absence of being – a phenomenon.”⁵⁵ In other words, works lack the presence of the person who created them and, as a result of this ‘absence of being,’ cannot produce ethical expression.

Artworks in particular have no capacity to undermine the power of the subject; rather, art adorns the world of the subject with beauty, making it into something to be enjoyed. Artistic images are no different from “the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car;”⁵⁶ they produce enjoyment, they immerse their recipients in the beautiful, and they thus preclude the possibility of ethical expression. Artworks preserve the subject in a state of egoist enjoyment and disengagement. As Levinas explains: “The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient image. All art is plastic.”⁵⁷ In this passage, Levinas presents Infinity, inextricable from the expression of the Other’s face, as hardening into a finite, plastic version of itself in the work of art. According to this view, artworks are static and determinate objects into which any human, living element disappears. Ethical expression – infinite, transcendent, indeterminate, exceeding any interpretation – stands in stark contrast to the finite, determinate and necessarily inexpressive work of art.

Levinas further develops his critique of artworks as disengaged and disengaging objects by comparing them with historical texts. History, like art, is a kind of “plastic image,”⁵⁸ “an idolatry of facts”⁵⁹ essentially disconnected from the reality of lived encounters and thus deaf to the ethics of responsibility demanded by them. Historical

⁵⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 65.

texts, much like works of art, substitute for the speaking of individuals and present a thematization of their lives. One grasps the characters of history the way one grasps the characters of a novel; they are appropriated against their will, as belonging to a sequence of events on which they no longer have a say. In “Reality and its Shadow,” Levinas already acknowledges this parallel between the literary work and history, describing literary characters as prisoners: the “novel shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom.”⁶⁰ The novel replaces life with a series of events immobilized in time, or, as Levinas puts it, “the plasticity of a history.”⁶¹ History is never *present*; it can only constitute its narrative after the fact, based on whatever heritage the individual has left behind. The individuals, for Levinas, “are thematized precisely because they no longer speak. The historical is forever absent from its very presence. This means that it disappears behind its manifestations; its apparition is always superficial and equivocal; its origin, its principle always elsewhere.”⁶² The historical text, like the artwork, marks the absence of a presence; history links up works into a “heritage of ‘dead wills,’”⁶³ which substitutes the singularity of each expression with a cohesive chain of events and reduces individuals to characters within a common narrative.

In both artworks and historical texts, therefore, the individual is exposed and yet not capable of expressing herself – she becomes literally like a thing, a plastic object that can be seen, but that cannot see. Levinas presents the characters of a work of art as standing “at the threshold of a future that is never produced, statues looking at one another with

⁶⁰ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 10.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65.

⁶³ Ibid. 228.

empty eyes, idols which... are exposed and do not see.”⁶⁴ The artistic image, which Levinas describes here as blind and taken out of time, cannot then produce the ethical expression of an Other living human being. Instead of expression, every work of art presents a kind of beautiful façade, which cannot reveal anything more than the appearance of a thing or individual. Art, for Levinas, is “indifference, cold splendor, and silence... it captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself.”⁶⁵ To return to a distinction first set up in “Reality and its Shadow,” the work remains *phenomenal*, a mere apparition against the *reality* of expression.⁶⁶ To apprehend an individual through his or her works is to apprehend only the appearance – or what Levinas describes as the phenomena – of that person, and not the expression or *reality* that cannot be contained in any appearance.

Ethics, for Levinas, would be not only the interruption of what he describes as the interiority of the I, but also the continual contestation of these plastic forms in which the face of the Other becomes signified or recognizable. It is only in being faced with ethical expression that the I is called out of its egoism and held by the infinite accountability for the Other: “in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response – acuteness of the present – engenders me for responsibility.”⁶⁷ Levinas’s critique of art in “Reality and its Shadow” is then carried over into his major text *Totality*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 222.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 193.

⁶⁶ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes this reality of the individual as their Being, which he juxtaposes to the phenomena of appearances. As some commentators have pointed out, Levinas still employs the language of ontology, unlike in his later work where he describes the distinction between Being and Appearance as Same and Other, or Saying and Said. See Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1993) 148. Jacques Derrida’s remarkable essay, “Violence and Metaphysics,” clearly demonstrates the ways in which Levinas remains bound, particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, to the language of ontology and metaphysics he is seeking to overcome. See Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁶⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 178.

and Infinity; as a “dimension of evasion”⁶⁸ art disengages itself and its audience, making it incompatible with the demand for responsibility expressed in the ethical encounter with another human being.

However, at various points in his career, Levinas undermines this position on art as a realm of obscurity and irresponsibility. This is true even in “Reality and its Shadow;” in the final passages of this essay, it is clear that Levinas does not wholly dismiss art as a source of ethical significance. He acknowledges there that the philosophical interpretation of art may provide insight into the ethical relation. Levinas thus, even in his most outright critique of art, does not entirely renounce it; rather, Levinas also recognizes that artistic images can be a source of philosophical truth. Philosophical criticism, he argues, in its interpretation of the mythic images of art, reintegrates these images into reality and also learns something in the process. This is because unlike philosophy, artistic works are both ambiguous and outside of linear time, making them capable of forcing philosophy to think beyond its intelligible boundaries. “Philosophical exegesis,” writes Levinas, “will measure the distance that separates myth from real being, and will become conscious of the creative event itself, an event which eludes cognition... Myth is then at the same time untruth and the source of philosophical truth.”⁶⁹ One can conclude from this that a philosophical exegesis of art, or of the ‘creative event,’ interprets art in order to reveal something about ‘real being,’ or in other words, reality. However, because it is unclear what Levinas means here by *reality*, it is unclear what he means by a philosophical exegesis of art. In the last lines of this essay, he provides a subtle hint. “We cannot here broach the ‘logic’ of the philosophical exegesis of art; that would demand a

⁶⁸ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

broadening of the intentionally limited perspective of this study. For one would have to introduce the perspective of the relation with the other without which being could not be told in its reality, that is, in its time.”⁷⁰ Reality, or ‘being told in its time,’ is inextricable from the ethical relation with the other, which, as we saw above, Levinas describes in greater detail in *Totality and Infinity*. Therefore, a philosophical exegesis of art is meant to interpret the myths of art in order to aid philosophy in its search for ‘real being,’ or in other words, the ethical relation. One can conclude from this that despite its limitations, art has the capacity, albeit only with the help of criticism, to garner insight into the ethical relation.

Levinas does not write another essay outlining what this logic of a philosophical exegesis of art would entail, and, in *Totality and Infinity*, he seems to conclude that the distance separating art from the ethical relation is insurmountable. However, in “Reality and its Shadow,” Levinas does suggest where exceptions to this strict divide between aesthetics and ethics can be found. At the end of this essay, Levinas argues that modern writers have become increasingly aware of the “fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry,”⁷¹ and as a result, insist on interpreting their artistic images themselves. The writers listed – Goethe and Dostoevsky, for instance – are artists whose quotes appear throughout Levinas’s writings, not in order to exemplify the beautiful, but to facilitate Levinas’s description of the ethical relation.⁷² One could speculate, then, that Levinas, by

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Alain Toumayan provides an insightful analysis of the profound affinity between *Brothers Karamazov* and the ethical relation in Levinas in his essay “‘I More than the Others’: Dostoevsky and Levinas,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 104 (2004): 55–66. Toumayan notes how frequently Levinas uses Dostoevsky to illustrate the ethical relation: “‘Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others,’ writes Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 146). The asymmetry of the ethical encounter is perfectly reflected in this quote; the I, for Levinas, is elected as unique from all others in his or her accusation by the Other. Toumayan also notes that many other themes

incorporating the artistic images of these mostly modern writers into his otherwise philosophical analysis, implicitly suggests that certain artists may provide insight into the ethical relation.⁷³ Nonetheless, in this early stage of Levinas's writings it is clear that art depends on criticism to draw out its relevance for the ethical relation and is thus subordinate both to philosophy and to ethics. This is a position that, as we will see in the following section, Levinas alters later in his career.

Proper Names

The essays collected in the volume *Proper Names*, published over the span of Levinas's career, provide evidence of a very different perspective on art than the one put forward in his early writings and then maintained in *Totality and Infinity*. In each of these essays, Levinas grapples with artists whose work he deems significant in ethical terms. There is nonetheless a marked difference between the early and late essays in this collection; the earlier essays, such as the 1947 essay "The Other in Proust" and the 1956 essay "The Poet's Vision" on Maurice Blanchot, are more reticent on the role art may

from Dostoevsky's novel, particularly fraternity, servitude and the face, are echoed throughout Levinas's description of ethics (Toumayan, "I More than the Others: Dostoevsky and Levinas," 56).

⁷³ In terms of the examples employed in this early essay, Levinas clearly privileges literature and poetry over other artistic mediums. Nonetheless, when it comes to defining art, Levinas is quite explicit that it makes no difference whether we are discussing poetry, sculpture, painting or music, or even whether we are discussing classical or modern art: inherent to every work of art is the aesthetic element of completion, and of sensation. According to Levinas, the statues, paintings and poems of antiquity "[conform] no less to the true essence of art than the modern works which claim to be pure music, pure painting, pure poetry" (Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 5). Because of his claim that all art forms harbour the same basic essence, Levinas is able to move with ease between different mediums throughout this essay, and will often equate the poem with the painting and the musical piece, or the sculpture with the literary work. Levinas's hesitation regarding the ethical potential of art then extends to all art, and, as we will see, is very much linked with his suspicion of the sensuous nature of each medium. In the coming chapters, I argue, using Adorno's theory of aesthetics, that Levinas's understanding of the artwork is too reductive, and thus prevents him from theorizing art and ethics together. For a different challenge, on ontological grounds, to this tendency to reduce art to a single unified essence, see Jean-Luc Nancy's essay, "Why are there Several Arts and Not Just One," in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).

play in producing an ethical experience, while his later writings, particularly his essay on Paul Celan from 1972 and his later essays on Blanchot, are much less ambivalent on the ethical significance of aesthetic experience. It is also noteworthy that Levinas became increasingly prolific on the subject of art as his career unfolded; most of the essays published in *Proper Names* date from the period after the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961.⁷⁴

An indication as to why Levinas became increasingly interested in art can be found in the foreword to *Proper Names*, which was first published in French in 1976. Levinas opens *Proper Names* with a description of the horror of recent years and of the weight of historical experience bearing down on his generation. He presents recent historical events, “world wars (and local ones), National Socialism, Stalinism (even de-Stalinization), the camps, the gas chambers, nuclear weapons, terrorism and unemployment,”⁷⁵ as demanding of his generation that they acknowledge the ethical imperative. “[A]t no other time,” he writes, “has historical experience weighed so heavily upon ideas; or, at least, never before have the members of one generation been more aware of that weight.”⁷⁶ In the brief foreword that follows these opening lines, Levinas presents an ethics of the Other as the only possible response to this historical weight, which he describes in this foreword as an ethical encounter that awakens in every one of us an absolute responsibility to those whom we cannot know. While this description of the ethical relation very much echoes the view of ethics outlined in

⁷⁴ For more on this trajectory within Levinas’s writings, see Seán Hand’s text *Emmanuel Levinas*. Hand is particularly helpful in distinguishing a shift in Levinas’s appreciation of Blanchot, beginning with Levinas’s earliest essay on Blanchot from 1956 – significantly predating the publication of *Totality and Infinity* – and ending with his much more favourable account of Blanchot’s ethical significance in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. I share Hand’s view that there is a significant change in Levinas’s perspective on art between the publications of his two major works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Proper Names*, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Levinas's previous works, what follows from this foreword marks quite a departure: in these essays Levinas finds evidence of ethics not only in the face-to-face encounter, but also in the works of poets and literary figures. Furthermore, based on the foreword to this text, we can assume that the work of these figures is just as significant in its ethical expression, and just as significant a response to the gravity of our historical situation, as the face-to-face encounter. Levinas appreciates, for instance, the philosopher Jean Wahl, because, as Levinas writes in the foreword, Wahl seeks the Absolute, as the separate and transcendent, "in the intensity of the felt, of passion, of poetry."⁷⁷ Levinas here seems to accept that transcendence can be expressed in a work of art. In these opening pages, and in the pages that follow, Levinas continues to find evidence of ethical expression, with all of its historical power, in the poetic creations of Agnon, Celan and Blanchot as much as he does in the face-to-face encounter.⁷⁸

Based on this foreword, it seems that Levinas finds exceptions to his standard exclusion of art from the ethical realm in those artists whose work responds to suffering and war. Latently, at least, Levinas acknowledges a difference between traditional forms of art, closely allied with a classical aesthetic, and art that carries historical weight, even if, as is the case with Proust, it was produced earlier in the 20th century. The section below addresses in more detail Levinas's appreciation for this other, more modern, form

⁷⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁸ While it is true that Levinas favours poetry over other art mediums when examining the ethical expression of certain artworks, he does not see the poem itself as any more capable of ethical expression than other forms of art. Paul Celan's poems are only ethical when they *transcend* their character as aesthetic objects, whether this character manifest itself as verbal, sonorous, tactile or visual. For this reason, as we will see below, Levinas distinguishes between poetry in the verbal sense of *poiein*, as the "rupture of the immanence to which language is condemned" (Levinas, *Proper Names*, 185), and poetry as a noun, the "species, the genus of which would be art" (Ibid., 185). Levinas's appreciation for the ethical moment in the sculpture of Sacha Sosno or the painting of Jean Atlan is consistent with this distinction, in the sense that, in both cases, the specifically aesthetic dimension gets suppressed in favour of the rupturing moment of the ethical. See Emmanuel Levinas, *De L'Obliteration*, and "Jean Atlan et la tension de l'art."

of art, which I will take up again in Chapter Four as a point of comparison with Adorno's account of Modernism. I focus on Paul Celan in particular both because he is exemplary as a postwar poet and because Levinas is most explicit in his essay on Celan on the correlation between ethics and aesthetics.

Levinas begins his essay on Paul Celan with a quote from the poet. "I cannot see any basic difference," writes Celan, "between a handshake and a poem."⁷⁹ This is a potentially telling comparison, for it indicates, at least for Celan, that the poem can provide an experience akin to that of an encounter with another human being. As the essay unfolds, it becomes clear that for Levinas too, the poem can serve as a handshake, or as a kind of gesture toward the Other individual. Levinas describes Celan's poetry as: "The personal: from myself to the other."⁸⁰ It is personal because it speaks in a way that interrupts the impersonal structures of language and philosophy, whether based in formal logic or the ontology of Being.

The opening lines of Levinas's essay on Paul Celan announce Celan's poetry as a literal intrusion upon Martin Heidegger's later writings on language, in which Heidegger claims that poetry has a unique ability to disclose the truth of Being. Language, Heidegger famously declares in his essay "On the Way to Language," is the "house of Being."⁸¹ By contrast, Levinas describes Celan's poem as an "intrusion in the famous 'language that speaks,' the famous 'die Sprache spricht': entrance of the beggar into the 'house of being.'"⁸² Levinas here asserts the primacy of the ethical relation against Heidegger's fundamental ontology, which for Levinas obscures the possibility of

⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 40.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸¹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 5.

⁸² Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to Other," 40.

transcendence – and thus of ethics – by positing Being as the comprehensive ground out of which beings emerge. According to Levinas, what is more fundamental than ontology, and than the epistemological approach of Western philosophy attacked by Heidegger, is the irreducible alterity of the Other in the ethical relation. It is thus significant that Levinas opposes Celan’s poetry to Heideggerian ontology, for it clearly places Celan’s work on the side of ethics against totality.⁸³ Celan, according to Levinas, lacks “understanding for a certain language that institutes the world in being.”⁸⁴ Levinas presents Celan as suggesting something “Otherwise Than Being,”⁸⁵ and thus sets the primacy of ethics in Celan’s poems against the primacy of Being in Heidegger’s philosophy.

By contrasting Celan’s poetry with Heidegger’s ontology, Levinas implies that Celan’s poems express something irreducible to the order of the same. From Levinas’s opening lines to this essay, it is clear that Celan’s poetry does not belong to the order of Being; rather, it intrudes upon it as a ‘beggar’. Levinas repeats the motif of the beggar further on, presenting Celan’s poetry both as an expression of “the nakedness of him who borrows all he owns”⁸⁶ and of the stateless stranger who has been expelled from the Heideggerian world of “dwelling” and of “enrootedness.”⁸⁷ In describing Celan using

⁸³ In opposing Celan’s poetry to Heidegger’s ontology, Levinas is also implicitly opposing Celan to the ontological reading of art frequently expressed in Levinas’s other texts. For instance, Levinas writes in *Otherwise Than Being* that the beautiful “supports Western ontology” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 40) by producing a “resonance of essence” (Ibid., 40). What Levinas means here is that through the experience of artworks one gains access to what is most fundamental, or essential, about forms, colours, sounds, words and so on. It is as though through artworks, one is able to experience colours or sounds or words in themselves, as they are, before they become simply a part of an entity or identifiable thing. Levinas writes: “In painting, red reddens and green greens, forms are produced as contours and vacate with their vacuity as forms. In music sounds resound... Poetry is productive of song, of resonance and sonority, which are the verbalness of verbs or essence” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 40).

⁸⁴ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 41.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 44.

these terms of destitution, nudity and poverty, Levinas draws a clear parallel between Celan's poetry and his descriptions elsewhere of the face of the Other in the ethical encounter. Levinas frequently employs very similar terms to highlight the irreducible alterity of the Other who faces us and for whom we are infinitely responsible. In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas states that it is the "essential poverty"⁸⁸ of the face, the face at its "most naked, most destitute,"⁸⁹ which exceeds every attempt to thematize the encounter or reduce it to the same. Levinas further describes the ethics of the face using the terms of impoverishment in *Totality and Infinity*: "The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated."⁹⁰ Levinas's consistent emphasis on the destitution of the Other is meant to highlight the ethical exigency as well as the unicity of every such encounter. The act of thinking through the face-to-face encounter is inevitably disproportionate to the experience itself; the face exceeds every attempt to think it. In accomplishing such a breakup of totality, the demand for responsibility enacted by the face takes ethical precedence over our judgments, our knowledge and our being.

The movement toward the other expressed by Celan's poetry demands a form of attention that affects the subject like an inescapable wakefulness or insomnia. Levinas's description here is significant in its departure from his earlier view of art in "Reality and its Shadow" as charming its audience into a state of passive disengagement, in which they cannot help but ignore 'the dictates of their conscience.' This departure is especially

⁸⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985) 86.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.

evident in the following passage, wherein Levinas contrasts the attention⁹¹ of Celan's poetry, described here in terms of conscience and responsibility, with distraction and evasion:

Attention – a mode of consciousness without distraction, i.e. without the power of escape through dark underground passages; full illumination, projected not in order to see ideas, but in order to prohibit evasion; the first meaning of that insomnia that is conscience – rectitude of responsibility before any appearance of forms, images or things.⁹²

Levinas here attributes to Celan's poetry an attentiveness marked by the 'insomnia of conscience', which *prohibits* evasion, distraction and 'the power of escape'. We are thus very far from Levinas's description of art in "Reality and its Shadow" as constituting "a dimension of evasion" and "irresponsibility."⁹³

Levinas frequently employs the metaphor of insomnia to describe the unceasing vigilance required of the ethical encounter. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas explains the correlation between the ethical and the experience of insomnia as follows: "The other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake, in a state of vigilant insomnia. Even though we are ontologically free to refuse the other, we remain forever accused, with a bad conscience.... I have described ethical responsibility as *insomnia* or *wakefulness* precisely because it is a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort that can never slumber."⁹⁴ Celan's poetry likewise produces an attention that literally

⁹¹Levinas, like Celan in *The Meridian*, cites Malebranche: "Attention, like a pure prayer of the soul." (Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to Other" 43)

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", 12. One could consider here Simone Weil's description of attention in her book *Gravity and Grace*. Weil describes prayer as absolutely unmixed attention: "Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears – is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived" (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*; (New York: Putnam, 1952) 118).

⁹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas: Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, Richard A Cohen, ed. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1986) 28.

prevents the refusal of the other, a ‘rectitude of responsibility’ that affects the subject like insomnia. For Levinas, his poems demand attention, rather than charm with their rhythm or silence with their beauty; as opposed to a sphere of evasion, these poems open a dimension of responsibility and generosity.

Based on the passage on attention in Levinas’s essay on Celan, it is clear that Celan’s poetry is above all an experience of what precedes ‘the appearance of forms, images, or things’. Put in the terms of Levinas’s other writings, what precedes forms or images or things is the speech or expression of the Other in the ethical encounter. And it should be noted that speech or expression is precisely what Levinas opposes to ‘dead’ works, including works of art. Here, it is clear that Celan’s poetry is on the side of speech. Furthermore, in the following passage, Levinas describes Celan’s poetry as an interpellation, echoing his description of the face-to-face encounter in *Totality and Infinity*: “A gesture of recognition of the other, a handshake, a saying without a said – these things are important by their interpellation rather than by their message.”⁹⁵ In *Totality and Infinity*, the essential aspect of the face-to-face relation is the interpellation of the other or “the unique actuality of speech.”⁹⁶ “The other is maintained and confirmed in his heterogeneity as soon as one calls upon him.”⁹⁷

As Theodore de Boer helpfully explains, the appeal to the other in speech, the interpellation, is for Levinas the foundation upon which discourse in general is built. For instance, when I speak of a particular subject with another person, I have always already presupposed the primary invocation of that other person in conversation. “The saying of

⁹⁵ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 43.

⁹⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

something,” de Boer states, “is always a talking *to* somebody.”⁹⁸ And that somebody to whom I speak can never be fully appropriated in a theme. De Boer clarifies that for Levinas the interpellation is a primary ethical experience of another person and is presupposed by every assertion of meaning or signification. De Boer explains: “This metaphysical founding of meaning, this signification prior to any signification in the strictly linguistic (ontological) sense, is what is meant by the expression *first signification*.”⁹⁹ Thus, for Levinas to describe Celan’s poetry as an *interpellation* and not as a *message*, Levinas is clearly comparing Celan’s poems to the primary ethical experience produced in speech. It is also significant in this regard that Levinas ends his essay on Celan with a description that directly echoes de Boer’s explanation of interpellation as ‘first signification’. The last lines of the essay read as follows:

The ineluctable: the interruption of the playful order of the beautiful and the play of concepts, and the *play of the world*; interrogation of the Other, a seeking for the Other. A seeking, dedicating itself to the other in the form of the poem. A chant rises in the giving, the one-for-the-other, the signifying of signification. A signification older than ontology and the thought of being, and that is presupposed by knowledge and desire, philosophy and libido.¹⁰⁰

This passage asserts a clear contrast between the works produced by artists favoured by Levinas, such as Celan, and artworks in general, which belong to the order of the beautiful, of concepts and ‘the play of the world.’ In opposition to these latter works, Celan’s poetry is a primary signification that grounds signification, in other words, an interpellation, an invocation, an expression, or speech.

⁹⁸ Theodore de Boer, “An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy,” in Cohen, *Face to Face with Levinas*, 97.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰⁰ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 46.

Furthermore, unlike in Levinas's earlier writings on art, Levinas describes the poem as presenting the I in his or her speaking to the Other; the poem embodies the moment when the I is pushed beyond itself in an act of generosity toward the Other, hence the title of the essay "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other." The poem, in other words, captures the experience of transcendence unique to the ethical relation and thus is no longer understood by Levinas as a static and determinate object. Levinas describes the poem as a "for the other;"¹⁰¹ "the fact of speaking to the other – the poem – precedes all thematization."¹⁰² In preceding thematization, Celan's poetry is opposed to the plastic quality of work described in *Totality and Infinity*. As we have seen above, Levinas is critical of artworks because their plastic quality hardens individual expression into a thing-like image and thus eliminates the possibility for ethical experience. However, in this essay on Celan, Levinas describes the poem as a speaking to the other, and thus in precisely the terms of ethical expression opposed to art above. The artwork produced by Celan is not plastic, attesting to the creator in absentia, but is rather capable of attending its own manifestation.

What this essay on Celan demonstrates is that in certain exceptional cases, Levinas attributes to art the power of ethical expression. Levinas's newfound appreciation for art is most evident in his definition of poetry as the "conversion into the infinite of pure mortality and the dead letter."¹⁰³ This definition stands in stark contrast to the opposition set up above between the expression of the infinite in the face-to-face encounter and the silent plasticity of the finite work of art. Pure mortality, as we have seen, is for Levinas to define an individual on the basis of their works, to reduce the unicity of a life, whose

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 42.

infinite particularity could never be contained in a summary, to the confines of a historical or literary character. Similarly, to reduce speech to writing – to a dead letter – is to eliminate the transcendence enacted by a conversation with the Other, whose speech infinitely exceeds the capacities of the I to contain it. If we recall that both of these elements, mortality and deadness, are characteristic of the work of art in Levinas's early writings, then Celan's poetry – a conversion of pure mortality and the dead letter into the infinite, or in other words, a conversion of the work into expression – is an exception to this rule.

We have already seen in Chapter One that it is entirely paradoxical for Levinas to allow for an act of transcendence within the confines of a closed work, or as he puts it, to conceive of “the infinite adventure of a dead letter.”¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, transcendence within the ‘dead letter’ of the artwork is precisely what this essay on Celan describes. According to Levinas, Celan accomplishes transcendence in his poetry by breaking up the ‘I’ into two distinct voices. Levinas here follows Celan's own description of the poem as “a place in which the person, in grasping himself as a stranger to himself, emerges.”¹⁰⁵ Levinas discerns in Celan's poetry two interwoven voices, as though Celan allows a conversation between himself and someone other to be heard. Levinas finds in Celan's *Meridian* an accurate description of Celan's poems in general, which “constantly [interrupt themselves] in order to let through, in the interruptions, his other voice, as if two or more discourses were on top of one another, with a strange coherence, not that of a dialogue, but woven in a counterpoint.”¹⁰⁶ In this passage, Levinas reads Celan's poetry as embodying the act of an ‘I’ separating from itself and engaging in a discourse between

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Ibid., 43.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 41.

self and other. The ‘other voice’ here appears as an interruption of the voice of the self. Levinas contrasts this ‘strange coherence’ of two voices in Celan’s poetry with the poetry of Hölderlin, Trakl and Rilke, all of whom are favourites of Heidegger. Against the impersonal ontological journey of these latter poets, to whom Levinas ascribes a Heideggerian vision of poetry “as opening the world, the place between earth and sky,”¹⁰⁷ Levinas describes Celan’s work as seeking a transcendence of self – and of ontology – toward the Other. In other words, the significance of Celan’s poetry for Levinas is its ability to capture a movement beyond being to an “unusual outside”¹⁰⁸ wherein “the stranger, the neighbour”¹⁰⁹ can be heard.

According to Levinas, what prevents Celan’s poems from congealing into the ‘dead’ form of typical artworks is the incessant movement from self to other enacted within the work. Levinas presents this movement as a persistent or continuous carrying over toward the other so that the poem may “last.”¹¹⁰ Through this movement, the poem can resist or “postpone”¹¹¹ the thematization of things within the said, or resist the desire to close the other into a fixed identity. In other words, Celan’s poems repeatedly interrupt the closure of their own form.

What are we then to make of Levinas’s appreciation for the poetry of a literary figure like Paul Celan? In this essay by Levinas, Celan’s poetry is undoubtedly ethical, as it enacts a giving to the Other which pushes the individual beyond his or her circular economy, and opens he or she to the demand for responsibility engendered by the Other human being. What Levinas avoids, however, in his description of the ethics of Celan’s

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

poetry, is the question of how as *aesthetic* objects these poems are capable of producing ethical expression. Levinas, in a different essay on Maurice Blanchot, indicates that he understands poetry as outside of the aesthetic in these writings. Levinas describes there poetic language as a mode of transcendence, which explodes the impersonal structures within which language is trapped, and forces the individual to question the totalizing tendency of his or her thought. He does not, however, view poetry as belonging exclusively to the realm of art. In a footnote to “The Servant and her Master,” Levinas writes the following:

[T]he word poetry, to me, means the rupture of the immanence to which language is condemned, imprisoning itself. I do not think that this rupture is a purely esthetic event. But the word poetry does not, after all, designate a species, the genus of which would be art. Inseparable from the verb, it overflows with prophetic meaning.¹¹²

In this statement, Levinas clearly distinguishes art – a dimension of evasion and play – from poetry, which is derived from the verb *poiein* and connotes a sense of making¹¹³ in opposition to the fixed, plastic images of art. Poetry as a verb, or as embodying a moment of creation, satisfies the criterion for an ethical relation grounded in the transcendence of ethical expression. In his emphasis on *poieisis*, Levinas avoids asking whether or how poems as *art objects* may be ethical.

Levinas attributes to Celan’s poetry the power of transcendence, something that Levinas elsewhere excludes, categorically, from the work of art. However, he does so while also refusing to describe transcendence in aesthetic terms. In employing terms to describe Celan’s poetry otherwise reserved for the ethical relation, i.e. by contrasting it

¹¹² Emmanuel Levinas, “The Servant and her Master,” in *Proper Names*, 185 fn4.

¹¹³ I owe this description of *poiein* to the translator of *Proper Names*, Michael B. Smith. See Levinas, “The Servant and her Master,” 185 fn4.

with ontology and beauty (including, as we have seen, art in general), Levinas does not mean to present the poem as a substitute for the face in the ethical relation. It is clear from Levinas's writings that the face-to-face is the site of the ethical par excellence. What is captured within the closed form of Celan's poetry, according to Levinas, is a response to the Other in speech. Thus, it is not that Celan's poems are a stand-in for the face, as though in reading his poems one experiences something akin to standing face-to-face with another human being, but rather that Celan's poems enact a relation with alterity within the confines of the aesthetic form. Celan's poems do not 'face' us as another human being would, but they nonetheless act to interrupt the order of totality to which we are accustomed. In other words, Levinas presents Celan's poetry as a counterpart to the experience of alterity in the ethical relation; and yet he does not explain how this counterpart differs from other experiences of the ethical.

Part of the problem with answering this question using Levinas's texts is that he is not interested in exploring the possibility of an experience that is aesthetic and ethical at the same time. It is my belief that Celan's poetry provides Levinas with a unique aesthetic counterpart to the ethical, but that Levinas explores the ethical dimension of this poetry without addressing its aesthetic dimensions. And thus the role of a poet like Celan within Levinas's oeuvre remains ambiguous and vague. For this reason, the opposition outlined above, between artworks and the ethical, still holds. The question of the aesthetic character of the event of the poem is superseded by the question of the ethical. This later essay on Celan is nonetheless significant in its acknowledgment of how human expression is mediated through the work of art, even if the work-character of art is not addressed. It will be necessary to look to the writings of Adorno for a theory of how

artworks may exist as both technically formed objects and as expressions of transcendence.

My concern here is to show that despite Levinas's reticence toward the aesthetic realm, particularly in (but not limited to) his early writings, Levinas paradoxically also held some artworks in the highest esteem. Ultimately, I argue that Levinas's appreciation for art, however paradoxical, allows for the possibility of expanding Levinasian ethics by means of the aesthetic. This appreciation is evident in Levinas's later essay on Celan, in his reliance on literature to illustrate the ethical relation, and, as will see, in the aesthetic quality taken on by his later writings. Poetry, in its very ambiguity, seems an amenable complement to what Levinas begins to describe in his later work *Otherwise Than Being* as the inherently ambiguous Saying. It is perhaps for this reason that *Otherwise Than Being*, to which we turn now, is written in a poetic style altogether different from his earlier works.

Poetry and Transcendence

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas recasts the ethical relation in terms of language. The ethical relation is here no longer described predominantly as an encounter with a face, but is rather understood by Levinas as an encounter between the said – which for Levinas is a dimension of language that inevitably categorizes or thematizes otherness – and the Saying, which denotes the moment when the Other's trace ruptures the order of the said. According to Levinas, the Saying conditions the said and allows it to emerge in the first place, though paradoxically, it is only through the said that the echo of the Saying can be heard. The difficulty of writing about the ethical relation, as Levinas

argues in this text, is that any attempt to describe the ethical, to respect it in its Saying, inevitably captures it in a proposition and thus thematizes or congeals it within the order of the said. The task of philosophy, according to Levinas, is to heed the Saying even while employing inevitably reductive concepts and thematizations.

Put in terms already employed in the discussion of art above, for Levinas the philosophical text, like the work of art, inescapably betrays ethical expression. Thus Levinas's position as a writer is very difficult. He explains this difficulty as follows: "A philosopher's effort, and his unnatural position, consists, while showing the hither side, in immediately reducing the eon which triumphs in the said and in the monstrations, and, despite the reduction, retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression."¹¹⁴ The 'diachronic expression' of Saying, compared here by Levinas to a vast and irreducible period of time, will necessarily be hypostasized in the said. And yet despite this, the philosopher must pursue its expression.¹¹⁵

How then does Levinas allow the Saying to be heard within the order of the said? One answer to this question can be found in Levinas's changing view of art. As we have already seen, he begins to appreciate poetry as a verb because it connotes the way in which the congealed aspects of language are interrupted. To repeat from the passage quoted above, Levinas writes in *Proper Names*: "the word poetry, to me, means the rupture of the immanence to which language is condemned, imprisoning itself."¹¹⁶ Put in the terms of *Otherwise Than Being*, the Saying of the Other, like poetry, breaks open the

¹¹⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 44.

¹¹⁵ For an interesting discussion of the parallel between the approach of the phenomenologist and the artist, which problematizes the strict division between the ethical and aesthetic in Levinas's writings, see John Llewelyn, *The Hypocritical Imagination between Kant and Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 170-181.

¹¹⁶ Levinas, *Proper Names*, 185 fn4.

said, which is inevitably restrained, or imprisoned, by the logical concepts of discursive language. Based on the definition of poetry given in *Proper Names*, then, there appears to be a connection between Levinas's interest in language in *Otherwise Than Being* and his definition of poetry in *Proper Names*. This connection is furthered by the adoption of a much more poetic manner of writing in *Otherwise Than Being*, a manner of writing that makes this text notoriously difficult to read. Levinas employs rhetorical devices such as repetition, ambiguity and metaphor in order to permit alterity to show itself, even if only as a trace, within language. It could be said, then, that whereas in *Totality and Infinity* it was through the face of the Other that Infinity appeared, in *Otherwise Than Being* it is arguably through the poetical text.

Gary Peters is one scholar who argues for a poetic style in *Otherwise Than Being*, and while he takes his analysis of Levinasian aesthetics in a very different direction than we intend to here,¹¹⁷ he provides important insight into the poetic elements of *Otherwise Than Being*. According to Peters, Levinas's attempt to 'dethematize' the Said in *Otherwise Than Being* is articulated in a rhetorical style that resonates with Levinas's early view of the artwork, which emphasizes the musicality of the artwork as well as its power of seduction and rhythm. Peters analyzes *Otherwise Than Being* in similar terms and draws out the musicality of Levinas's writing, highlighting Levinas's use of repetition to draw attention to the Saying and thereby undermine the power of the said.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Peters grounds his study of Levinasian aesthetics in questions of education and teaching. For that reason, Peters is primarily concerned with how the latent aesthetic dimensions of *Otherwise Than Being* problematize Levinas's conception of teaching in *Totality and Infinity* and other essays from that period. See Gary Peters, *Irony and Singularity: Aesthetic Education from Kant to Levinas* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005) 152-164.

¹¹⁸ Peters, 162-163. Another striking poetic feature of this text not noted by Peters is Levinas's frequent use of metaphor. Levinas consistently resorts to metaphor when describing the Saying. For instance, Saying is an echo, a resonance, a trace, breath; Saying turns consciousness inside out "like a

Peters and I differ, however, on two points. Firstly, Peters highlights only those elements of *Otherwise Than Being* that approximate the earlier aesthetic position put forward by Levinas in “Reality and its Shadow” and *Existence and Existents*. In doing so, Peters distances Levinas from the view of the ethical in *Totality and Infinity* and from Levinas’s later position on art.¹¹⁹ While I agree with Peters that there is a musicality and a rhythm to the text of *Otherwise Than Being*, I think Peters misses an important point in focusing exclusively on Levinas’s earlier position on art; namely, that Levinas’s rhetorical style also allows him to approximate the poetic as he understands it in his later writings. Secondly, according to Peters, Levinas’s poetic style in *Otherwise Than Being* is a direct result of his move away from the face-to-face encounter and his increased tendency to present ethics in elusive, ambiguous terms.¹²⁰ Peters writes: “While there can be no doubt that, for Levinas, ethics always remains ‘first philosophy,’ the receding of themes and the liberation of ‘the saying’ brings the enigma of the unsayable ever more to the fore, resulting in a manner of writing that is profoundly rhetorical, at times indistinguishable from the aesthetic and, thus, ‘beyond’ (or outside of) *the ethical*.”¹²¹ In other words, Peters argues that Levinas’s foregrounding of the aesthetic in *Otherwise Than Being* implies a move beyond or outside of the question of the ethical. Like Robbins, Peters does not allow ethics and aesthetics to converge, although for a very

cloak” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 48); Saying is “suffering by a thorn burning the flesh” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 50).

¹¹⁹ It is possible that Peters narrows his analysis of aesthetics in *Otherwise Than Being* because of his larger argument on the correlation between education and aesthetics. Peters uses the latent aesthetic dimensions of *Otherwise Than Being* to problematize Levinas’s conception of teaching in *Totality and Infinity* and other essays from that period. See Gary Peters, *Irony and Singularity: Aesthetic Education from Kant to Levinas*, 152-164.

¹²⁰ Peters, 152-156.

¹²¹ Peters, 162. Here Peters builds on an observation made by Stella Sandford on the relevance of Levinas’s section ‘Beyond the Face’ at the end of *Totality and Infinity* for understanding transcendence as extending beyond the ethical. ‘Beyond the Face’ is taken to imply spaces of experience and meaning, such as writing, that may have ethical significance but that are not inherently ethical. See Stella Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 50-51, 79-80.

different reason; according to Peters, ethics does not supersede the aesthetic, but precisely the opposite – in *Otherwise Than Being* it is aesthetics that supersedes the ethical.

By contrast with both Peters and Robbins, I would like to ask whether it is possible to draw the aesthetic and the ethical closer together. Doing so requires understanding the poetic elements of *Otherwise Than Being* not as a throwback to an earlier aesthetic – and thus a move away from the ethical – but rather as a product of Levinas’s later position on aesthetics. I argue, against Peters, that Levinas learns from poetry how to allow the Saying to appear in a philosophical text; the Saying explodes the confines of the said just as poetry explodes the confines of everyday language. It is for this reason that when Levinas speaks of the Saying and the said he resorts to a poetic style. In doing so, he departs from his earlier position that art requires philosophical criticism to have ethical import; in *Otherwise Than Being*, philosophy now models itself on poetic expression.

Seán Hand’s argument on Levinasian aesthetics is productive in its analysis of *Otherwise Than Being* as a direct reflection of Levinas’s later position on art, particularly as expressed by Levinas in his essay on Celan. Unlike Peters, Hand demonstrates that *Otherwise Than Being* marks an inversion of Levinas’s early aesthetic view. Hand understands Levinas as moving from “disapproval to intimate appreciation”¹²² in his approach to the artwork; in “Reality and its Shadow,” the artwork shadows reality and thereby lures its recipient away from the realm of responsibility and thus of ethics, whereas in Levinas’s later writings the artwork is capable of enacting transcendence and

¹²² Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 78.

generating a relation with the ethical.¹²³ What is of particular significance for my argument here is Hand's treatment of Levinas on art criticism. As we have already seen, Levinas initially subordinates the artwork to its philosophical interpretation; a philosophical exegesis of art is required if an artwork is to be more than a dimension of evasion. It could even be said that for Levinas, in "Reality and its Shadow," philosophy saves art from itself. However, Hand carefully demonstrates that Levinas's later position, particularly as it emerges out of his engagement with Celan and Blanchot, is a radical inversion of his original take on the artwork and philosophical exegesis. Art, according to Hand's view, now provides the model for exegesis and not the other way around. Hand explains: "Far from opposing exegesis to the artwork, Levinas now sees the latter as providing the model for the former's most radical shifts and effectively guiding his own forthcoming philosophical work."¹²⁴ Levinas's various descriptions of the ethical relation in his essay on Celan, as a 'saying without a said,' 'insomnia of conscience,' 'extreme receptivity,' are taken up again in his text *Otherwise Than Being*, published two years after his essay on Celan. Hand concludes that the work of Levinas in this later text converges with his work on Celan, namely in their shared desire to give voice to an otherwise than Being.

¹²³ Nick Smith, in his essay "Adorno vs. Levinas: Evaluating Points of Contention," argues against the attempt to draw art and ethics closer together based on Levinas's later writings. He explains: "Notwithstanding attempts of several Levinasian theorists to redeem art as a site of alterity by cleaving his work in 'early' and 'later' periods, Levinas consistently found art to be a beguiling shadow when compared with the true transcendence of the face" (Smith, 2). While I agree with Smith that Levinas continues to exclude art from the realm of ethics throughout his career, there is nonetheless a striking ambiguity to Levinas's later texts on art that must be accounted for. Unlike Smith, I take this ambiguity on the question of art – and correlatively, Adorno's ambiguity on the question of ethics in his *Aesthetic Theory* – to be a point of intersection between Adorno and Levinas, and not, as Smith claims, a point of contention. The nature of this intersection will be explored in depth in Chapter Five.

¹²⁴ Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 76.

Seán Hand's writings on Levinas and art are extremely useful for any discussion of Levinas's complex view of aesthetics as it pertains to the ethical relation, and for countering those who dismiss Levinas's view of art as simply negative or unimportant for Levinasian ethics. His analysis of the poetic dimension of *Otherwise Than Being* also raises the question of whether Levinas eventually expands his conception of the ethical relation to include an aesthetic dimension. Based on Levinas's own writings, however, one would have to answer no, given that, despite his numerous writings on literary figures and even the visual arts,¹²⁵ the work discussed in these later writings is not considered art at all. For instance, Levinas takes the criticism of the beautiful in Celan to indicate that Celan is more than a poet; the Saying engendered by his work is not aesthetic, but ethical. It is a similar case with Levinas's own writing, both illustrated by quotations from literature and eventually written in a poetic style. Levinas, while appreciative of works of art and of the interruptive force of poetic language, did not allow that artworks, as aesthetic objects, could produce an experience of transcendence akin to the ethical encounter.

It is then easy to see how one could argue, as Jill Robbins does, that Levinas bends the aesthetic to his ethical imperative. Seán Hand upholds a similar division between aesthetics and ethics; works of art are ethically significant for Levinas only once they are no longer treated as works of art. Hand writes the following of Levinas's writings on Blanchot, echoing Robbins's own view:

Through Blanchot's work and readings, Levinas is now prepared, with only occasionally residual hesitations, to acknowledge how poetic language is able to generate signs beyond meaning, abandon the order present to vision and hold open transcendence. As a result, the poem is no

¹²⁵ See fn. 42 above.

longer viewed as an aesthetic object by Levinas. Instead, he significantly aligns it to prayer and prophecy.¹²⁶

While I agree with Hand and Robbins that Levinas ultimately subordinates the question of the aesthetic to the ethical, I propose in this dissertation to expand Levinas's project and ask whether and how it is possible to retain a Levinasian ethics in an *aesthetic* theory. While Levinas leaves us with a rich account of ethical expression, which he accepts is possible to achieve on certain conditions through works of art, he sets aside the question of the art object and correlatively, of aesthetic experience. In other words, I would like to ask whether it is necessary to exclude the aesthetic from Levinas's discussion of the ethical. Doing so requires going beyond Levinas's texts, and asking a question that he himself did not ask: what about the aesthetic object is capable of producing an ethical experience otherwise reserved by Levinas for the transcendence of Saying or the face-to-face encounter? Over the coming chapters, I argue that it is necessary to look elsewhere for a theory of aesthetics that could converge with Levinas's ethics (and latent aesthetics). I argue that such a theory can be found in the writings of Adorno, whose work on aesthetics resonates with many of Levinas's concerns and even, as will be shown, has a latent ethics parallel to Levinas's own.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that despite Levinas's harsh criticism of art and aesthetics throughout his career, his view is in no way consistent. Not only does Levinas deeply appreciate certain artists and even attribute ethical significance to their work, he relies heavily on artists to illustrate the ethical relation while also taking on an increasingly poetic style in

¹²⁶ Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 74.

his writing. It is my view that Levinas intuits a convergence between the aesthetic and the ethical, but that his limited categories for speaking about art and the lack of any worked out aesthetic theory render it impossible for him to make such a convergence explicit. Any close reading of Levinas's aesthetics, then, ends up with a series of proximities between aesthetics and ethics, but there is no way around Levinas's fundamental hostility toward the artwork and even to the aesthetic tradition at large.

In the coming chapters, I problematize Levinas's limited view of the aesthetic using Adorno's aesthetic theory. However, I do not wish simply to superimpose upon Levinas's writings an aesthetic theory that is not his own; rather, I use Adorno's discussion of modern art, which according to Adorno is marked by a radical reworking of the classical aesthetic tradition, to draw out what remains only intuitive in Levinas's writings on ethics and art. This is not to say that Levinas ignores the importance of the modern epoch in which he finds himself; rather, it is not his concern to explore the implications of this epoch on the development of art. The beginning of *Proper Names*, as we have seen, announces the historical burden that weighs upon all of those writing in this time,¹²⁷ and finds in the writers collected in this book evidence of a Saying that interrupts the rigidity of traditional discourse and meaning. Levinas gleans from the work of these writers the beginning of an end to the form of rationality founded in a philosophy of the same, whose apotheosis is the total absorption of all otherness within a system of identity. As we will see in the next chapter, in the wake of the atrocities to which the 20th century has been witness – nuclear catastrophes, totalitarianism and ongoing wars – what is demanded by Levinas, and what the individuals in this book point to (Marcel Proust, Agnon, Celan,

¹²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, "Foreword," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 3-4.

Jean Wahl, to name a few), is an ethical philosophy that begins with the other human being. It is clear from this foreword to *Proper Names* that for Levinas certain artists are just as important as philosophers in the transformation of entrenched forms of thought. What remains to be explained is how art differs from philosophy in its response to this historical and ethical demand.

Chapter Two: Ethics and Critique

In Chapter One, we have seen that Levinas, a thinker concerned with establishing the primacy of the ethical relation in the realm of philosophy, aesthetics and politics, is also, paradoxically, very much preoccupied – and seemingly troubled – by the question of the aesthetic throughout his career. Despite his preoccupation, however, Levinas never developed a substantial theory of the aesthetic and even appears contradictory on aesthetic questions throughout his writings. In some essays by Levinas, art and ethics are diametrically opposed; in others, they seem to converge. Any discussion of Levinas and aesthetics is thus faced with substantial limitations. It is my view that the apparent conflict in Levinas's writings on the subject of art can be resolved by reading his work alongside Adorno, a theorist with similar philosophical and ethical concerns. What Adorno provides is the means to draw out what remains only latent in Levinas's work: recognition of a range of the ethical that is also aesthetic. When these two thinkers are read together, it becomes clear that Levinas did not simply dismiss art, but was rather suspicious of certain forms of art that could provoke against the Other an evasive return to the Same. By contrast, some artists – Blanchot, Celan and Jabès, for instance – have the power to interrupt egoism with an experience that qualifies as ethical in Levinasian terms. Adorno's philosophy, I argue, helps to clarify what an aesthetic experience that is also ethical may look like.

The argument for a correlation between Adorno's aesthetic theory and Levinas's ethical philosophy must first justify why two such seemingly incongruent thinkers should be associated in the first place. On the surface, they seem quite opposed, particularly with respect to philosophical method; whereas Levinas spends much of his career working

within and against the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, Adorno models his own approach on Hegelian dialectics. And yet despite their differences, each develops his work in opposition to a similar tendency in the history of Western philosophy, which they describe as totality and identity-thinking, respectively. Typical of this philosophical approach in abstract terms is the desire to assimilate what is other or particular to a universal, subjective concept; put in concrete terms, this rationality finds its counterpart in the European colonial experience, in the often violent attempt to eradicate difference by imposing the familiar categories of an Enlightenment subject. For both Levinas and Adorno, this form of rationality has led to an unprecedented narrowing of experience and for both thinkers it is imperative that an alternative be found.

Taking this shared interest as my starting point, the chapter below aims to introduce each of these thinkers by situating their respective critiques within a broader philosophical tradition. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for my argument in later chapters that the alternative sought by Levinas in ethics and by Adorno in aesthetics are not only complementary but also, when taken together, serve to illuminate what has heretofore gone unnoticed in each: the ethical dimension unique within aesthetics.

This chapter provides a closer examination first of Adorno and then of Levinas on the failings of traditional philosophy and their respective attempts to seek out alternatives for philosophical thought. When read alongside each other, the parallels between the two thinkers, particularly in their respective critiques of identity and totality, will become clear. What will also become clear is how seemingly different are their alternatives to a similar problem, particularly on the question of whether and how transcendence is possible. Levinas, as we have already seen, describes the experience of the ethical as one

of revelation or transcendence; Adorno's negative dialectics, by contrast, is extremely reticent on even the possibility of transcendent experience. This divergence on the topic of transcendence poses a problem for anyone interested in reading Levinas and Adorno together. I argue in later chapters, however, that this problem can be solved through a closer reading of Adorno's aesthetic theory, which contains a latent account of transcendence very much akin to Levinas's description of the ethical relation. Thus, in its consideration of the more general philosophical concerns of both writers, and the similarities and differences between them, this chapter is meant to provide a foundation for the more detailed analysis of aesthetics and transcendence that will follow.

Adorno

In the final chapter of his seminal work *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno argues that metaphysics, by which he means the traditional philosophical pursuit of transcendental truth, must be fundamentally rethought in the wake of WWII. For Adorno, traditional philosophy is utterly culpable with respect to these events and must be completely transformed. According to Adorno: "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience."¹²⁸ In this final chapter, Adorno argues that only by recognizing the implications of its history will philosophy be able to continue at all.

Adorno identifies as culpable in traditional metaphysics its consistent reduction of objective experience to subjective categories, a reduction that he describes as identity-thinking. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno, with Max Horkheimer, provides a

¹²⁸ Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 362.

historical analysis of the identity-thinking characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy in particular, which he continues to support in his later text *Negative Dialectics*.¹²⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the main impetus behind the Enlightenment was to disenchant the natural world, or, put differently, to replace mythic – and eventually religious – authority with the authority of reason. They begin their study with the writings of Francis Bacon, who argued that the scientific method could accomplish a “happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things.”¹³⁰ The power of the human mind lay in its ability to know the world on an ever-increasing scale – in other words, to rid the world of mystery, to disenchant it. As they write: “Power and knowledge are synonymous.”¹³¹ The objective world will no longer be something to be feared, as a mythic space with inexplicable powers, because of the supposed power of knowledge to disenchant, to master. Early efforts to appease nature through mythic forms – a less radical bid for domination – become through instrumental reason solely about domination and control.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, there is an undeniable correlation between the quest for identity in traditional metaphysics and actual violence. As Adorno writes, with Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The universality of ideas as developed by discursive logic, domination in the conceptual sphere, is raised up on the basis of actual domination.”¹³² As a result of the catastrophic failure of Western metaphysics, Adorno identifies at the end of *Negative Dialectics* a revised Kantian moral law in the aftermath of the atrocities of WWII: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by

¹²⁹ See Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 185.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 14.

Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange our thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.”¹³³ According to Adorno, radicalized identity-thinking is fully implicated in a war that turned even the suffering of its victims into a specimen for study. “Genocide,” writes Adorno, “is the absolute integration... Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.”¹³⁴ For Adorno, absolute identity was achieved in the concentration camps, where the most particular aspects of individual experience – life and death – were quantified according to a system of identification.

What must be resisted, according to Adorno, on grounds that it is no longer morally tenable, is philosophy’s desire to remove itself from reality. It is no longer possible for philosophy to begin from a set of abstract, immutable ideas; for Adorno, thought does not emerge unscathed by the events of the Second World War. Modern philosophy is compelled by these events to reject the appeal to transcendent truth in traditional metaphysics and the corresponding assertion that there is higher meaning in this world. Instead, philosophy must turn to the somatic and material moment, to suffering: “The physical moment tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different.”¹³⁵ According to Adorno, such a moment must serve as a reminder not only that things should be different, but also that the traditional emphasis on rationality in metaphysics is culpable with respect to the war. Adorno explains:

The course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism. What the mind once boasted of defining or construing as its like moves in the direction of what is unlike the mind, in the

¹³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 362.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

direction of that which eludes the rule of the mind and yet manifests that rule as absolute evil.¹³⁶

For Adorno, one's very existence after the war calls for atonement, not simply because of the disproportion between the sheer number of victims and the small number of survivors. What Adorno describes as "the drastic guilt of him who was spared"¹³⁷ is the sense that simply by living one inevitably participates in the kind of reality that made Auschwitz possible in the first place. The cold, calculating processes of what Adorno describes as 'bourgeois rationality' have contributed to the development of a cold and calculating bourgeois subject who is inescapably responsible for the horrors of the war.¹³⁸ Every survivor, every individual, in other words, is interminably guilty and responsible for those others who did not survive. "This," writes Adorno, "nothing else, is what compels us to philosophize."¹³⁹

Identity-Thinking: Kant and Hegel

Much of Adorno's criticism – and reappraisal – of Enlightenment rationality derives from a critique of Kant and Hegel. Adorno frequently criticizes both philosophers for radicalizing identity-thinking through their respective systems. At the same time, Adorno's rereading of Kant and Hegel is central to his broader effort to salvage rationality from its instrumentalized fate. It is thus appropriate to spend some time considering Adorno's reading of their positions.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 365.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 363.

¹³⁸ Adorno, writing with Max Horkheimer, explains this link between identity-thinking and Fascism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as follows: "Objectifying (like sick) thought contains the despotism of the subjective purpose which is hostile to the thing and forgets the thing itself, thus committing the mental act of violence which is later put into practice. The unconditional realism of civilized humanity, which culminates in Fascism, is a special case of paranoiac delusion which dehumanizes nature and finally the nations themselves" (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 193).

¹³⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 364.

Kant argues in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that human knowledge of the world is conditioned by a set of transcendental, a priori categories. His self-described Copernican turn is based on a radically new approach to the problem of truth. Rather than assume as his starting point that a subject seeks to know the objective world as it actually is, Kant begins from the assumption that knowledge is strictly limited to the set ways in which subjects encounter the world. According to Kant, objects appear to the subject not as they are in themselves, but as mere representations created and unified in accordance with a priori forms of the mind. For this reason, even knowledge of nature is the result of universal and subjective conditions given prior to experience. Kant explains: “[T]he order and regularity in the appearances, which we entitle *nature*, we ourselves introduce. We could never find them in appearances, had not we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, originally set them there.”¹⁴⁰ Human knowledge, in other words, brackets the objective world as it is in-itself, and results instead from studying the ways in which the objective world is made to conform to a priori categories of thought. Knowledge is restricted to what has always already been constituted by irreducible subjective categories; it is limited to what can be filtered through a subject’s transcendental lens. Jay Bernstein nicely summarizes Kant’s position as follows: “Reason thus becomes the lawgiver to nature, providing the very idea of a natural, law-governed world.”¹⁴¹ For Kant, in other words, the transcendental structures of consciousness provide conditions for the very possibility of human knowledge of the world.

¹⁴⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) Ak. 125.

¹⁴¹ Jay Bernstein, “‘The Demand for Ugliness:’ Picasso’s Bodies” in *Art and Aesthetics After Adorno*, 212.

The noumenal realm, according to Kant's designation, or the realm of the thing-in-itself, consists of that which exceeds the confines of the subject's transcendental categories. The thing-in-itself remains absolutely beyond the subject's structured experience of the phenomenal world and thus does not in any way affect the ability to order the natural world according to transcendental categories. Adorno criticizes what he describes as a Kantian block on the noumenal realm as "peephole metaphysics;"¹⁴² Kant allows individuals to glimpse what is heterogeneous to their categorical knowledge only then to banish it again.

As we will see in his discussion of aesthetic experience, Adorno appreciates this division between the phenomenal and noumenal realms at the same time that he criticizes it. By blocking the realm of the in-itself Kant preserves its alterity, although he also prevents any possibility of reconciliation between the subject and her objective world. According to Adorno:

There is no peeping out. What would lie in the beyond makes its appearance only in the materials and categories within. This is where the truth and the untruth of Kantian philosophy divide. It is true in destroying the illusion of an immediate knowledge of the Absolute; it is untrue in describing this Absolute by a model that would correspond to an immediate consciousness.¹⁴³

Kant limits cognition to what it can *know* for certain, but in doing so he continues to support a form of rationality that takes domination over nature as its goal.

Central to Adorno's critical project is the belief that patterns of thought are inextricable from the historical, material conditions out of which they arise. As such, a pattern of domination in thought is mirrored by a pattern of domination in reality. In his essay "Subject and Object," Adorno draws a parallel between the Kantian imprisonment

¹⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 139.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 140.

of the subject within her own categories and “the real captivity of every individual”¹⁴⁴ in the late capitalist world. Adorno further explains what such an imprisonment entails in *Negative Dialectics*, where he argues that the impulse toward identification in Idealist thought is reflected in the reductive impulse of a capitalist system. He argues that philosophical Idealism has its social counterpart in a capitalist society, which reduces the labour of human beings to an abstract quantity for the purposes of exchange; on the market, “nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical.”¹⁴⁵ Adorno uses this comparison to demonstrate that Enlightenment philosophy, particularly as developed by Kant and Hegel, expresses the spirit of a capitalist society built around commodity exchange. Capitalist exchange removes any qualitative distinction between things by measuring everything according to the price a commodity can acquire on the market; totalizing philosophical thought is no different in its attempt to reduce objectivity – in all of its myriad particularity – to abstract projections of the mind.

The result of this impulse toward identity, when taken to the extreme, is a diminished experience of the objective world, and conversely, the diminished chance of attaining genuine freedom. Against Kant, Adorno reorients philosophy toward what cannot be reduced to the transcendental categories, toward precisely what Kant blocked off, which he describes as the nonidentical. As Adorno explains in *Negative Dialectics*, he is trying “by critical self-reflection to give the Copernican Revolution an axial turn.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, Adorno attempts to reorient philosophy toward what exceeds

¹⁴⁴ Theodor Adorno, “Subject and Object,” in *The Adorno Reader*, Brian O'Connor, ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000) 145.

¹⁴⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xx.

every attempt to categorize neatly human experience of the world. Adorno describes the inquiry into what goes beyond the identifying impulse as a negative dialectic. Negative dialectics counters identity-thinking by seeking out what exceeds every identification, and has as its end a social order that would not eliminate a qualitative exchange between individuals and the objective world of which they are a part.

In sum, Adorno equates identity-thinking with a desire to disenchant the world by reducing it to a framework set out by a rational subject. As a result of this critique of identity, Kant's block on the in-itself appeals to Adorno because it prevents what is unconditioned from being completely sacrificed to an audacious subjective gaze. At the same time, Adorno argues that the Kantian block misses something fundamental; what conditions subjective thought is precisely what exceeds it – the absolute, the nonidentical or the thing-in-itself – and thus it is not possible to divide so strictly the phenomenal from the noumenal realm. The result of Kant's block on the in-itself, for Adorno, is the reduction of the possibility of experience, which necessarily goes beyond the formal categories of the mind. "What the Kantian block projects on truth," Adorno explains, "is the self-maiming of reason, the mutilation reason inflicted upon itself as a rite of initiation into its own scientific character. Hence the scantiness of what happens in Kant as cognition, compared with the experience of the living..."¹⁴⁷

It is in Hegel's critique of Kant that Adorno finds a way out of the Kantian impasse, albeit with significant qualifications. Where Kant limits knowledge of the in-itself, Hegel allows for it by tracing the dialectical movement of consciousness from an early stage of immediacy to an eventual position of absolute knowledge. Central to Hegel's critique of Kant, then, is the recognition that a thinking subject does not simply

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 388.

accept the contradictions of dialectical reason as unsurpassable, but rather in recognizing them also transcends them and moves to a higher stage of thought. Much of Adorno's critique of identity-thinking derives from a reworking of Hegel's position into a negative version of itself, with the absolute (albeit an absolute no longer understood as knowledge) forestalled as opposed to achieved. As a means of clarifying the significant impact of Hegel on Adorno's negative dialectical approach, the following paragraphs will examine Hegel's method in more detail.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reveals how each concept, upon closer examination, is contradictory and must be modified. As concepts are scrutinized, Hegel writes in the Preface, their alleged identity with an object dissolves into contradiction. The "labour of the Notion"¹⁴⁸ is the effort required by the concept not to seek out the general properties of a given object, but rather to recognize the inadequacy of its own position. A dialectical movement results from this negative effort, wherein a given concept is revealed as contradictory and must then be overcome. Hegel names this process determinate negation, through which "a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation the transition is made through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself."¹⁴⁹ Adorno appreciates that for Hegel, each individual object, when analyzed, will necessarily become something other despite the identifying projections of the subject.¹⁵⁰

Adorno thus credits Hegel with recognizing that while it is in the nature of thought to identify what it encounters, it is also in the nature of thought to pursue the

¹⁴⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V Miller (Oxford [England]: Clarendon Press, 1977) 43.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 25.

contradictions inherent in these determinations. Adorno would like to preserve this aspect of the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “That Introduction bids us purely to observe each concept until it starts moving, until it becomes unidentical with itself by virtue of its own meaning – in other words, of its identity. This is a commandment to analyze, not to synthesize.”¹⁵¹ Negative dialectics would then break with the congealed concepts that compulsively seek identity, and discern nonidentity by way of identity. For Adorno, to think against thought in a negative dialectic is to follow Hegel in the pursuit of contradiction between subjective concepts and the objective world.

In his dialectic, Hegel makes a significant attempt to solve the Kantian block on the in-itself; Hegel, unlike Kant, recognizes that the subject is not separate from the objective world in-itself, but rather actively develops out of a social and historical relation with it. Put differently, Kant’s realm of the thing-in-itself, unknowable to the thinking subject, is in Hegel integral to the historical development of a given subject. Despite his dialectical insight, however, Hegel ultimately succumbs to the identity-thinking characteristic of Enlightenment philosophy. As Marx first recognized, Hegel’s error is that in the end he does not remain true to the negativity of his method, to the contradiction between what the subject posits and the objective world that escapes it. Hegel falsely synthesizes subject and object through the abstract, subjective principle of Spirit, which he must presuppose from the start of his analysis. Adorno explains this error as follows:

The thesis that the negation of a negation is something positive can only be upheld by one who presupposes positivity –as all-conceptuality – from the beginning... The negation of negation would be another identity, a

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 156.

new delusion, a projection of consequential logic – and ultimately of the principle of subjectivity – upon the absolute.¹⁵²

In other words, the synthesis achieved by Hegelian Spirit does not escape Adorno's criticism, which he also levels at Kant, that the Enlightenment subject takes its identifying capacity – built into our very conceptual forms – to such an extreme that all contradiction is ultimately suppressed. Furthermore, Adorno argues, following Marx, Hegel's positing of a unity between subject and object at the end of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is emphatically unreal; the particular material conditions of Hegel's world are in the end sacrificed in his dialectical pursuit of Absolute knowledge. Put simply, Hegel produces reconciliation in thought, but not in reality. He does an injustice to the objectivity he purports to save from Kant's uncompromising verdict by ultimately subordinating it to a subjective Idea.

Thus, in the end, Hegel does not break out of the traditional pattern of identity-thinking that, as we have seen, is inseparable from a pattern of domination in the actual world. Hegel's concept of spirit, which supposedly reconciles the subject with the objective world, is, given the events of WWII, made to seem ridiculous, and even, for Adorno, culpable. As we have already seen above, in the wake of these events, philosophy can no longer claim reconciliation between subject and object without a guilty conscience.

Adorno's concern in *Negative Dialectics* is to refashion Hegel's dialectical method into a more critical philosophical approach. Despite Hegel's flaws, Adorno's negative dialectic learns from Hegel to point beyond what is given to the particularities

¹⁵² Ibid., 160.

embedded within any experience of the objective world.¹⁵³ For Adorno, Hegel recognizes that upon examination, objective experience produces an “inward shudder”¹⁵⁴ or a restless motion that prevents it from being contained by a single identifying concept. The objective world cannot be categorized with certainty; rather, for the critical philosophers working in Hegel’s wake, subject and object are necessarily entwined in a shifting social and historical context. The object of study begins to move under the gaze of the philosopher, who is asked by Hegel to immerse herself completely in the phenomenon. As Adorno explains, “Hegel is able to think from the thing itself out, to surrender passively, as it were, to its authentic substance.”¹⁵⁵ Adorno’s negative dialectic similarly points beyond the temptation to settle for our initial categorizations to the excess yielded by any given experience of the objective world.¹⁵⁶

Rationality Redefined

Adorno’s critique of traditional philosophy begins with the radicalized identity-thinking evident in the work of thinkers such as Kant and Hegel, who both assume, in different ways, that it is possible to identify the objective world with categories of thought. However, there is something true about identity-thinking for Adorno, which is that the desire for identity is an inescapable aspect of all forms of thought. In using concepts, we necessarily subsume what is particular under a universal and thus miss the particular qualities of the phenomena we set out to explain. This identifying impulse

¹⁵³ Ibid., 149-50.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹⁵⁵ Theodor W Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993) 6.

¹⁵⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 149-50.

cannot be excised from thought: “To think is to identify.”¹⁵⁷ For Adorno, negative dialectics begins by working against this fundamental inadequacy of the conceptual form by seeking out, by contrast with traditional philosophy, what is inevitably missed by our attempts to understand – and thus unavoidably to categorize – the world around us.

To practice negative dialectics is to grant primacy to the nonidentical against the identifying impulse of thought; it is therefore to “think against our own thought.”¹⁵⁸ In doing so, negative dialectics heeds “the preponderance of the object.”¹⁵⁹ Part of the difficulty in observing this preponderance, for Adorno, is the risk of simply inverting the hierarchy between subject and object. As he puts it, the point is not “to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject.”¹⁶⁰ Rather, heeding the preponderance of the object, or actively capitulating to the phenomena under study, means that the thinker must pursue, unremittingly, what exceeds her identifications; this excess will appear as a remainder, or as what every concept misses in its classification of the world.

In ceding to the object in this way, negative dialectics inverts the traditional hierarchy that props up the thinking subject and downplays the moment of objective experience. Negative dialectics begins with the most concrete experience of the world, the historically and socially conditioned, with what exceeds the tidy packaging of conceptual thought. This excess, termed the heterogeneous or nonidentical by Adorno, reveals to us the inadequacy of attempts to understand our relation with the world and compels further reflection. “Dialectics,” according to Adorno, “is the consistent sense of

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

nonidentity.”¹⁶¹ The consistent failing of our concepts serves as a reminder to the subject that her knowledge of the world is not absolute. The resulting philosophy of the particular takes a “micrological view,” and “cracks the shell of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity.”¹⁶² Negative dialectics, in other words, must pursue knowledge with the utmost humility, beginning with what presents itself in its most mundane and diminutive form.

Adorno is unequivocal in *Negative Dialectics* that heeding the object’s preponderance is also a pursuit of the possibility of transformation, of utopia. Negative dialectics is the appropriate response to a reality that has pushed identity to its extreme; in heeding nonidentity, negative dialectics is identity’s antidote, but, significantly, Adorno writes that it would no longer be necessary in a transformed world. For Adorno, dialectics “is the ontology of the wrong state of things;”¹⁶³ the flipside is that “the right state of things would be free of it.”¹⁶⁴

Adorno writes of negative dialectics that “its form of hope”¹⁶⁵ is its incessant refusal to give into identity, to resist the temptation to assimilate what is nonidentical to the thinking subject. What negative dialectics may ‘hope’ for, however, is gestured toward only in the most reticent of ways in Adorno's writings. Adorno consistently emphasizes the possibility of a *reconciling* reason, which he implies would somehow transcend the subject-object dichotomy and thus also dialectics. Thierry De Duve argues that the concept of reconciliation, or ‘Versöhnung’ in German, is the word most “laden

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶² Ibid., 408.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 406.

with pathos”¹⁶⁶ in all of Adorno's philosophy. It has both religious and political undertones, implying a promise that retains the possibility of fulfillment at the same time that it has been betrayed.¹⁶⁷ Adorno is careful to distinguish this repeated call for ‘reconciliation’ from the ‘identity’ pursued by traditional philosophy. Reconciliation presents what reason ought to strive for but also what instrumental rationality has successfully repressed.

Because such a possibility of transcendence is remote, dialectics only goes so far. Negative dialectics can only express what is *missing* from this reality by consistently acknowledging the preponderance of the nonidentical without saying positively what that missing thing is. It would be a mistake, however, to stop here and read Adorno's project as thoroughly negative. Rather, for Adorno it is essential that a horizon of possibility be maintained. Negative dialectics, as well as art, which we will turn to in the coming chapters, are driven by the possibility of a different world, within which the subject could be reconciled with the objective world without domination. This redemptive horizon within Adorno's writings is not simply an idea, endlessly deferred; it represents a concrete, historical possibility that material conditions can change, and that the needless suffering and reduction of experience in the current reality can disappear. According to Adorno's argument, to give up this concrete possibility of transformation is to treat the

¹⁶⁶ Thierry De Duve, “Resisting Adorno, Revamping Kant,” in *Art and Aesthetics After Adorno*, 254.

¹⁶⁷ De Duve, 254. De Duve takes issue with the starkness of Adorno's alternative, between preserving the possibility of ultimate redemption or acceptance of the status quo. As De Duve puts it, “since no one but the most naïve optimist will place bets on global redemption, what remains is global despair in the name of global redemption”(260). While de Duve raises an important issue, I argue here that it is precisely the severity of Adorno's position that makes it fruitful for rethinking ethics from the perspective of the whole and not simply from the perspective of particular, ‘local’ change. While De Duve seeks an alternative to Adorno in a reworking of Kant's transcendental subjectivity, my interest is to push Adorno's theory further by considering his ethical imperative in light of his aesthetic theory. My hope is that this will help to inform our understanding of artistic practice and experience in a larger sense. The difference between my own position and that of De Duve's will be taken up again in Chapter Five.

historical situation of late capitalism as inevitable and as essentially unchangeable. To do so would render the function of critique a mere tweaking of the current conditions without any hope of transforming them. Without this horizon of possible transcendence, in other words, Adorno's philosophy remains negative and loses much of its critical force.

By positioning himself against the possibility of reconciliation, however distant, Adorno provides the clearest indication of a Levinasian ethical concern. I follow here Raymond Geuss's position that while Adorno espouses a number of ethical values such as freedom and happiness, he rejects the traditional approach to ethics as a set of rules which determine how rational human beings ought to behave. For this reason, Adorno, like many philosophers of the twentieth century (Benjamin, Heidegger and Bergson to name a few), falls "outside ethics."¹⁶⁸ And yet, despite his being 'outside ethics,' Adorno's emphasis on suffering and on guilt, on freedom and happiness, places him in a tradition of thinkers including Levinas who are concerned with transforming social life for the better.

In the following chapters, I would like to continue this discussion of reconciliation, with its echo of Levinasian ethics, within the purview of Adorno's aesthetic theory. I will demonstrate that the artwork for Adorno produces an experience of reconciliation quite different from the experience of reconciliation in negative dialectics. And while Adorno's treatment of the possibility of reconciliation in his writings on art is still hesitant and minimal, I argue that it is here that Adorno and Levinas come closest together. When read alongside one another, as they will be in the coming chapters, it is possible to expand Adorno's aesthetics to include an ethical dimension and to expand Levinas's ethics to include the aesthetic.

¹⁶⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005) 2.

Levinas

In response to the question of “whether we are not duped by morality,”¹⁶⁹ with which he opens his text *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers a radical reassessment of Western philosophy. Levinas demonstrates how this philosophy has consistently placed knowledge before ethics; totality before infinity; the Same before the Other. According to Levinas, philosophy ensures that any experience of exteriority, no matter how other, does not destabilize the subject in her quest for truth. For Levinas, philosophical reflection is an Odyssean journey, circling back on itself. In philosophy, the person rediscovers, through even the most violent encounters with what is other, what it always already knew. According to Levinas, “Anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mould of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise.”¹⁷⁰ Like Adorno, Levinas cites Hegel as a radical example of this tendency; Hegel’s subject, after completing a dialectical process of coming to know the world, finds itself in a position of absolute knowledge. The infinite, in this context, is not encountered by the subject, but is rather an all-encompassing Idea with which the subject ultimately coincides. The actions of Odysseus and Narcissus reverberate in an ego that remains untouched by the other and integrates what is other into the same. “Philosophy,” according to Levinas, “is an egology.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 99.

¹⁷¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44. For a more detailed discussion of the figure of Odysseus as exemplary of modern rationality and subjectivity in Levinas’s writings as well as in Adorno’s collaboration with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Orietta Ombrosi, *The Twilight of Reason: Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer and Levinas, Tested by the Catastrophe*, trans. Victoria Aris. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012) 13-28. Ombrosi unites Levinas with Adorno and Horkheimer through their common

At a diagnostic level, Levinas's critique of Western philosophy echoes Adorno's own in significant ways. Levinas shares with Adorno a suspicion of identity-thinking in the history of Western thought, although Levinas does not name it such: identity-thinking, the tendency of the thinking subject to reduce the objective world to its categories, is in Levinasian terms to reduce the Other to the Same. As we have already seen, the main thrust of Adorno's critique is the radical manifestation of identity-thinking within Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, a manifestation whose counterpart has been the gradual erosion of our receptivity to the irreducible aspects of objective experience. The nonidentical, according to Adorno, is ultimately sacrificed to a bid for identity that has become totalizing. Using different terms and addressing a different set of interlocutors, Levinas nonetheless acknowledges a very similar problem. Levinas criticizes Western philosophy for its repeated reduction of the Other to the Same. Levinas, like Adorno, sees this reductive tendency as having real implications of violence in the world, and shares the belief that Auschwitz – for Levinas, “the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering”¹⁷² – necessitates a radical reappraisal of the Western philosophical tradition.

Where Levinas and Adorno diverge is in their respective strategies for grappling with this problem in Western thought. For Adorno, it is within and against dialectics that an alternative can be found, in a negative dialectics that consistently interrupts the concept's subsumptive logic. For Levinas, by contrast, what undermines totality is what always already conditions and precedes it: the relation with Otherness in the face-to-face

experience of the trauma of World War II, which for all three thinkers was seen to produce an irreparable rupture in the history of Western thought.

¹⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 97.

relation. In other words, Levinas responds to the reductive circularity of philosophy not by thinking *against* thought, as Adorno does, but by recognizing how the irreducible relationship between Same and Other is an ethical relation always already presupposed by philosophical endeavors.

What is overlooked, and forgotten, by Western philosophy, according to Levinas, is recognition that the ethical relation is the condition upon which philosophical reflection, including ontology, is possible in the first place. The consequences of this memory lapse extend beyond the boundaries of philosophy, and, as we have seen, Levinas does not hesitate to equate war and tyranny with totalizing thought. Opposed to a political system that levels individuality for the sake of a common law, to a history that subsumes the inimitability of life under a neutral gaze, to an egoist subject seemingly freed of the demands of alterity, Levinas expresses that ethics is the condition for philosophy and politics. Levinas accomplishes a radical inversion of the totality of traditional philosophy, exposing the ethical relation with the Other as the foremost experience of all human beings, and as the sole antidote for the hubris currently passing as morality.

The paragraphs below unpack Levinas's position in more detail and keep to a similar structure as the section on Adorno above. I begin by explaining Levinas's critique of the history of philosophy, focusing primarily on his reworking of Husserl and Heidegger, and follow this with an examination of Levinas's reorientation of philosophy toward the ethical relation. My goal in outlining the positions of each thinker in detail is to provide a framework for my argument in the following chapters that Adorno and

Levinas, read together, generate an entirely unique approach to the question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

Husserl and Heidegger

Like Adorno, Levinas develops his own position within and against certain trends in the history of philosophy. For Levinas, the philosophical approach to be reckoned with most closely is phenomenology, particularly that of Husserl and Heidegger. It is thus necessary to spend some time outlining their impact on his thought.

One of the most significant contributions by Husserl, for Levinas, is his account of consciousness as intentionality. What Husserl means by intentionality is that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, or that consciousness intends something outside of itself; perception in consciousness is perception of a perceived, desire is desire for a desired, and so on. The very phenomenon of producing meaning in consciousness, in other words, is inseparable from the object intended by that consciousness. Significantly, for Levinas, Husserlian consciousness acts to bestow meaning in ways that are not limited to theoretical intentionality, but include also the affective acts of desire and feeling, perception and will. By acknowledging the importance of nontheoretical intentionality or by, as Levinas puts it, “[r]ecalling the obscured intentions of thought.”¹⁷³ Husserl radically breaks from the traditional privileging of knowledge in philosophical thought and retrieves forgotten ways of signifying the world. Husserl’s influence on Levinas’s phenomenological description of the affective aspects of ethical experience cannot be overstated.

¹⁷³ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 31.

Where Levinas breaks with Husserl is in his overemphasis on representation in the phenomenological account of consciousness. In “The Work of Edmund Husserl” (1940), Levinas demonstrates that while Husserl redeems for philosophy a number of neglected forms of consciousness, he nonetheless grounds all forms of intentionality in a larger framework that remains, at its core, intellectual. As Levinas demonstrates, to have meaning for Husserlian consciousness is the same thing as to be identified; in other words, consciousness constitutes the meaning of its object through a process of identification. Echoing Adorno's correlation between identity and thought explored above, Levinas explains his critique of Husserl as follows: “For Husserl to think is to identify... The intentionality of consciousness is the fact that across the multiplicity of mental life there can be found an ideal entity, the synthesis of which the multiplicity does nothing more than bring about.”¹⁷⁴ In making identification the basis for all forms of intentionality, Husserl ends up privileging the theoretical over other modes of signification. He likewise gives identification primacy over the multiplicity that exceeds it and thereby does not completely break from the totalizing impulse of the epistemological tradition.

Despite this reduction to identity, however, Husserl's account of intentionality allows us to imagine horizons of meaning that cannot be fully identified by consciousness. It is partly out of this reading of Husserl's phenomenology that Levinas is

¹⁷⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Work of Edmund Husserl,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, ed. Richard A Cohen (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 59.

able to forge his own notion of alterity, albeit a notion grounded not in the epistemological relation but in the encounter with the ethical.¹⁷⁵

It is in Heidegger that Levinas first finds a pathway for phenomenology beyond Husserl's approach. Levinas admits that Heidegger, more than any thinker prior to him, shares many of his concerns, despite Levinas's profound reservations toward Heidegger after his complicity with Nazism during WWII.¹⁷⁶ Levinas deems Heidegger's *Being and Time* to be one of the "finest books in the history of philosophy"¹⁷⁷ and describes Heidegger's thought as "a great event of [the twentieth] century."¹⁷⁸

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger expands Husserl's phenomenology to include a number of nontheoretical intentions such as care and anxiety. "Henceforth," writes Levinas, "the comprehension of being does not presuppose a merely theoretical attitude but the whole of human comportment."¹⁷⁹ Heidegger thereby grounds philosophy not in theoretical intentionality but in a fundamental ontology concerned with an existential analysis of beings engaged in a world. Heidegger's biggest insight for Levinas is his recognition that any understanding of a particular being presupposes emergence within a larger horizon of being. Human beings and objective phenomena in general *are* or appear in the world only as a result of the active disclosure of Being. Correlatively, the meaning of Being is only accessible to the being that inquires after it, and thus philosophy must

¹⁷⁵ The introduction by Richard A. Cohen to *Discovering Existence with Husserl* has been particularly helpful in elucidating the relationship between Levinas and Husserl. See Richard A. Cohen, "Introduction," in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, xiii to xviii.

¹⁷⁶ While Levinas's critique of Heidegger is primarily on a philosophical level, Levinas does argue that Heidegger's thinking leaves him unable to grapple with the problem of ethics, or more particularly, of evil. For an interesting discussion of Levinas's critique of Heidegger, see Richard Bernstein, "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 261-262.

¹⁷⁷ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 37.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 3.

begin with an existential analysis of human beings. Levinas appreciates in Heidegger this reinterpretation of *being* as a verb, wherein Being connotes an active event. In Heidegger, beings now comprehend the world within a larger event of Being; ontic truth is made subordinate to ontology.

Despite his appreciation for these aspects of Heidegger's thought, Levinas argues that Heidegger nonetheless subordinates particular to universal like the traditional metaphysics that he criticizes. Heidegger simply reveals what comprehension has always already presupposed: the openness of Being within which particular beings appear. Levinas explains this problem in Heidegger as follows: "Hence our concrete existence is interpreted as a function of its entry into the 'openness' of being in general. We exist in a circuit of understanding with reality. Understanding is the very event that existence articulates. All non-comprehension is only a deficient mode of comprehension."¹⁸⁰ Thus, Heidegger's ontology does not succeed in its critique of traditional knowledge and Heidegger is guilty of an intellectualism far worse than Husserl's; Heidegger remains within the identifying logic that he, as well Levinas, recognizes as a fundamental difficulty plaguing Western thought. Levinas nicely sums up his own position relative to Heidegger in the following passage:

When Heidegger traces the way of access to each real singularity through Being, which is not a particular being nor a genus in which all the particulars would enter, but is rather the very act of being which the verb to be, and not the substantive, expresses... he leads us to the singularity across a Neuter which illuminates and commands thought and renders intelligible. When he sees man possessed by freedom rather than possessing freedom, he puts over man a Neuter which illuminates freedom without putting it in question. And thus he is not destroying but summing up a whole current of Western philosophy.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 100-101.

According to Levinas, then, Heidegger does not dethrone the primacy of knowledge in traditional metaphysics but rather reinforces it. For Levinas, what is irreducible to comprehension is not Being but alterity. And alterity is precisely what Heidegger's fundamental ontology does not allow. Heidegger's ontology overlooks the primacy of the ethical relation, a relation that in its basic *asymmetry* refuses even the possibility of comprehension. There is nothing in Heidegger outside the closed dialogue between Being and beings; all particular beings, no matter how unique, are unified in their shared emergence within a horizon of Being. Singularity, in other words, is swallowed up by a universal and thus Heidegger, like Husserl before him, does not escape what Levinas describes as a philosophy of the Same.¹⁸²

Alterity

As early as his dissertation in 1930, Levinas began sketching out his own metaphysics of the Other against both Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology. Levinas unfolds a philosophy of alterity, wherein the individual's yearning to subsume the world under universal concepts is punctuated by the irreducible otherness, or *infinity*, of the Other human being. Beginning from his readings of Heidegger and Husserl, Levinas explains, phenomenologically, a subject who lives, thinks, comprehends, enjoys, a world and yet who also presupposes and is conditioned by an experience of absolute alterity. The substance of this relation between a separated ego,

¹⁸² I am very much indebted to Adriaan Peperzak for clarifying Levinas's complex relationship to Heidegger and Husserl. In particular, I relied on Peperzak's book *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, as well as the following article: Adrian Peperzak, "Phenomenology — Ontology — Metaphysics: Levinas' Perspective on Husserl and Heidegger," *Man and World* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 1983): 113–27.

with myriad and complex layers of subjectivity, and alterity is the central concern of all of Levinas's works. As we have already seen, the Other in Levinas cannot emerge within Husserlian phenomenology, which ultimately reduces even non-theoretical intentionality to representation; nor did Levinas think it possible for the Other to emerge within Heidegger's ontology of Being, which neutralizes the uniqueness of the 'I' by placing it within a wider ontology of Being. According to Levinas, the Other and the Same are not members of a shared ontological horizon, nor is the Other amenable to the identifying acts of consciousness. Only the Other in the ethical relation is irreducible to comprehension and thus capable of pushing beyond the boundaries of traditional metaphysics.

Levinas develops his account of the ethical relation against the traditional pursuit of truth in Western philosophy. For Levinas, philosophy's quest for truth is a seeking of both comprehension and possession. As such, philosophy is inseparable from power. "To possess is, to be sure, to maintain the reality of this other one possessed, but to do so while suspending its independence."¹⁸³ In the case of the ethical relation, however, the freedom of an individual is thoroughly questioned by an Other and revealed to be unjustified. In the ethical relation, the ego does not return to itself because it finds that it cannot assimilate this Other; the priority of Same over Other collapses as a result. "The human only presents itself," writes Levinas, "to a relation that is not a power."¹⁸⁴ For Levinas, the presence of the Other person fundamentally disturbs the egology at the heart of Western philosophy which he has taken pains to describe. Philosophy, as a result, is radically transformed.

¹⁸³ Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," 98.

¹⁸⁴ Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, 10.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents the ethical relation as a condition for the experience of the individual in his or her everyday life. The paradox of the ethical relation is that we, as subjects, have always already undergone an encounter with the Other. I experience myself as unique and separated, as an ego encountering a world, but paradoxically, this experience is possible only because of a previous encounter with alterity. The ego thus realizes the ethical relation as antecedent only after the fact, or *posteriorly*, through recollection. “The posteriority of the anterior – an inversion logically absurd – is produced, one would say, only by memory or by thought.”¹⁸⁵ In other words, though the ego has always already been called to responsibility by the Other, phenomenologically speaking, this encounter occurs only after the fact. Against Heidegger’s conception of Being-in-the-world, the ‘I’, according to Levinas, emerges as a social creature, subject to the call of the Other, and as egocentric, engaging with the world in a multiplicity of ways and heedless of this ethical call. For the ‘I’ has forgotten this initial encounter with alterity: for this reason, Levinas begins *Totality and Infinity* with the ego in its separated sphere, closed to the ethical relation. Levinas analyzes this “interval of separation,”¹⁸⁶ or realm of totality, through the lens of phenomenology, abstracting the various experiences of the ‘I’ in the world from the encounter with the Other, beginning with the experience of an ego *enjoying* life, living from it, dwelling in it, and ultimately, representing it in thought. Levinas’s description of the ego’s economy is a necessary abstraction from “concrete man”¹⁸⁷ because it reveals how the ego is able to recognize its ethical responsibility to the Other human being. As we shall see, only an ‘I’ who has the capacity to withdraw into itself, atheistic and separated, disinterested and

¹⁸⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 54.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

self-involved, can “turn to what it does not lack:”¹⁸⁸ the ethical call of the Other human being.

What renders Levinas’s analysis in *Totality and Infinity* unique is its characterization of the ethical, which he describes here as infinite, or as absolutely other to this separated ego. A person can choose to seal herself off from this experience of the Other, as it is not necessary for – even though it conditions – life, politics, or philosophical thought. Levinas writes: “The forgetting of transcendence is not produced as an accident in a separated being; the possibility of this forgetting is necessary for separation.”¹⁸⁹ An image used by Levinas to describe this forgetting is the ego closing its doors and windows; another is the figure of Gyges, whose ring allows him “to see without being seen”¹⁹⁰ and thus evade responsibility. Levinas writes: “Gyges is the very condition of man, the possibility of injustice and radical egoism, the possibility of accepting the rules of the game, but cheating.”¹⁹¹ However, for Levinas, if each ‘I’ were not unique, and completely formed unto itself, independent and withdrawn, they would be subsumed under a general concept of ‘human being’ or ‘person’ or ‘Dasein’, and thus the alterity of the Other could not be preserved. Only an ‘I’ who has the capacity to withdraw into itself, atheistic and separated, disinterested and self-involved, can allow its propensity toward totality to be broken by the demands of infinity and justice.

The relation with the Other, for Levinas, is first and foremost a relation with an otherness that cannot be thematized. The other person is always beyond my grasp; in speaking to a person, I acknowledge her independence from my concepts and –

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 173.

significant in its difference from Heidegger's ontology – as independent even from her status as a being. In an early essay on the primacy of the ethical relation over ontology, Levinas writes that in the ethical relation, “I am not only thinking that the Other is, I am speaking to the Other... I have spoken to the Other, that is to say, I have neglected the universal being that the Other incarnates in order to remain with the particular being that he or she is.”¹⁹² Levinas is careful to distinguish the speech, or *expression*, unique to the encounter with the other human being (with his or her face) from the relation with things. When I approach a thing, even if I do so in a nontheoretical way, the thing nonetheless appears to me in such a way that I can possess it, or use it. To be given as a thing, according to Levinas, “is to be exposed to the ruse of the understanding, to be caught up in the mediation of a concept and the light of being in general.”¹⁹³ Conversely, even when I attempt to comprehend another person, to thematize them in some way, the expression unique to the encounter with the face of the other has always already happened. And this encounter makes comprehension and possession impossible. The “event of sociality,”¹⁹⁴ as Levinas describes it, takes precedence over knowledge.

Levinas returns again and again to two instances in the history of philosophy where the priority of alterity asserts itself: Plato's characterization of the Good, or ‘beyond being’, and the idea of the Infinite in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In these moments, philosophy is the movement toward what is not familiar, toward an exteriority that is transcendent and heteronomous.¹⁹⁵ In Plato, the Good is that which exceeds totality; it is what cannot be reduced to the knowing subject. According to

¹⁹² Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental,” 125.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹⁵ Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” 88-91.

Levinas, “Plato nowise deduces being from the Good: he posits transcendence as surpassing the totality.”¹⁹⁶ The Good, as the ‘beyond being’, patterns itself on desire – insatiable, intensifying with every encounter – as opposed to the finite, satiable character of need. This distinction between need and desire is fundamental to Levinas’s own distinction between totality and infinity, the latter as being utterly transcendent with respect to being.

Levinas also finds in Descartes’s *Meditations* an expression of absolute alterity, in the Descartes’s idea of the infinite, or God. In this text, Descartes describes the idea of the Infinite as that which surpasses any attempt by the subject to think it. Levinas describes the idea of the Infinite in Descartes as a “presence... in a soul too small to contain it.”¹⁹⁷ Above all, what makes Descartes so significant for Levinas is his recognition at the end of the *Meditations* that the thinking subject can never *know* the infinite but must be content simply to contemplate its radical otherness. The Infinite is not knowledge here, threatening to absorb the subject or limit it, but is rather something the subject ‘submits’ to. As Levinas explains: “A thought thinking more than it thinks or a thought that, in thinking, does better than think, since it finds itself to be already responsible for the other, whose mortality – and consequently whose life – regards me.”¹⁹⁸ Levinas, building on Descartes’s idea of Infinity, characterizes the Infinite as an original call to responsibility that conditions and precedes the relation of knowledge, that reveals knowledge to be presupposed by the realm of ethics. This attitude toward alterity,

¹⁹⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 103.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

as a radical submission to an Infinity that literally *affects* it, becomes for Levinas the foundation for the ethical relation between Same and Other.

Levinas employs these examples of alterity in Plato and Descartes in order to highlight the absolute separation of the 'I' and the Other, which is necessary for a true encounter with the Other to occur. If the 'I' and the Other were two parts of a logical or dialectical relation, then it would not be possible to introduce an idea of Infinity, as absolutely exterior, into the mind of the subject. By asserting the experience of absolute alterity as presupposed by the dialectical relation, Levinas's account of transcendence in the ethical relation seems to complicate any comparison with Adorno's negative dialectics. Negative dialectics, as we have seen, emphatically refuses to sketch out what may transcend the current reality, and seeks instead to subject this reality to the most careful critique. At the same time, in certain passages, Adorno clearly retains a notion of transcendence, although he gestures toward it only in the most minimal of ways. I argue in later chapters that it is in Adorno's minimal gesture toward transcendence, which gains particular significance in his writings on art, that a latent ethics can be found.¹⁹⁹

Conclusion

¹⁹⁹ In my focus on aesthetics, I differ from the work of two other scholars who have examined the role of transcendence in Levinas and Adorno, Asher Horowitz and Carl B. Sachs. Sachs argues that both Adorno and Levinas demand that ethics be rethought after Auschwitz, and that such a rethinking of ethics relies on a notion of transcendence which counters that of theodicy (see Carl Sachs, "The Acknowledgement of Transcendence: Anti-Theodicy in Adorno and Levinas"). Horowitz approaches the question of transcendence rather differently, arguing that it is only in reading Levinas's ethical relation side by side with Adorno's negative dialectic that each thinker's position on transcendence can be fully understood (See Asher Howoritz, "'By a Hair's Breadth': Critique, Transcendence and the Ethical in Adorno and Levinas," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 28, no. 2 (2002): 213–48. Both of these positions will be considered in more detail in Chapter Four.

The above examination of Adorno and Levinas suggests significant parallels between Adorno and Levinas, particularly in their respective critiques of identity and totality and in their equation of traditional philosophical thought with concrete forms of tyranny and domination. Part of the reason for this ultimate convergence is their shared desire to criticize the tendency to reduce what is wholly other to a theoretical absolute. As we have seen, Adorno describes this tendency as the striving for identity by thought, which for him reaches its apex in the dialectical synthesis achieved by Hegel in the final pages of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Taking this work by Hegel as a seminal instance of identity-thinking, Adorno concentrates his own critical philosophy on the task of revealing both the destructive implications of the Hegelian synthesis and the otherness that this synthesis leaves out. In order to achieve this, Adorno remains faithful to dialectics, with the crucial caveat, however, that his dialectical thought remain negative and without foreseeable synthesis in any kind of third term. Where he converges with Levinas is in his characterization of otherness as that which cannot be pinned down by any concept, idea or thought. Otherness, for Adorno, is the irreducible particular, a material experience of otherness that heretofore has been ignored by philosophy. The only way to respect such otherness is to recognize, in thought, thinking's consistent *failure* to thematize it. I will demonstrate in Chapters Three and Four that Adorno's negative dialectic escapes Levinas's critique of dialectics as inevitably totalizing.

Despite the similarity of their criticisms, however, differences between Levinas and Adorno must nonetheless be respected. Adorno's choice of negative dialectics, even with its emphasis on the non-identical, remains problematic within the purview of Levinas's thought. For Levinas, the relation between Same and Other is fundamentally

asymmetrical. Dialectics, by the very nature of the procedure, does not allow for absolute alterity in the way that Levinas describes it. Even in a *negative* dialectics, subject and object form part of a symmetrical relation because a synthesis, no matter how remote, is nonetheless possible.

Furthermore, Adorno's choice of a negative dialectic reveals his extreme reticence on the question of an ethical alternative to the current system. With the exception of a few scattered passages, Adorno does not present in positive terms what reconciliation may look like. By contrast, Levinas is quite clear on at least how to approach such a question; to counter the hypostasization of totality one must begin by acknowledging ethics as first philosophy. These differences between the two thinkers are in many ways insurmountable.

Nonetheless, despite these differences, I have argued in the above chapter that Levinas and Adorno share a commitment to finding an ethical alternative to the approach of traditional philosophy, however different this alternative may be. As we will see in the coming chapters, Adorno finds the most significant realm of possibility in modern art. The question that guides the remainder of this dissertation is why two thinkers, who share a critique of totality and a desire for an ethical interruption of that totality, would diverge so dramatically on the question of art. By reading the two together, however, it is clear that this divergence is not as radical as it at first seems. Embedded in Levinas's ethics as first philosophy is a latent aesthetics that Levinas himself never developed, but which can be drawn out using Adorno's writings on art; likewise in Adorno's aesthetics there is a latent ethics that can only be clarified with the help of Levinas's writings on the ethical relation.

Chapter Three: The Work of Art as Complex Totality

This chapter returns to the issue raised in Chapter One, regarding Levinas's deep suspicion of the completed quality of artistic works. I have taken pains to distinguish between Levinas's early, less sympathetic view of art and his later allowance that art does, in some cases, produce an expression akin to the ethical Saying. Nonetheless, his later view in no way endorses a straightforward linkage between art and ethics. Levinas's unwavering hesitation with respect to the aesthetic is made explicit in a late interview with Edith Wyschogrod, in 1982. In response to a question posed by Wyschogrod on whether art, especially contemporary art, is capable of putting ontology into question – in other words, of contributing to a project of reestablishing ethics as first philosophy – Levinas reaffirms his earlier view from “Reality and its Shadow”:

There is goodness in beauty, and there is certainly an idolatrous moment in art, I think. The idolatrous moment is very strong. [Or], if you will, in the end the good that is in it is absorbed by the form. I wrote something some time ago, “Reality and its Shadow”, where this is very clear. One experiences the accommodation in resemblance, in form. It remains a moment, but at the same time it is necessary to complete it [the form].²⁰⁰

Levinas here attributes to art the two opposed moments of ‘goodness’ and idolatry, and in so doing he continues to uphold a division between the ethical and the work of art.²⁰¹ On the one hand, ‘there is goodness in beauty’; on the other hand, art has a very strong ‘idolatrous moment’ because as an object it is necessarily a formed, completed whole. In other words, we are led to believe that while there is an ethical moment in art, this

²⁰⁰ Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, 293.

²⁰¹ Levinas's conflation in this passage, and in the lines preceding it, of art with the ‘beautiful’ and with ‘beauty’ will be problematized in Chapter Four.

moment will always be cut short by the closure inherent to artistic form. Put differently, by making ethics and aesthetics two *moments* of art, Levinas ascribes to artworks a certain temporality, as though there is first an ethical moment which is “in the end”²⁰² superseded by a moment of completion, or by aesthetic form. The temporal logic of Levinas’s analysis ensures that both the moment of goodness and the moment of completion cannot exist simultaneously,²⁰³ at the same time that it reveals a certain anxiety on Levinas’s part with respect to art.

Levinas’s answer to Wyschogrod’s question of whether art allows us to throw ontology into question, then, is an emphatic no. Works of art do not truly criticize the totalizing structures of ontology because, as emblematic of completion, they participate in totality and cannot succeed in pushing beyond it. Part of what prevents Levinas from thinking the ethical and the aesthetic together is his insistence that, as totalities, artworks cannot also be ethical. This either/or conception of artworks misses the complexity of aesthetic totality, which, I argue below, has both an aesthetic and a transcendent dimension. As we know, Levinas did not provide a worked out aesthetic theory nor was he concerned with developing one, despite the longstanding interest in art evident from his numerous philosophical texts. It is my view – as we have seen in the Introduction, a view shared by many Levinas scholars interested in a correlation between aesthetics and ethics – that this omission means that one must look beyond his writings for a supplement to his ethical philosophy. One such supplement, a particularly fruitful one, can be found

²⁰² Wyschogrod, 293.

²⁰³ Levinas also employs the word ‘accommodation’ to describe the ethical in this statement, as though the ethical is a kind of space opened up by art. While Levinas ultimately treats this ethical accommodation as a moment to be subsumed by aesthetic form, his use of a spatial metaphor to describe ethics betrays a more Adornian notion of the artwork as a space within which alterity occurs. It is much easier to think art and transcendence simultaneously when the latter is described in terms of ‘accommodation’ than when it is described in terms of a fleeting ‘moment’ to be overcome.

in Adorno's writings on aesthetics. What is useful about Adorno's aesthetic theory for my purposes here is his claim that works of art have the power to question ontology, to use Wyschogrod's phrase, precisely *because* they are totalities. Adorno treats artworks as complex totalities that consistently transcend the closure of their form, which allows us to push beyond Levinas's limited conception of artworks as necessarily exclusive of transcendence. And while Adorno's view of transcendence – here presented as a forceful experience of what could be other than the status quo – and Levinas's differ in significant ways,²⁰⁴ I think it is nonetheless possible to use Adorno's theory of the artwork as a complex totality to complicate Levinas's outright dismissal of art's ethical import on formal grounds. Put simply, in the face of Adorno's aesthetic theory, Levinas's straightforward dichotomy between goodness and artistic idolatry begins to strain.

In this chapter, I present Adorno's argument in *Aesthetic Theory* that artworks inevitably transcend the boundaries of their form, or, to put it in terms that resonate with Levinas, that artworks are both totalizing and non-totalizing at the same time. One moment need not supersede the other. Adorno agrees with Levinas that essential to a work of art is its structure of completion, but he goes further than Levinas in attributing to it a power to interrupt the attempt at totalizing meaning; a work of art is, despite its closure, thoroughly unresolved. There are in Adorno at least two ways of understanding the artwork as a complex totality. One is at the level of interpretation, which includes not just the interpretation of specific artworks but also the discourse of aesthetics in general. According to Adorno, an artwork, despite presenting itself as a closed form, at the same time thoroughly eludes exhaustive meaning. Adorno's term for this is riddle, which becomes a model for how a critical interpretation of artworks ought to proceed. I address

²⁰⁴ I address this difference in Chapter Five.

this concept of riddle in the first section below.

Adorno also presents the artwork as a complex totality from the perspective of artistic production; in the second section below, I demonstrate how for Adorno an artwork is both a humanly made thing and yet also more than just a thing by virtue of a mimetic impulse. In other words, there is a technical, formed quality to any work, but this quality is also mediated, dialectically, by an inherently non-totalizing element of mimesis or expression. To put my argument in more general terms, this chapter takes as its focus the artwork as a complex totality, in order to rethink what I perceive as a limitation in Levinas's approach to works of art.

Before moving on to the ways in which complex totality emerges as a theme within Adorno's aesthetics, I would like to step back for a moment and consider Adorno's broader attempt to reconfigure the approach of aesthetic theory. The simultaneity of closure and irresolution characteristic of artworks is performed by the text of *Aesthetic Theory* itself. Though unfinished – Adorno died while completing the final revisions – the text, as he left it, still captures what Adorno envisioned as a necessary approach to the subject of aesthetics. The particular artwork cannot be interpreted using a traditional, argumentative structure, but rather its interpretation must proceed by way of constellations. Martin Jay explains the constellation as follows: “A juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle.”²⁰⁵ By choosing to write in constellation form, Adorno accepts that there is no stable starting point or first principle from which to proceed. The constellation is humble in its ambition not to exhaust reality but to allow what exceeds cognition to be heard; by circling the object of cognition in a series of

²⁰⁵ Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984) 14-15.

concepts, the constellation registers that the object extends beyond the possibilities of what can be said about it. Adorno demonstrates in the very form of *Aesthetic Theory* that artworks are *particular* closed structures, and thus invariably resist totalizing interpretation despite being totalities themselves. Any attempt to interpret an art object must acknowledge the impossibility of comprehending, exhaustively, this object's meaning; the interpreter of art must settle instead on a series of gestures, crystallized in a constellation, that cannot be reduced to one single idea. As Adorno mused during the course of writing *Aesthetic Theory*, there can be no first principle on a subject that eludes totalizing definition. On the difficulties of presenting such a subject, Adorno writes that it is impossible to organize the book in a traditional way, with chapters logically following from one another: “[T]he book must, so to speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation.”²⁰⁶ The text must, in other words, mimic the artwork of which it speaks; just as the work of art fundamentally eludes a single, unified meaning, so must its philosophical interpretation.

What follows in this chapter is a more detailed account of how the artwork produces this unique resistance to totality while nonetheless presenting itself as a closed form. I have tried to respect as much as possible Adorno's refusal of a traditional argument structure, and thus present his position on aesthetic totality through a series of concepts that form a constellation around the artwork rather than define it through a succession of logical ideas. The first section, on riddle, expands on Adorno's view of artworks as essentially resistant to totalizing interpretation. I follow this with a more

²⁰⁶ Quoted in “Editors’ Afterword,” in Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 462.

technical discussion of *how* the work of art, which Adorno breaks down into its two component parts of mimesis and technique, is capable of pushing beyond totalizing meaning. In other words, I address how an artwork, as a completed whole, is able to accommodate elements that point beyond it, or to put in Adornian terms, to create a space out of which something mimetic can emerge. In presenting these concepts from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, I intend to problematize Levinas's one-sided account of the artwork as a totality ultimately preclusive of ethical expression. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that Levinas's rather reductive view of the artwork can, when read alongside Adorno, be made to overlap with the ethical in ways not foreseen by either thinker.

Riddle and Truth

Essential to the artwork's power as a complex totality, according to Adorno's aesthetic theory, is its riddle character.²⁰⁷ The interaction between the artwork's riddle and the philosopher's attempt to understand it becomes in Adorno's philosophy a model for how a non-totalizing philosophy ought to proceed. According to Adorno's argument, the work of art presents itself as a riddle to be understood, but at the same time eludes total comprehension. For Adorno, the artwork is a riddle with no definitive answer, or a picture puzzle that contains "the potential for a solution; the solution is not objectively given."²⁰⁸ The riddle of the artwork, according to Adorno, compels the viewer, listener or reader to reenact it in his or her experience of the work. The artwork only comes alive

²⁰⁷ English translations of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* tend to use the word 'enigma' in place of 'riddle' to describe the work of art. However, Adorno most frequently employs the German word 'Rätsel' as opposed to 'Enigma' in the original text. For an interesting discussion of why translators tend to prefer the Greek-based word enigma as opposed to the Germanic-based riddle, see Brian Tucker, *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud* (Lewisburg, N.Y.: Bucknell University Press, 2011) 15-16.

²⁰⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 167.

through this reenactment on the part of the recipient; the artwork is “mute”²⁰⁹ and casts an “empty gaze”²¹⁰ if its riddle is left unheard. Adorno's theory of the artwork thus stands in stark contrast to Levinas's own. By attributing to the artwork a dynamic and relational essence, Adorno problematizes Levinas's assumption that artworks are essentially idolatrous, staring out at their viewers with ‘empty eyes.’ If their eyes are ‘empty,’ it is only because the viewer does not recognize what he or she is being asked to do, interpretively. Whereas for Levinas, then, artworks are plastic, fixed and immobile things, for Adorno, artworks are a dynamic nexus of elements that provoke their recipients with a riddle to be solved. In other words, artworks take on a dead, muted quality only if their demand for engagement is ignored.

Riddle is a critical model used by Adorno to describe not only the interpretation of artworks but also a historically humbled philosophy of negative dialectics; in both contexts, the riddle suggests an intersection between irreducible particularity and conceptual thought. The obscurity of artworks, like the obscurity of reality, challenges the philosopher to seek meaning in constellations that can only ever unlock, momentarily, traces of a larger truth. The discourse of aesthetics becomes an exemplary instance of the interplay between concepts and non-concepts, universality and particularity, or perhaps, to use Levinasian terms, totality and infinity. Art compels its viewers into a relation akin to negative dialectics; the viewer seeks to comprehend what appears in art and yet finds that the appearance consistently eludes his or her conceptual grasp. The viewer is then driven by the work to seek out new concepts, which, in expressing some aspect of the work, necessarily miss another aspect. An artwork is a totality, then, but a complex one;

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 160.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

far from a closed and unchanging form, it is an open-ended riddle, demanding to be deciphered and yet paradoxically refusing to be fully understood.

By defining the essence of the artwork as a riddle, Adorno situates himself within a specifically modern aesthetic tradition. In contrast to the classical view of the artwork, which attempts to extirpate obscurity in the name of clarity and precision (the neoclassical paintings of Jacques-Louis David are exemplary in this regard), there is a modern tendency to celebrate the obscure and riddling effects of any work of art. Put differently, the ideal of the modern artwork has often been to elude any straightforward explanation, or to confound. Brian Tucker, in his book *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud*, carefully traces the history of this equation of riddle and artwork in modern aesthetics. Beginning with early German Romanticism, he claims, artworks begin to be celebrated for their riddling nature as opposed to criticized for it. This newfound appreciation for the inaccessible and the obscure is essential to both modern and postmodern interpretations of art, according to Tucker, and is particularly evident in the writings of Heidegger, Adorno and Roland Barthes.²¹¹ Adorno in particular makes art's riddle character central to his aesthetic theory, arguing that an artwork cannot be definitively solved; rather, its riddling nature persistently thwarts any one interpretation from expounding, completely, the work's meaning.²¹² Tucker explains Adorno's position as follows:

The riddle codifies the danger of coming to an end and underscores the work of art's evanescence: both interrupt the continuum of intelligibility, and both thus exist only for as long as they remain reticent. Adorno writes of art's constitutive riddle character,

²¹¹ Tucker's objective in this book is to trace the history of the riddle metaphor in order to explain why Freud employs it in his writings on the self and psyche, and thus takes his analysis in an entirely different direction than I do here.

²¹² Tucker, 14-17.

“Works of art that unfold to contemplation and thought without remainder are not works of art.”²¹³

While Adorno shares with his contemporaries an appreciation of the artwork’s obscurity, he has an altogether unique explanation of the artwork’s relevance for socio-historical critique. Adorno employs the riddle metaphor not only in the context of aesthetics, but also philosophical interpretation in general. As early as 1931, in his inaugural lecture “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno describes the philosophical pursuit of truth as the attempt to decipher the riddles of reality. No longer capable of providing a trans-historical, comprehensive truth, Adorno’s ‘changed philosophy’ proceeds with utmost humility, interpreting reality as a series of riddles that resist clear, totalizing explanation. Adorno presents philosophy as a seeker of a truth that is perpetually deferred; reality appears as a riddle for which philosophy does not possess “a sure key.”²¹⁴ Every step in the history of philosophy presents a trace of the solution to this riddle, but these traces do not add up to one complete meaning or truth. For this reason, Adorno describes philosophical interpretation as an

everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few ‘results’.²¹⁵

With each interpretation, according to Adorno, a riddle is solved but a riddle also retreats, which prevents philosophy from ever alighting on a single explanation of reality. Each interpretation is inherently aware of its own limitations as fleeting and partial. The

²¹³ Tucker, 17. Quote from Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 121.

²¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, “Actuality of Philosophy,” in *The Adorno Reader*, 31.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

metaphor of riddle highlights for Adorno the limitations of reason and of philosophical critique; philosophy cannot uncover the “totality of the real”²¹⁶ as it once hoped it could, but is rather limited to grasping reality in its most miniscule, particular form.

Adorno's theory of the riddle character of artworks allows us to reassess Levinas's analysis of the work of art as comprising two incompatible moments of goodness and idolatry. Adorno would agree with Levinas that there is a moment of closure in a work of art, but this moment can be nothing more than a ‘fleeting, disappearing trace’; it is not as it is for Levinas: a crowning moment that silences the element of ‘goodness’ in any given work. For Adorno, the totalizing moment in the interpretation of art – and analogously, in the work of art itself – is not *completion* in an idolatrous sense, but rather thoroughly entwined with the subsequent dissolution of precisely that moment into obscurity, elusion and transcendence. Levinas's mistake, in other words, is to overlook the ways in which the closure of a work and its ethical expression are not static moments, where the former inevitably subjugates the latter in a forceful act of completion, but are rather opposed to each other as dialectical opposites, each one repeatedly giving way to the other with every interpretative act.

Adorno's view of artworks as complex totalities can only be understood within his larger argument on riddle and philosophical interpretation, which again reveals significant differences from Levinas's point of view. As riddles, artworks demand reflection and even require this mediation by thought to achieve their fullest expression. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*: “The demand of artworks that they be understood, that their content be grasped, is bound to their specific experience; but it can only be

²¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

fulfilled by way of the theory that reflects this experience.”²¹⁷ As we have already seen in Chapter One, Levinas, like Adorno, acknowledges the importance of a philosophical interpretation of art, but his reasons are entirely different; for Levinas, art requires philosophy to draw it out of its realm of essential disengagement. Without philosophy, art remains a realm of escapism and play. For Levinas, it is in philosophy and not in art that the ethical relation can be heard. Adorno, by contrast, makes the artwork a vehicle of a truth content that goes beyond its bounds, necessarily calling for engagement on the part of its recipient.²¹⁸ Every attempt to explain the work in clear and distinct terms is invariably frustrated by the work’s puzzling nature. Adorno writes: “The better an artwork is understood, the more it is unpuzzled on one level and the more obscure its constitutive enigmaticalness becomes.”²¹⁹ Thus, whereas Levinas presents philosophy as saving art from itself, as necessary to translate the obscurity of the artwork into clear philosophical terms, Adorno presents philosophy as increasingly challenged – and increasingly humbled – the more it attempts to solve the riddle character of the work of art.

Levinas does acknowledge obscurity as the central feature of the artwork, and thereby aligns himself with the same modern aesthetic tradition as Adorno, but his view

²¹⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 162.

²¹⁸ Truth appears to the philosopher only indirectly, both in the smallest, intentionless elements of reality and in the unique riddle form of the work of art. In more general terms, Adorno presents truth as inextricable from the possibility of a changed reality, from the concepts of reconciliation, happiness or the in-itself discussed in the previous chapter. And because this change remains only the remotest of possibilities, truth itself does not yet exist; it is for this reason that truth appears indirectly, in riddle form. Because artworks are essentially riddles, they are complex totalities capable of bearing a transcendent truth; they gesture toward it as their ‘remainder’, but do not pretend to have it, concretely, in their hands. Adorno presents this truth content as orienting both philosophical reflection and artistic practice: “Philosophy and art converge in their truth content – what unfolds in the work of art is the truth of the philosophical concept” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 172). Without philosophy’s attempt to understand this truth content, art remains incomplete. And yet, paradoxically, this truth content inevitably recedes from philosophy’s grasp.

²¹⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 161.

differs from Adorno's in significant ways. For Levinas, an artwork's obscurity renders it unintelligible; it does not gesture toward truth, nor does it harbour knowledge about the world. Rather, the artwork's obscurity situates it outside of the world of knowledge and truth. Artworks seal themselves off from reality: "The work," Levinas asserts, "is completed in spite of the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue."²²⁰ To repeat what was already discussed in the first chapter, Levinas equates completion with disengagement. An artwork's completion is also its ability to obscure truth, invert reality and draw its viewers away from the world of knowledge, of history and of ethics. "Art does not know a particular type of reality," Levinas asserts; "it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of night, an invasion of shadow."²²¹ While Adorno would agree that completion and obscurity are essential to art, he would disagree with Levinas's conclusion that such features render the artwork incapable of critique. If anything, for Adorno it is the opposite. Precisely because artworks are complex totalities that obscure reality, they are placeholders for a truth content that points beyond the 'totality of the real' to the possibility of an actively engaged world.

Adorno, then, understands the artwork to be a source of knowledge, and, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, to be reflective of its particular socio-historical reality. Levinas's view of the artwork, by contrast, is almost the complete opposite. According to Levinas, artworks are not sources of knowledge, nor are they in any way reflective of the socio-historical conditions in which they find themselves.²²² Levinas

²²⁰ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 12.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²²² The ahistorical nature of Levinas's analysis of art will be taken up in more detail in Chapter Four.

acknowledges obscurity as the essence of the artwork alongside Adorno, but he considers this obscurity as an impediment to ethics as opposed to an aid. Adorno's conception of the interplay between riddle and truth in the completed form of a work of art challenges Levinas's view; Adorno makes it possible to imagine how artworks produce, as opposed to hinder, a challenge to totality within their own sphere. It is because of Levinas's lack of such a complex notion of totality that when it comes to favoured artists such as Maurice Blanchot and Paul Celan, Levinas cannot reconcile their ethical import with their aesthetic form.

Mimetic Rationality

As we have seen in the previous section, the essence of the artwork for Adorno is its riddle character, which propels interpretation and gestures toward a truth content that exceeds the bounds of the work. The question I would now like to raise is *how* an artwork is capable of transcending itself in this way. One way to answer this question is to examine the production process of the work. For Adorno, the riddle of the artwork results from a careful combination of mimesis and artistic technique in the creative process. Artists must have the skill to manipulate material, on the one hand, but they must also allow truth content, which goes beyond the artistic subject, to be mimetically expressed through the work. If an artwork lacks a mimetic component, it feels too fabricated and falls flat, but if it lacks technique, it falls into the trap of sentimentality.

The mimetic component of artworks is difficult to pin down, but is central to Adorno's claim that artworks, despite being subjectively produced, generate a truth content that transcends their frame. In the first section below, I examine mimesis and

technique in more detail by asking how their interplay in art provides a non-totalizing alternative to instrumental rationality. In the second section on mimesis, I explain why Adorno's version of mimesis differs from the traditional view in order to problematize further Levinas's notion of works as inherently precluding any transcendence of totality.

Throughout Adorno's writings on both negative dialectics and art, mimesis, albeit with certain qualifications, provides a powerful antidote to instrumental rationality. In order to understand why mimesis is so important, it is necessary to look again to Adorno's earlier collaboration with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There, Adorno and Horkheimer locate vestiges of a more genuine human experience of the world in early mimetic approaches to nature, based in magic. According to their interpretation of this early stage of human history, individuals respond to a natural world that is both mysterious and fearful by identifying with it, as a way of diminishing some of its power. Unlike the modern form of identity-thinking, this early mimetic relation "is not one of intention but of relatedness."²²³ Out of fear of the unknown, magic seeks to appease nature through mimetic gestures and thus by proximity to the object in question, as opposed to distance and calculation. And while such rituals did seek to control what was unknown through mimesis of the natural world, they nonetheless did not take the complete mastery of nature as their goal. Early mimetic approaches do not fully subsume nature under subjective categories of thought, as radicalized identity-thinking attempts to do, but rather accept a position of uncertainty relative to the multifarious world of things. In other words, for Adorno, the orientation of instrumental rationality is completely different from mimesis. Instrumentalized reason begins not from the fearful unknown but from the totalizing concept, and thus permits a kind of premeditated conformity between

²²³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 10-11.

concept and phenomenon; mimesis, by contrast, begins from the sheer mystery of the objective world, and thus from the very start allows for the object's fundamental unknowability.²²⁴

This is not to say that Adorno and Horkheimer wish to reinstate an earlier approach now denied to us; they do not advocate a return to some glorified past. Magic, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is still marked by a desire to fend off terror and is thus also an attempt to control the natural world in all of its alterity. Nonetheless, there is much to be learned from a relation to the world based in mimetic 'relatedness,' as it provides a powerful counterpoint to the mastering impulse of instrumental reason. While it is true for Adorno and Horkheimer that a return to mimesis is not desirable, a complete exculpation of the mimetic impulse is not desirable either. And it is the latter approach that has dominated Enlightenment philosophy since the very beginning. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment project can be summed up as a series of attempts to master our fears of what is unknown. The Enlightenment model makes the pursuit of knowledge synonymous with reason asserting its dominance over the natural world.²²⁵ Adorno and Levinas converge in their analysis of the paucity of experience that necessarily accompanies such a relentless pursuit of power. According to Adorno – and to Levinas – genuine experience is premised on recognition of what goes beyond the scope of our reality, on an experience of something more than what we think we know; it follows that as the pretense to totality becomes more and more entrenched, and otherness

²²⁴ What makes both art and negative dialectics unique, according to Adorno's theory, is the way in which each combines this archaic mimetic impulse with modern reason. The mimetic rationality common to both art and negative dialectics presents a relation between subject and object modeled on approximation as opposed to comprehension, if comprehension implies, as it does for Adorno, absorbing the object into subjective categories. Negative dialectics embodies this approach because of its making the object preponderant, which is to say its careful illumination of an object through constellations that refuse to subsume it completely under categories of thought.

²²⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

thereby becomes increasingly invisible, so the possibility of genuine experience narrows. For Adorno, it is necessary to work against instrumental rationality, now taken to be the hallmark of the Enlightenment, and to rethink the knowledge relation to include a moment of relatedness or approximation gestured toward by early mimesis. In Adorno's writings, art provides an example of how such a rethinking of the knowledge relation can proceed.

Adorno argues that the artwork retains something of a mimetic approximation to the natural world, but this mimetic moment must be seen as inextricable from the artwork's ability to act as a site of knowledge. An artwork is mimetic and rational at the same time. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno writes: "Just as in the ceremony the magician first of all marked out the limits of the area where the sacred powers were to come into play, so every work of art describes its own circumference which closes it off from actuality."²²⁶ According to this argument, just as the natural world once appeared within the prescribed space of the cultic rite, some element of reality is mimetically reproduced within the closed circumference of the artwork. The artwork results from an intentional act of forming this circumference on the part of the artist, and from the artist mimetically exposing "itself to its other"²²⁷ by creating a space in which something other can appear. Adorno describes the relationship between technical form and mimetic expression as a paradox of art: "to produce what is blind, expression, by way of reflection, that is, through form; not to rationalize the blind but to produce it aesthetically."²²⁸ Thus, art cannot be reduced to the mimetic; the expression of alterity in

²²⁶ Ibid., 19.

²²⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 69.

²²⁸ Ibid., 149. Adorno also describes the artwork's mimetic comportment as "the nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other" (Ibid., 70).

artworks only emerges as formed through technique. Adorno describes in the work an “aporia of mimesis and construction,”²²⁹ which preserves a delicate balance between spontaneity and control. The interplay of these two sides – and not the isolation of either one – is essential to the production process of every work.

For Adorno, technique refers to the unifying element of a work of art. This includes both the terms according to which an artist lays out the parameters of a work, and the way in which these terms are maintained throughout the process of production. Because of technique, an artist does not reflect the world in unmediated fashion, but rather completely transforms empirical reality according to the laws set out by the work.²³⁰ Adorno explains this artistic comportment as follows:

Object in art and object in empirical reality are entirely distinct. In art the object is the work produced by art, as much containing elements of empirical reality as displacing, dissolving, and reconstructing them according to the work’s own law. Only through such transformation... does art give empirical reality its due.²³¹

It is as though for Adorno artworks are forces that act upon the empirical reality outside of their bounds; they contain elements of this reality, but only on the condition that these elements are completely transformed according to the laws prescribed by the work. Despite this process of reconstruction, however, Adorno claims that art gives reality ‘its due;’ I take this to mean that the recreation of reality within artistic form – akin to the constellation of concepts produced by a negative dialectics – nonetheless respects empirical reality as the irreducible particular that it is.

²²⁹ Ibid., 151.

²³⁰ Ibid., 302.

²³¹ Ibid., 335.

Thus far in this section, I have explained that Adorno's notion of totality, as a function of artistic practice, is characterized by an immanent and a transcendent component – by a technical, formed element and a mimetic component that remains irreducible to this form. I would now like to spend some time explaining the transcendent moment of this equation; in other words, how for Adorno mimesis allows a work to point beyond the rationally constructed bounds of its aesthetic form.

Adorno repeatedly describes art's mimetic comportment as the ability to respect what is other to reality. Adorno claims that this other can be found in traces of reality, but requires an aesthetic displacement of reality's elements to appear. "The elements of this other," Adorno explains, "are present in reality and they require only the most minute displacement into a new constellation to find their right position. Rather than imitating reality, artworks demonstrate their displacement to reality."²³² In displacing reality and recreating it within the circumference of a work, artworks end up drawing out something *more* than what immediately appears. This 'more' or 'other' that is 'present in reality' emerges in an artwork because of art's mimetic component, which, like the archaic comportment from which it derives, respects the world as a space of difference and uncertainty. There is an important difference, however, between mimesis in artworks and early mimetic relations with the world. Artworks are able to distance themselves from the world out of which they emerge through the construction of their form, while at the same time respecting the alterity of that world; they are equally rational and mimetic at the same time. An artwork's mimetic rationality stands in stark contrast to instrumental reason, which suppresses the alterity of objective reality by consistently treating the world as a space to be dominated and controlled.

²³² Ibid., 174.

If technique refers to the law of the work, or the way in which the work emerges as a rational and organized whole, then mimesis refers to the way in which an artist takes its cue from matter, or what Adorno will frequently describe as nature. At the root of mimesis is a relationship with nature grounded not in domination but in approximation; artworks are vehicles of mimesis and as such they recollect an alternative comportment toward nature unacceptable within a framework of instrumental rationality. The mimetic expression of art is in Adorno's words "the plenipotentiary in the aesthetic continuum of extra-aesthetic nature."²³³ Through mimesis, a relationship to nature that is not one of mastery is made to appear, even if, as we will see below, it is inevitably neutralized by its appearance within an artwork's unified form. In other words, the artwork is treated as a refuge for a lost relationship with the natural world. The work of art literally comes to *speak* for the nature it inevitably alters through its form.

Jay Bernstein's reading helps to clarify the role of nature – and its counterpart, natural beauty – in Adorno's aesthetic theory. Bernstein explains that for Adorno, natural beauty once served as a reminder of what was lost in the radical elevation of spirit above sensuous matter in Idealist thought – an elevation that, as we will see in the next chapter, is strikingly evident in the Kantian sublime. However, because commodity culture has ensured that natural beauty is no longer accessible as it once was, what natural beauty once harboured as possibility is now transposed into the realm of art. Artworks, Bernstein explains, become for Adorno "a stand-in for repressed nature."²³⁴ Illuminating in Bernstein's account is his use of Adorno's discussion of natural beauty to explain the

²³³ Ibid., 148.

²³⁴ J.M. Bernstein, "'The Dead Speaking of Stones and Stars': Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Thomas Huhn (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 151.

experience of ‘objectivity’ produced by works of art. Art is intrinsically bound to the natural world through its sensuous medium: “Art mediums are nature conceived of as a potential for human meaning.”²³⁵ It is the sensuous quality of artistic mediums that allow artworks to exceed every interpretative act on the part of the viewer. Something in art is determined not by reason or human intention but by nature, and thus expresses something *more than* intention and *more than* reason. Bernstein uses the example of a Modernist painting by Henri Matisse, “The Red Studio,” in which the colour red presents itself as something irreducible to the artist’s intention, and thus allows the painting to appear intentionless and intrinsically meaningful. This is an example, for Bernstein, of the preponderance of the object in art. He writes: “These images mark the limits of the constitutive, transcendental subject, a self-relinquishing of transcendental subjectivity, and so a relinquishing of the idea of the world as a mere mirror of the subject.”²³⁶ What confounds any attempt to reduce the work to a single unified meaning is then the work’s sheer objectivity, the sensuousness of natural beauty in mediate form.

For Bernstein, the transposition of nature into art – or of natural beauty into art beauty – cannot be separated from the dialectic of Enlightenment already discussed above. Natural beauty moves into art as a result of a process of disenchantment already initiated, for Adorno and Horkheimer, in Ancient Greece. The language of nature, which Adorno describes as “a nonconceptual, nonrigidified signifiative language,”²³⁷ speaks for what hypostasized reason has denied – and for the suffering that it has produced.

²³⁵ Ibid., 152.

²³⁶ Ibid., 153.

²³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 67. Quoted in Bernstein, ““Dead Speaking of Stones and Stars,”” 153.

Adorno's references to the transcendence of art, as the ability to speak for what instrumental reason denies, are as cautious in *Aesthetic Theory* as they are in his other writings. Despite Adorno's qualifications, what can be gained from this discussion is insight into how artworks are sites of transcendence, which further problematizes Levinas's emphasis on the closure of the aesthetic form. What is significant for my argument in this chapter is how Adorno's analysis of aesthetic transcendence contrasts with Levinas's dismissal of the completed work of art as a mere static thing.

What complicates this examination of the two thinkers is Adorno's historical dialectical treatment of transcendence, which stands in stark contrast to Levinas's phenomenological description of an ethical moment foundational to human experience. In Adorno's writings, nature is not only indicative of the presence of sensuous particularity within artistic practice, but also marks the historical end point of both philosophy and art; a reconciliation between the natural and the human – which, to put in terms employed above, would mean that the riddle of the work has been solved – coincides with the actualization of a reality other than one bound by instrumental reason. Adorno explains the correlation between nature and art as follows:

Every act of making in art is a singular effort to say what the artifact itself is not and what it does not know: precisely this is art's spirit. This is the locus of the idea of art as the idea of the restoration of nature that has been repressed and drawn into the dynamic of history. Nature, to whose imago art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist; what is true in art is something nonexistent.²³⁸

With every creation of a work of art, in other words, something is expressed that cannot yet be understood – and may never be understood – either by the creator of the work or its recipient. According to Adorno, an artwork is more than a mere thing in its promise of

²³⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 173.

something other to the existing world. This something other is inextricable from Adorno's historical analysis of what has been lost or 'repressed' in the unfolding of instrumental rationality. The 'restoration of nature' to which Adorno refers is the possibility of a different relationship with nature – one that does not yet exist – hence, the true in art is 'nonexistent.'²³⁹

In attempting to problematize Levinas's view of aesthetic totality in this section, I do not mean to conflate what is clearly a very different reading of transcendence in Adorno with Levinas's reading of ethical expression in art. I return to this important difference between their two views – and the possible limitations of Adorno's analysis – in Chapter Five. In this chapter, I intend simply to draw out the ways in which transcendence may occur in and despite the totalizing form of a work of art.

Classical and Modern Conceptions of Mimesis

To sum up what we have seen so far, for Adorno the completed form of every work of art, so suspicious to Levinas, encapsulates a nonconceptual approximation with otherness that provides an antidote to totalizing reason. One of the reasons for Levinas's divergence from Adorno on this point is his classical view of mimesis in art, which must be differentiated from Adorno's more modern interpretation. Adorno carefully distinguishes his conception of mimesis – the ability to produce an affinity with otherness, while not subjecting that other to an imposed classification – from the traditional, classical conception of works as idealized plastic duplicates of the world.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ "In each genuine artwork," writes Adorno, "something appears that does not exist"(AT, 109).

²⁴⁰ Criticism of the traditional view of mimesis in art was common in the early to mid-twentieth century, due to the preference for abstraction in much Modernist art.

Levinas, by contrast, has no such criticism of the classical view and in fact bases his ultimate dismissal of art, including modern art, on its inherently classical qualities. For instance, Levinas writes that “every image is in the last analysis plastic... every artwork is in the end a statue”; citing the sculpture of Laocoön, Levinas describes the artwork as “an instant [that] endures infinitely... an impersonal and anonymous instant”; and finally, Levinas’s main reason to preclude art from the ethical is its completion, by virtue of which “every artwork is classical” and “essentially disengaged.”²⁴¹ In contrast to Levinas’s reduction of artworks to static and illusionary things, Adorno rethinks the terms of classical aesthetics and is able to take his argument in an altogether different – and I would argue more fruitful – direction.

According to Adorno, the imitation espoused by the classical view of art is an “objectifying”²⁴² form of imitation that seeks to eliminate any trace of particularity, or irreducible otherness, from the finished product. The beautiful, tensionless forms that result – precisely the basis for Levinas’s correlation between art and totality – result, according to Adorno, from the suppression of the archaic mimetic impulse, presumably due to its mythic associations. For this reason, Adorno compares the classical Greek aesthetic to identity-thinking, which seeks to eliminate what cannot be contained in its “mute universal.”²⁴³ What Adorno finds interesting about the modern aesthetic form, by contrast, and what Levinas misses in his adoption of the classical view, is precisely the ability of artworks to introduce a moment of non-identity into their completed form. A completed artwork is a totality, but it is modeled on reconciliation as opposed to suppression or mastery. Modern art counters identity-thinking with a non-repressive

²⁴¹ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 2.

²⁴² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 212.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

identity of its own; the artwork, writes Adorno, is “self-likeness freed from the compulsion of identity.”²⁴⁴ Contrary to the classical Greek aesthetic, the power of modern art is that it does not simply copy what exists – or substitute an idyllic image for the real thing – but rather transforms reality into something other than it is.

Here, then, we return to the discussion of riddle above. In his view of art, Adorno is clearly aligned against classical aesthetics in his appreciation for the obscure. It is the work filled with tension that interests him – he prefers late Beethoven for this reason – as opposed to the smoothly finished and sculpted classical piece. Tension, difficulty, unfinished detail – this is the source of art’s *resistance* to totality as opposed to its perpetuation.²⁴⁵

The above examination of the dual character of artistic practice in Adorno serves to problematize Levinas’s strict distinction between expression and work discussed in Chapter One. To recap briefly Levinas’s contrast between work and expression, Levinas argues that works, which he does not limit to artworks but includes also historical texts, artifacts and so on, do not contain any living expression of the person who made them. Put differently, whereas for Levinas expression is infinite and transcendent, works are finite and mortal. Adorno’s account, by contrast, describes the artwork as containing a dynamic relationship between an artifactual component – its finitude, in Levinas’s terms – and an expressive mimetic component which gestures beyond it. Artworks express the “multiplicity of what surpasses identification.”²⁴⁶ By rearranging the elements of reality, the work of art is capable of pointing beyond totality and identity, and of producing in an

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 166.

²⁴⁵ For this reason, Adorno’s aesthetic theory employs the category of the sublime as opposed to the beautiful to explain modern trends in art. Adorno’s discussion of the sublime will be analyzed at length in Chapter Four.

²⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 173.

image “the reality of what is not.”²⁴⁷ What is most relevant for my own analysis of artworks as complex totalities is the way in which mimetic expression, for Adorno, is able to exceed the confines of any given work. Technical form and mimetic expression thoroughly mediate each other; by contrast with Levinas, for Adorno one does not preclude the other. Adorno's conception of artworks is significantly different from Levinas's view of the artwork as a closed whole, absorbing what may transcend it into its form.

Levinas misses the way in which one component – the ability to express what exceeds the artistic subject – is intrinsically bound up with the other – the technique of drawing together a set of materials into a formed whole. Adorno allows these two elements to exist alongside one another in a complex totality, both at the level of interpretation and at the level of artistic production. However, as we will see in the coming chapters, there are significant differences between the two thinkers as well, particularly in Adorno's reading of transcendence in historical terms.

Conclusion

Essential to Adorno's aesthetic theory, then, is a fundamental open-endedness at the heart of the artwork. Far from being closed forms with no remainder, artworks consistently exceed our determinations. Adorno defends this thesis both by characterizing the finished work as a riddle whose solution is perpetually deferred and by making artworks a refuge for an alternative, non-totalizing comportment toward the world. Adorno thus bases his definition of art on the lack of closure inherent to artistic form;

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 174.

Levinas, by contrast, appears to do precisely the opposite. For Levinas, the expression of artworks, particularly works by certain poets, may produce an experience akin to the transcendence of the ethical relation, but Levinas is quite careful to separate such expressive power from the aesthetic form of these same works. For Adorno, no such strict division between form and expression exists. Rather, form and expression mediate each other, dialectically, in every work of art.

As we have already seen, for Levinas the limitation of artworks is their character as works; in representing the artist in her absence, the work of art fails as expression and thus cannot be made comparable to the face in the ethical relation. This contrast between work and expression is central to Levinas's claim that the face-to-face is the exemplary instance of ethics, and that it is impossible for works of art, just as it is for any work in general, to reproduce an ethical experience by virtue of the limitations of artistic form. Levinas thus felt justified in not pursuing aesthetics in any serious way. And yet Adorno, whom as we have seen shares many of the same concerns as Levinas, considers aesthetics to be one of the few realms of ethical possibility open to an increasingly totalized subject.

It would be misleading, however, to present the two thinkers as completely opposed on the nature of the work of art. While Adorno does define a 'true' artwork as that which contains a remainder, he nonetheless acknowledges an idolatrous moment in every artwork, which he describes as its semblance character. The semblance of art indicates that the truth content of artworks, the part of artworks that is not humanly made but that emerges out of the made, may or may not be realized. Thus, Adorno, like Levinas, acknowledges the illusory quality of all works of art. Unlike Levinas, however, Adorno argues that the semblance of artworks also expresses the possibility of something

other to this reality. Simply by bringing the elements of reality “into an eloquent relation,”²⁴⁸ artworks preserve an image of what may go beyond instrumental reason through their form. In other words, the semblance of unity in a finished work of art presents the possibility of real reconciliation. This is, in Adorno’s words, “the utopia of its form.”²⁴⁹ And yet, according to Adorno, what form expresses is semblance, and thus all art mourns for what it cannot be. For Adorno, “all art is endowed with sadness; art grieves all the more, the more completely its successful unification suggests meaning, and the sadness is heightened by the feeling of ‘Oh, were it only so.’”²⁵⁰ Again we see repeated here Adorno's argument that the identity produced by artworks makes appear a relation with the world not premised on domination and control. The identity pursued by art, despite its being semblance, is an image of reconciliation and thus also of possibility and hope.²⁵¹ It should be emphasized, however, that Adorno remains cautious on this topic of hope in art. Much of Adorno's aesthetic theory centres on art’s deceptive character; all artworks, for Adorno, may be no more than a lie. As he writes: “Artworks have the absolute and they do not have it.”²⁵² There is thus an element of ideology to all artworks, in that they are vehicles of transcendence at the same time that this transcendence is not real.²⁵³

Adorno, then, like Levinas, recognizes in the artwork an idolatrous moment,

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ I return to this formulation of semblance in Chapter Five, and ask whether Adorno's emphasis on semblance as the illusion – and simultaneous possibility – of reconciliation between subject and object, nature and freedom, ends up over-determining the content of artworks according to the terms of loss and recuperation.

²⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 175.

²⁵³ Adorno argues that it is only because of its semblance that an artwork is capable of expressing truth. An artwork serves truth because it is semblance demarcated by what it is not, by what would not be semblance. Ibid., 107, 245-6.

which he describes as semblance. Where Levinas errs is in making idolatry the essential feature of all works of art. In other words, both thinkers attribute an ideological component to art, though while Levinas elevates this component to the exclusion of any other, Adorno explains how the semblance of form and mimetic expression are dialectically intertwined. Particularly problematic, at least from Adorno's perspective, is Levinas's ultimate exclusion of expression from artworks. While there may be an expressive moment in art for Levinas, alternatively described as 'goodness', it is inevitably cut short by the artwork's more powerful idolatrous form. Adorno, by contrast, views these two elements of semblance and expression as dialectically intertwined.

My goal in this chapter has been to throw into question Levinas's dismissal of an artwork's ethical import on the grounds that works of art, like all products of human labour, preclude the possibility of transcendence. To be fair to Levinas, aesthetics was not his primary concern, and thus his analysis of the artwork lacks the thoroughness of a thinker like Adorno, whose aesthetic theory was central to his philosophy as a whole. However, it is precisely because aesthetics was not Levinas's primary concern that I have chosen to look to Adorno's theory. What should now be clear are the ways in which the artworks cannot be reduced to mere plastic, unified forms. Artworks may be totalities, but to limit artworks to this element is too dismissive; it is my view that such a position cannot account for many aspects of the artwork, namely the sense that an artwork consistently exceeds what can be said about it. How an artwork is capable of such indeterminacy, and of what this indeterminacy consists, is a central concern of Adorno's aesthetic theory.

In the above chapter, I have tried to demonstrate the limitations of Levinas's view of the artwork using two elements of Adorno's aesthetics. Firstly, Adorno has a much more expansive approach to art interpretation, which, contrary to Levinas's position, allows that artworks are significant sources of knowledge and truth. Secondly, Adorno's view of the production process of artworks as a combination of artistic technique and a mimetic compoment explains how artworks can be both humanly made objects and yet seem to be more than mere things. Levinas, by contrast, does not account for the two-sided nature of artworks and ultimately reduces the expression of works of art to their work character. Adorno's dialectical interpretation of these two elements is helpful in this regard.

My hope in the next chapter is to bring Levinas's ethics and Adorno's aesthetics closer together by reading their accounts of the rejection of beauty in modern art side by side. In particular, I will ask whether Adorno's reworking of the sublime helps to supplement the contradiction between two descriptions of art within Levinas's oeuvre – between a view of art as fundamentally unethical, and one where art and ethics seem to coexist. For Levinas is missing not only a complex understanding of aesthetic totality, but also of aesthetic expression. Using Adorno's concept of the sublime, I argue that it is possible to find a notion of expression that is ethical in the way that Levinas understands it *and* whose aesthetic qualities are not subordinate to this ethical imperative. As we will see, Adorno's sublime explains an aesthetic expression of alterity akin to that of the face-to-face encounter and thus also capable of calling into question the totalizing structures of Western thought.

Chapter Four: Modernism and the Sublime

We have established that Levinas's exclusion of art from the realm of ethics is premised, at least in part, on the way that for Levinas, the art object necessarily *precludes* transcendence by virtue of its form. This assertion derives from Levinas's continued division between work and expression; it is not possible for a work, no matter how expressive, to approximate the living expression of the Other human being. In Chapter Three, I problematized this claim by asking if an artwork may be a site of transcendence in ways that Levinas did not imagine. As we have seen, Levinas is adamant that these two spheres of aesthetics and ethics be kept separate because he views the work of art as an essentially closed and static whole. To counter Levinas's view, I looked to Adorno's theory of artworks as sites of both closure and transcendence, wherein the terms of form and expression are not mutually exclusive but dialectically bound. Ultimately, Adorno claims, an artwork's wholeness, or its unity, is only successful when its meaning spills over its bounds; one is essentially unable to tease unified meaning out of this unified form. Recasting the art object using Adorno's theory appears to resolve at least partly Levinas's contradictory reading of art, according to which certain works of art are ethical, but only on the condition that they are removed from the aesthetic sphere. If we accept Adorno's theory that the artwork is an inherently open and dynamic whole, as I suggest we do, then Levinas's strict division between ethical expression and aesthetic form no longer holds.

Let us recall briefly here Levinas's analysis of the poetry of Paul Celan. Levinas describes Celan's poetry as a personal language, which donates itself to the Other in a

way that mimics the act of speaking in conversation. To quote from the final lines of this essay on Celan already analyzed in Chapter One, Levinas describes Celan's poetry as an "interrogation of the Other, a seeking for the Other. A seeking, dedicating itself to the Other in the form of the poem."²⁵⁴ As this passage indicates, there are many similarities between Levinas's description of Celan's poetry and his description of ethical expression. And yet one occurs as a conversation between self and Other and one occurs within a poem. In this chapter, I would like to unpack the meaning of Levinas's statement, that Celan's poetry dedicates itself 'to the Other in the form of the poem'. Given Levinas's repeated hesitation with respect to art, how can ethical expression be produced aesthetically, or, put differently, how can aesthetic expression also be ethical? The difficulty with answering this question is that Levinas nowhere addresses the difference between the expression unique to the ethical encounter – which occurs as a dedicating of oneself to the Other – and the expression unique to the work of art. In Chapter Three, I used Adorno's aesthetic theory to imagine how an artistic form is more than a closed and static whole. But, even if we allow that Levinas had an overly narrow conception of the art object and thus could not acknowledge the way in which works of art inevitably transcend the boundaries of their *form*, there is still the problem that Levinas reads all *aesthetic expression* as marked by evasion and not by ethical responsibility. His comparison between the expression of Celan's poetry and the expression unique to the ethical encounter, in other words, requires ignoring the aesthetic aspects of the former; it is not possible to explain, using his philosophy, how ethical expression, a 'dedicating of oneself to the Other', is produced in an aesthetic way.

I argue below that part of what prevents Levinas from seeing a correlation

²⁵⁴ Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to Other," 46.

between ethics and aesthetics is his overly static use of aesthetic categories. Despite acknowledging that there are clear differences between art forms, as well as artistic periods, Levinas tends to view art from within a fairly static aesthetic framework characterized by a classical interpretation of beauty. It is this static, ahistorical quality of Levinas's aesthetic categories that I would like to problematize in this chapter.

At various points Levinas describes changes within the history of artistic practice, but art's basic essence nevertheless remains the same: art is a beautiful, plastic form, to be enjoyed at the expense of a higher call to ethical responsibility. While there may be significant differences between art forms, particularly between the verbal and non-verbal arts – a range from classical figuration to modern abstraction – these differences are basically culpable of the same logic of evasion. For Levinas, all provide images of reality that disengage them from the world of concepts and representation. All are invariably wrapped up with a timeless, classical aesthetic concerned with creating beautiful, plastic forms.²⁵⁵ Thus, when an artist like Paul Celan presents an exception to this rule, Levinas opposes the ethical character of his work to an aesthetic sphere defined primarily according to a timeless conception of beauty. Celan's poetry enacts an ethical questioning only when it interrupts "the playful order of the beautiful;"²⁵⁶ in other words, when it is, according to Levinas's definition, not aesthetic. As we have already seen, this separation is maintained in Levinas's distinction between the aesthetic form as static and beautiful and the transcendence enacted by poetry in its *verbal* sense of poesis. An artwork is powerful in ethical terms – it ruptures 'the play of the beautiful' – only when it exceeds the confines of the aesthetic in a given work of art. In other words, it would seem that

²⁵⁵ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 5, 12.

²⁵⁶ Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to Other," 46.

Levinas has a single operative aesthetic category – that of the beautiful. This explains why Levinas is skeptical about the possibility of transcendence through art and is forced to subordinate the aesthetic aspect of works he appreciates to the ethical imperative of his philosophical project. Levinas treats art and beauty as synonymous and thus a poet like Celan, whose work is precisely a critique of the beautiful, can be made an exception to Levinas's aesthetic rule.

Based on Levinas's emphatic opposition of ethics to beauty, then, if he deems an artwork ethical, it must be because he has taken it outside of the aesthetic sphere. This chapter aims to overcome this apparent conflict between art and ethics by considering again the so-called ethical exceptions to Levinas's aesthetic rule. I argue here that Levinas's writings on certain artists, particularly Paul Celan, reveal an aesthetic sense counter to that of traditional beauty. I claim that Levinas latently respects a different sort of aesthetic sensibility, one resembling the category of the sublime rather than the beautiful. This means reexamining Levinas's critique of art's ethical power as a critique not of art in general, but of the beauty of plastic form, which invariably falls short of the ethical expression of the human face.

In the chapter below, I argue that what is missing from Levinas's account is a way of speaking about the aesthetic in ethical terms, terms that he keeps apart by juxtaposing categories like poesis and the beautiful. Using Adorno, I hope to explain how a specifically aesthetic expression of alterity is possible within the work of art, and thereby allow an aesthetic counterpart to the face-to-face encounter to emerge. Once this overlap between Levinasian ethics and Adornian aesthetics is fully established, it will become

possible for us to develop a notion of ethically aesthetic experience not overtly present but minimally gestured toward by each writer's work.

As we saw in Chapter One, some, such as Jill Robbins and Seán Hand, have argued that Levinas's later writings on art require a suspension of the notion of the artwork as an aesthetic object. Others have taken a different viewpoint, pondering instead the radical aesthetic possibilities opened up by Levinas's later appropriation of art for the ethical relation. Few, however, have considered Levinas as having two distinct conceptions of the aesthetic: a critique of traditional beauty and a latent endorsement of the sublime. I argue here that we are in a better position to understand Levinas's aesthetics if we place him within a broader tradition of the sublime. Doing so will allow us to read his terms of the aesthetic and the ethical alongside one another, as opposed to accepting them as mutually exclusive. Such a reading will also make Levinas a more valuable resource for discussions of contemporary art.

The category of the sublime makes for a productive point of comparison with Levinas because of its character as a response to an overpowering experience, on the one hand, and its role as a counterpart to beauty, on the other. Perhaps the foremost theorist of the sublime has been Immanuel Kant, who presents the sublime as that which overwhelms the subject with a phenomenon beyond her powers of representation. Stuart Dalton is one thinker who has explored a connection between the Kantian sublime and Levinas's description of the ethical, although he takes an altogether different approach to the one I put forward here.²⁵⁷ According to Dalton's argument, Levinas finds the ethical encounter on an experience of absolute exteriority that resembles the experience of being

²⁵⁷ Unlike Dalton, I base my reading of Levinas on Adorno's reworking of the sublime in relation to modern art. See Stuart Dalton, "Obligation to the Other in Levinas and the Experience of the Sublime in Kant," *Kantian Rev. Kantian Review* 3 (1999): 81–98.

overwhelmed by the Kantian sublime. However, while Dalton does present a strong argument for similarities between the Kantian sublime and the ethical encounter, he tends to gloss over the differences between them. One such difference stems from Kant's distinction between two moments in the sublime. In the initial moment of the sublime, Kant's sublime does resemble to some extent the absolute exteriority of the ethical relation, albeit with the caveat that for Kant, the sublime is grounded in natural phenomena and not the human face. The Kantian subject in this first moment, presented with an overwhelming magnitude or power, is completely disoriented by an experience she cannot comprehend. Likewise, Levinas describes the face of the Other as infinitely exceeding the capacities of the subject and as thereby interrupting her pretense to totality. However, Dalton misses a radical difference between Levinasian ethics and the second moment of the sublime. For, as we will see in more detail below, Kant quickly subordinates the initial moment of transcendence to a second moment, during which the subject recognizes within herself a capacity to think this Infinite as an idea. By contrast, while the subject of the ethical relation in Levinas does attempt a Kantian return to self, if one can call it that, he or she will *always fail*; the infinite otherness expressed in the face-to-face encounter will always overflow the capacity of the subject to tame it, even and especially as an idea. Dalton overlooks the fact that the exteriority described by Kant is really interiority, in the sense that what is at first absolutely exterior is then refigured within the subject, through the positing of an idea of Reason.

I would like to pause for a moment to consider Levinas's frequent juxtaposition between the pedagogic modes of Socrates and Descartes, as it will help to clarify what, precisely, is problematic about the second moment of the Kantian sublime (and

correlatively, about Dalton's reading of it). According to Levinas, Socrates supports a theory of teaching as maieutics, according to which nothing can be taught that is not already contained within the self. This is problematic for Levinas, as any experience of alterity – of an Other not containable within the categories of the subject – is necessarily excluded from the maieutic process. Levinas, by contrast with Socrates, will align himself with Descartes on this question of pedagogy. Levinas appreciates in Descartes his description of the Infinite as an Idea absolutely exterior to the subject, despite all attempts to contain it in thought. Levinas argues for a teaching based on absolute alterity and not in the drawing out of knowledge already buried within the self—for a radical encounter with Infinity rather than an archeology. In his theory of the sublime, Kant takes the opposite approach. While the subject is drawn out of herself by an experience of absolute exteriority, she ultimately returns; the initial moment of transcendence is still subordinate to the recognition of a rational capacity to think the Infinite as an idea. The experience of the Kantian sublime is thus a kind of Socratic maieutics; it is an exercise or experience meant to teach the individual what is already contained within the self.

These disagreements with Dalton notwithstanding, the category of the sublime is instructive insofar as it allows for a better understanding of Levinas's later writings on art. I argue below that it is Adorno's historical reformulation of the Kantian sublime which will help us to locate within Levinas's later work on aesthetics the element of the sublime – a sublime that in turn allows us to think the ethical and the aesthetic together, and thus to expand his philosophy to include an ethical approach to art. The basis of this comparison will be Adorno and Levinas's shared interest in modern artists such as Paul Celan. Whereas Levinas must bracket the aesthetic – which he mostly defines according

to an ahistorical conception of beauty – in order to appreciate the ethical in Celan’s poetry, Adorno reads Celan as emblematic of a Modernist rejection of the beautiful in favour of the aesthetic sublime. I argue here that Levinas’s bracketing of the aesthetic is unnecessary once the aesthetic is understood through Adorno's historical account of the sublime. To make this argument, I compare Adorno’s discussion of modern art to the kind of ethical art that Levinas describes. I argue, based on Adorno’s writings, that Levinas implicitly recognizes the limitations of the beautiful in the wake of the Holocaust and endorses instead something similar to Adorno's interpretation of the Modernist sublime. In other words, Adorno answers a latent demand within Levinas’s system: a demand to think the ethical and the aesthetic at the same time.

The first section below explores in greater detail Adorno's position that Modernism is premised on a rejection of beauty. The second section examines Adorno's claim that the critique of beauty in modern art does not necessarily imply a total rejection of the aesthetic, as it does for Levinas, but rather indicates a need to turn against certain aspects of the aesthetic in order to achieve a critical perspective on an insufficient reality. Adorno explains this turn against beauty in modern art using a reworked conception of the Kantian sublime.

A Rejection of Beauty

The critique of society inherent to Modernist art, according to Adorno, is premised on a rejection of traditional beauty, a rejection similarly acknowledged by Levinas to be integral to the work of Paul Celan. None of the Modernist examples repeatedly employed by Adorno – Mahler’s compositions, Picasso’s paintings, Celan’s poetry, Beckett’s plays

– are traditionally beautiful. At the same time, Adorno is careful to point out that this is not an outright rejection of beauty for the sake of the ugly or the fragmented; like every concept approached by Adorno, the category of beauty is not simply negated, but rather must be understood dialectically and historically. The historical quality of Adorno's analysis certainly complicates any comparison with Levinas, whose ethical phenomenology mostly brackets historical concerns. One of the aims of this chapter, however, is to demonstrate that Levinas and Adorno are not as far apart as they at first seem when it comes to their analyses of modern art. It is my view that Levinas even latently attributes the same historical power to Modernist art as Adorno does.

By opposing beauty to the living and to morality, and by characterizing it as a source of violence and of guilt, Adorno closely approximates Levinas's indictment of beauty in "Reality and its Shadow." For instance, Adorno describes beauty as the "original sin"²⁵⁸ of art; it is that which makes art a "permanent protest against morality."²⁵⁹ Levinas, by comparison, treats the beautiful work as "essentially disengaged"²⁶⁰ and "a dimension of evasion."²⁶¹ Art, according to Levinas's view, fundamentally opposes engagement and the demands of responsible action; when experiencing art, one feels "as though everything really can end in songs."²⁶² Furthermore, both Adorno and Levinas see a fundamental correlation between the reconciling impulse of beauty's form and death, though they understand this correlation in slightly different terms. As we have seen, for Adorno this affiliation between beauty and death has to do with the unification of multiplicity into an aesthetic form – or with

²⁵⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," 12.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

the subjecting of the multiplicity of nature to one unified law. For Adorno, “[t]he affinity of all beauty with death has its nexus in the idea of pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished in it.”²⁶³ By contrast, for Levinas, beauty is death-like in the sense that it suspends time by repeating a single instant in perpetuity; the completed work of art thus removes itself from the living and is marked by the “infinite repetition”²⁶⁴ of a single moment. According to Levinas: “The artist has given the statue a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life.”²⁶⁵ The artwork imprisons its characters, locks them in, thereby substituting an immobile plasticity for a living history.

Perhaps above all, a Levinasian echo can be heard in Adorno's claim that beauty is inextricable from the guilt of its coercive form. Both thinkers are suspicious of the use of beauty as a palliative, as an apology for regressive social conditions. To uphold an aesthetic of beauty in postwar Germany, in Adorno's view, is to descend into the worst form of apology for the catastrophic events of World War Two. During Hitler's regime, Adorno reminds us, the beautiful was exploited in the service of the most barbaric ends. “The more torture went on in the basement,” Adorno writes, “the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns.”²⁶⁶ Despite employing very different terms, Levinas recognizes a similar problem with aesthetic enjoyment and binds pleasure in beauty to a feeling of guilt and shame: “There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.”²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 68.

²⁶⁴ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 10.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 64.

²⁶⁷ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 12. Compare this statement by Levinas to the passage from Adorno's essay “Commitment,” which argues that no modern art is exempt from the element of shame: “The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts

Despite these similarities, Adorno's historical analysis clearly differs from Levinas's phenomenological account of aesthetic enjoyment. Whereas for Levinas, the beautiful is a mostly fixed category, frequently employed in opposition to ethics, for Adorno, the beautiful is thoroughly dynamic. This indicates one of the major differences between Adorno and Levinas in their respective philosophical approaches. Adorno's dialectical approach indicates that every category, including the beautiful, must be historically situated. By contrast, Levinas describes, phenomenologically, the essential modes of human experience, which he grounds in the primacy of the ethical relation. He does not choose to theorize the relation between ethics and the totality of our everyday experience, including the experience of beauty, in dialectical or historical terms. For this reason, the essential structure of beauty for Levinas does not – and cannot – change. For instance, Levinas equates aesthetics with beauty and while he does note differences between classical and modern manifestations of beauty, namely contrasting the “happy beauty”²⁶⁸ of the former with the “sad value”²⁶⁹ of the latter, he maintains a fairly static conception of beauty throughout his career. And by opposing this static notion of beauty to ethics, Levinas makes it difficult to explore the implications of modern art for the ethical relation.

My goal here is to demonstrate that Levinas's writings on art indicate a certain predilection for Modernist art, and thereby acknowledge, latently, that modern art may be more open to the ethical than its predecessors. This acknowledgement is evident in Levinas's description, at the end of “Reality and its Shadow,” of modern art's unique

contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it” (Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (London; New York: Verso, 2007) 189).

²⁶⁸ Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow,” 12.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

ability to perform its own philosophical exegesis. As we examined in Chapter One, Levinas identifies the ethical dimension of art strictly from within the context of philosophical exegesis; he argues that philosophy is required to integrate “the inhuman work of the artist into the human world.”²⁷⁰ Through philosophical exegesis, which Levinas claims is still “preliminary,”²⁷¹ it is possible to draw the artwork out of its realm of evasion and force it “to speak.”²⁷² Levinas thus acknowledges a correlation between art and ethics, but only via philosophical criticism. Here I am interested in Levinas’s remark on the self-criticism increasingly apparent in the work of modern artists in particular; in his words, modern literature “manifests a more and more clear awareness of this fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry.”²⁷³ Put differently, modern art demands of artists that they be both artist and art critic at the same time. “The artist refuses to be only an artist,” Levinas asserts, “...because he needs to interpret his myths himself.”²⁷⁴ If, for Levinas, to interpret art is to draw it out of its realm of irresponsibility and make it relevant for the ethical relation – to break its silence, in other words – then the modern artwork becomes a site of struggle between the idolatry of aesthetic form, equated by Levinas with beauty, and the artist’s critique of that idolatry as insufficient in its suspension of living reality.²⁷⁵ As we will see below, Levinas’s view of the artwork is more historical and less opposed to Adorno’s theory than it at first seems.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid., 13.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas reaffirms his position that modern art is marked by an awareness of its own ontological essence: “The research of modern art, or perhaps more exactly, art in the stage of search, a stage never overcome, seems in all its aesthetics to look for and understand this resonance or production of essence in the form of works of art” (*Otherwise Than Being*, 40-41).

Outside of this short analysis in “Reality and its Shadow,” Levinas does not explore further the question of a philosophical exegesis of art or the self-criticism unique to modern art. Levinas privileges the modern artwork as a site of ethical significance without explaining how it achieves this in aesthetic terms. Such an explanation becomes possible, however, if we expand Levinas’s conception of the self-critical nature of modern art using Adorno’s analysis of Modernism. What Adorno adds here is a historical explanation of why Modernism enacts a turn against beauty, and how this move necessarily results in a more complex, non-totalizing understanding of modern art.

Modernism’s turn against beauty results in part from a discomfort with the illusion of reconciliation produced by a beautiful form. According to Adorno, such reconciliation is won through an act of violence upon the particular elements of reality; beauty forcibly transfigures disparate, living material into a pure, unified form. The beautiful is cruel, in other words, because in it “something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of the works, the more cruel they are.”²⁷⁶ Modern art begins to condemn its own desire for beauty, adamant that no such reconciliation with the ‘living’ elements of our experience has occurred. It thus becomes self-critical by drawing attention to cruelty as an inevitable aspect of all artistic form. Adorno explains the overt cruelty of modern art as follows:

If in modern artworks cruelty raises its head undisguised, it confirms the truth that in the face of the overwhelming force of reality art can no longer rely on its a priori ability to transform the dreadful into form. Cruelty is an element of art’s critical reflection on itself; art despairs over the claim to power that it fulfills in being reconciled.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 65.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In choosing the dreadful over beautiful form, art becomes a site of protest against not only the dominant ideology, but also against its own inevitable complicity with the very ideology it condemns. And yet artworks inevitably create a sense of reconciliation and thus are beautiful despite themselves, due to the closure of their form. Modern art attempts to compensate for such cruelty through self-criticism, by fragmenting, rupturing and defacing the beauty of its form at every turn.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno presents the history of the beautiful and the ugly as part of the dialectic of Enlightenment first theorized in his 1947 text with Max Horkheimer. In Adorno's view, the beautiful emerges out of the ugliness of a so-called archaic stage of history, which Adorno characterizes by the grimacing gestures of cultic masks, as part of an attempt to sublimate fear of the natural world through imagination and form. A counterpart to the early operation of instrumental rationality, then, the beautiful results from the aggressive unification of disparate particulars into a reconciled, harmonious form.²⁷⁸ Keeping with his argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno argues that what is lodged in the emergence of the beautiful is the promise of reconciliation with nature as opposed to the perpetuation of mythic fear. However, because our relation with the natural world continues to be one of violence and domination, ugliness persists in art as the dissonant and the particular, serving as a reminder that history "has yet to redeem the promise of freedom"²⁷⁹ lodged in beauty. In *Aesthetic Theory*, the history of the beautiful and the ugly in art then mirrors the dialectic of Enlightenment by unfolding according to the same dialectic of freedom and fear.

²⁷⁸ This argument by Adorno on beauty is the counterpart to his discussion of classical mimesis, which we examined in Chapter Three. As we saw there, Adorno rejects the classical Greek aesthetic for its softening of the particularities of reality through the harmony of form.

²⁷⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 62.

According to Adorno's narrative, as the possibility of freedom becomes increasingly remote in Western culture, artists begin to turn against beauty and the category of the ugly dialectically reemerges as the dominant aesthetic form. What now exemplifies Modern art are the “physically revolting and repellent”²⁸⁰ aspects of Samuel Beckett and the “anatomical horror”²⁸¹ of Rimbaud or Benn. This turn against beauty and toward ugliness allows art to escape the grips of instrumental rationality and thus retain autonomy from the status quo. Autonomy and ugliness in modern art go hand in hand; both allow for a turn against the totalizing tendencies of instrumental rationality. As Adorno puts it: “In its autonomous forms art decries domination... and stands witness for what domination represses and disavows.”²⁸² Notice here that Adorno attributes two aspects to modern art: Art protests against domination, but it also bears witness to the repressed. Leaving aside the second of these claims for a moment, I would like to ask what it means for art to ‘decry domination’. How does the rejection of beauty in modern art achieve this critical effect?

Adorno finds evidence of modern art’s success as a site of protest in the widespread reaction against modern art as ugly and obscure. In opposition to the popular desire for “idle beauty”²⁸³ and consolatory images, modern art embraces the ugly and grotesque. It is only in doing so that modern art can effectively mimic the ugliness around it. Adorno explains: “Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as ugly, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it... Rather, in the ugly, art must

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 61.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid., 64.

²⁸³ Ibid.

denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image.”²⁸⁴ Whereas art in its early stage asserted itself against mythic fear by drawing menacing elements into a beautiful form, modern art turns against its own reconciling impulse, using ugliness as a means to protest the suppression of freedom in the modern world.

Adorno shares with Levinas a deep respect for Paul Celan, finding in his poetry an exemplary instance of modern art’s rejection of beauty. In Celan, beauty is dialectically inverted. His “lifeless”²⁸⁵ language is not the same extinction of the living by beautiful form described elsewhere by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* and by Levinas in “Reality and its Shadow.” Rather, Celan’s poetry approximates death because it knows no other way to respond to suffering, or to speak for the victims of the war. Lifeless images are not an escape from moral responsibility, but actually the most engaged response possible to Celan’s postwar world. What is essential to Adorno’s analysis is his appreciation for the self-critical quality of Celan’s poems; Celan turns against beauty by making shame and death – two qualities of beauty problematic for Levinas – the primary features of his poems. Adorno explains:

His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan’s poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence. Their truth content itself becomes negative. They imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings, indeed beneath all organic language: It is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars.²⁸⁶

Celan’s poetry, which eliminates the organic in favour of the ‘dead speaking of stones and stars,’ reacts against the increasingly inorganic, lifeless quality of human experience, which, as we have seen, finds its counterpart in violence and in human suffering. Celan’s

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 405.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

poetry seeks to highlight the increasing difficulty of integrating reality into a beautiful form, and chooses thus to describe nature, and even human beings, as deadened and mute.

For Adorno, there is more to the modernist rejection of beauty, however, than critique. As we have seen, art not only ‘decries domination’ but it also ‘bears witness to what domination represses and disavows’. Turning now to the second of these claims, I would like to ask what it means for Adorno to call modern art a ‘witness’ to the repressed. How does art testify to the presence of something outside of the confines of instrumental reason?

The answer to this is found in Adorno’s reworking of the categories of the beautiful and, as we will see below, the sublime. According to Adorno, lodged within the history of beautiful form, with all of its cruelty, is the possibility that a less violent, more reconciled relation with the objective world could emerge. The dialectic between form and myriad objectivity at the heart of the beautiful is played out in the “sphere of untouchability”²⁸⁷ that is aesthetic form. Echoing Kant on aesthetic judgment here, Adorno writes that the beautiful preserves an experience distant from the practical demands of the everyday. And while such an experience of “aesthetic reconciliation”²⁸⁸ is powerless to bring about change – “[i]t achieves an unreal reconciliation at the price of real reconciliation”²⁸⁹ – it nonetheless serves as witness to what current conditions continue to repress.

Modern art turns against the beautiful, according to Adorno, not because it wants to rid itself of beauty entirely, but because it wants to protect the beautiful from ideology.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Thus, the beautiful does not disappear even in modern art, but is gestured toward as a negative possibility, or as a deferred promise. Put in dialectical terms, the ugly always carries within it the implications of the beautiful. Adorno explains: “Indeed, it is for the sake of the beautiful that there is no longer beauty: because it is no longer beautiful. What can only appear negatively mocks a resolution that it recognizes as false and which therefore debases the idea of the beautiful.”²⁹⁰ Adorno here contrasts the negativity of modern art with the false resolution of radical identity-thinking, which makes a mockery of the reconciliation with myriad objectivity once sought after by traditional beauty. It is only in refusing beauty that art becomes the voice of something other than the false identity of instrumental rationality.

There is thus a historical reason, according to Adorno, for the modern turn against beauty and, as will be shown below, toward the sublime. The sublime aesthetic allows modern art to express, on the one hand, the increasingly fragmented society in which it lives, and, on the other hand, it allows modern art to save beauty from its corruption by the culture industry. The rejection of beauty is thus at the same time its preservation; what is promised by beauty, like its counterpart in truth content or reconciliation, does not yet exist. Modern art becomes a kind of placeholder for a truth content remaining outside of its grasp. By turning to the sublime, Adorno, unlike Levinas who has no such category, is able to explain the rejection of beauty characteristic of Modernism in aesthetic terms. As we will see in the next section, Adorno's reworking of the Kantian sublime opens up a space to consider in aesthetic terms Levinas's division between the artwork as ethical event and as static beautiful thing.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 69.

The Category of the Sublime

The category of the sublime has enjoyed renewed interest in recent years, in the wake of a series of lectures presented by Jean-Francois Lyotard in the 1980's.²⁹¹ This contemporary discussion of the sublime echoes an earlier resurgence of interest in the topic, following Despréaux Boileau's translation in 1674 of Longinus'²⁹² text *Peri Hupsos* (or *On Sublimity*), dating from the 1st century A.D. As a result of its passage in and out of popularity, the concept of the sublime has undergone numerous transformations. Edmund Burke, for example, places special emphasis on the physiological effects of the sublime on the subject, understanding terror and delight to be the sublime's ruling principles.²⁹³ Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, similarly describes a mixed experience of pleasure and fear in his account of the sublime, but also focuses on where the physiological experience gives way to higher principles of reason. Both of these 18th century writers differ from what is largely taken to be the first rumination on the topic by Longinus, who focuses on poetic grandeur, describing the sublime as "a kind

²⁹¹ See *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), which contains essays by a number of well-known authors, including Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy writes that there is no modern reflection on art that does not address the question of the sublime in some form or another. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 25-54.

²⁹² The author and exact date of this text are unknown.

²⁹³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968). For a discussion of the difference between Burke's presentation of the sublime and Adorno's, namely due to the former's emphasis on the power of sublime to inspire respect for the socio-political order and the latter's emphasis on historical critique, see Martin Morris, *Rethinking the Communicative Turn: Adorno, Habermas, and the Problem of Communicative Freedom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Morris sees a continuation of the more regressive, conformist Burkean sublime in the culture industry, the products of which employ the effects of terror and awe (always at a safe distance) in order to sustain the de-politicized, non-participatory values of a society driven by exchange (Morris, 183-184). Morris's analysis diverges from my own analysis of shudder as a site of Adornian aesthetics and Levinasian ethics in that Morris ultimately retrieves shudder for a Habermasian project on an intersubjective, communicative ideal: "A politics that appreciates the mimetic shudder is fundamentally a democratic politics"(Morris, 191).

of eminence or excellence of discourse.”²⁹⁴ The word itself derives from the Greek ‘hupsos’, usually translated as high or height,²⁹⁵ and the Latin ‘sublimis’, indicating something under a threshold or limit.²⁹⁶ To speak of the sublime is either to speak of height – hence Longinus’s emphasis on poetic grandeur – or, in keeping with the Greek origin of the term, to indicate what goes beyond certain limits – evident in Kant’s emphasis on the transcendence of nature and the infinity of reason.²⁹⁷ Jan Rosiek provides the following characterization of the sublime: “From Longinus to Lyotard, the sublime has been portrayed as the feeling of an emotional blow caused by a simultaneously terrifying and attractive power. Terms like lightning, terror, anxiety, and shock have been mustered in order to capture the effect of this event.”²⁹⁸ Rosiek’s definition is apt if we look at what the extensive literature on the sublime has in common: all share an emphasis on the emotional experience of something that transcends (or fails to transcend), whether that be the majesty of nature, the triumph of reason over the senses, the terror of death, the power of the divine, or the postmodern emphasis on the intensity of the artistic event.²⁹⁹ Due to the complexity of this history, any interpretation of the sublime requires some explanation of what kind of sublime one is talking about. Here, I will focus on those aspects of the sublime most pertinent to Adorno’s reworking

²⁹⁴ Longinus, “Dionysius Longinus On the Sublime,” 1819, 462.

²⁹⁵ The translation of the sublime as ‘height’ echoes Levinas’ emphasis on height in his description of infinity in *Totality and Infinity*: “The idea of infinity designates a height and a nobility, a transcendence” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 41).

²⁹⁶ See Jan Rosiek, *Maintaining the Sublime: Heidegger and Adorno* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000) 8-9.

²⁹⁷ Rosiek, 38. Jan Rosiek defines the sublime as follows: “Any definition of the sublime must bear in mind the meaning of situation at or near an entrance into the limitless. We may extend this into the minimum requirement that the sublime must be engaged in an exploration of limits, as well as in a speculation on the no-thing that may be at the end of this exploration beyond these limits” (Rosiek, 9).

²⁹⁸ Rosiek, 12. Rosiek goes on to argue that the modern sublime is a theological-aesthetic concept, which no longer manifests itself through religion, but through artistic practice.

²⁹⁹ For a general history of the sublime along these lines, see Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 1-11.

of the term. I will begin with Kant's interpretation of the sublime as a failure of the sensible, and follow this with an analysis of Adorno's unique use of the category to explain Modernist art.

Adorno modifies Kant's notion of the sublime in at least two significant ways, both of which allow for a more fluid comparison with Levinas. Briefly, Adorno's two significant changes to the Kantian sublime are as follows: firstly, the decision to isolate the initial moment of the sublime in order to emphasize the experience of an overwhelming otherness as opposed to the primacy of human reason; secondly, the grounding of the sublime not in experiences of nature, but in experiences of art.

In order to understand why Adorno finds it necessary to isolate the first moment of the Kantian sublime, it is helpful first to consider Kant's position in more detail. For Kant the sublime is an experience of the failure of the powers of sensible representation. One way in which this occurs is as a failure of the faculties of space and time, which were laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the a priori intuitive forms through which any given subject perceives the world. In his description of the mathematical sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes a conflict between the ability of the mind to *comprehend* an absolutely large magnitude and the mind's attempt to *apprehend* this magnitude according to the logical measurements of space and time. Kant writes that this conflict results in "a regression that in turn cancels the condition of time in the imagination's progression and makes *simultaneity* intuitable."³⁰⁰ Further on, he refers to this cancellation of the condition of time as "a subjective movement of the imagination

³⁰⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) Ak. 258-9.

by which it does violence to the inner sense.”³⁰¹ For Kant, the sublime thus undermines the phenomenal experience of the world, and makes accessible to the mind what he elsewhere describes as the noumenal, or the thing-in-itself, understood in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as what is beyond the reach of the senses but not beyond the ideas of reason.

Kant further describes the initial moment of the sublime as a disorienting sensible experience that frustrates the imagination’s attempt to comprehend what it apprehends. Kant’s description of the sublime as a dizzying feeling that one has lost one’s senses echoes the earlier formulation by Longinus. For Longinus, the sublime is a combination of wonder and awe, of ecstasy and astonishment, “which tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator’s whole power at a single blow.”³⁰² Longinus interprets the sublime as an effect on the subject, as what sweeps the listener or reader away with “invincible power.”³⁰³ This is exemplified for Longinus by a fragment in which Sappho describes the madness of love as the loss of one’s senses, unfolding in turn the loss of speech (“I cannot speak”), of taste and touch (“my tongue is broken, a subtle fire runs under my skin”) and of sight and hearing (“I cannot see, my ears hum”). This multitude of sensations ultimately culminates in a feeling of fear at the nearness of death, the sublimity of which Longinus describes as follows: “Do you not admire the way in which she brings everything together – mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin? She seems to have lost them all, and to be looking for them as though they were external to her. She is cold and hot, mad and sane, frightened and near death, all by turns.”³⁰⁴ This passage by Longinus resonates with Kant’s description of the initial

³⁰¹ Ibid. Ak. 259.

³⁰² Longinus, 462.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 472.

moment of the sublime, in which the imagination fails to apprehend what it perceives through the senses. Like Longinus, Kant compares the sublime to the fearful experience of standing over an “abyss” in which the imagination is “afraid to lose itself,”³⁰⁵ for Kant, the sublime marks the forced surrender of a subject’s stabilizing powers of representation.

As an overwhelming phenomenon, exceeding the mind’s attempt to apprehend it, the first moment of the Kantian sublime bears resemblance to the ethical in Levinas. Levinas often depicts the ethical relation in Cartesian terms, wherein the subject attempts to think the idea of Infinity, but finds that Infinity necessarily overflows every attempt to contain it in thought. As we have already seen in the introduction to this chapter, there are crucial differences as well. Kant assumes from the start of his analysis of the sublime that the subject will eventually acknowledge the feeling of excess produced by the sublime as indicative of the power of her own reason. The subject may not *apprehend* this experience – meaning that she may not be able to place it within the limits of phenomenal knowledge – but this initial failure on the part of the subject’s sensible faculties is overcome in a second moment, when the subject discovers within herself a faculty of Reason that can posit the Infinite as an idea. In other words, for Kant the imagination loses footing only then to regain its dignity on a higher, supersensible plane.³⁰⁶ And thus, in contrast with Levinas, Kant sides with Socratic maieutics over Cartesian infinity.

Furthermore, the sublime reveals a deeper cleavage between Levinas and Kant on the subject of morality. The transition from repulsion to attraction in the sublime – or from displeasure to pleasure – occurs as a kind of subreption, or substitution, which

³⁰⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak. 258.

³⁰⁶ For an interpretation of this passage in terms of the connection between the sublime writer and the presence of the divine, see Rosiek, 42-46.

reveals the deeper, moral intentions of Kant's formulation of the sublime. The initial experience of inadequacy is *replaced* by an experience of elevation at the power of human reason; in other words, the initial sensible moment is used as a gateway to the higher vocation of reason within the subject. "What we call sublime in nature outside us... becomes interesting," writes Kant, "only because we present it as a might of the mind to rise above *certain* obstacles of sensibility by means of moral principles."³⁰⁷ For Kant, sublime experiences make "intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility."³⁰⁸ By directing the subject toward those aspects of humanity that go beyond the level of the merely sensible, in other words, toward the dictates of practical reason, Kant describes the experience of the sublime as raising the "soul's fortitude,"³⁰⁹ and keeping "the humanity in our person from being degraded."³¹⁰ In other words, the subject elevates herself above the initial experience of overwhelming alterity by appealing to the higher principles of reason, and correlatively for Kant, of morality. This privileging of reason over the experience of Infinity in the sublime highlights an important difference between Kant and Levinas. For the latter, the ethical results from an acknowledgement of what is prior to rationality and more fundamental than even the subject, namely an encounter with absolute alterity. For Kant, by contrast, the ethical results from an acknowledgment of the power of reason to

³⁰⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak.271. David Martyn describes the relation between these two moments as follows: "The sublime, for Kant, is initially experienced as something that overloads or outstrips the subject's faculties of comprehension. The mind *fails*, runs out or exhausts itself, in its attempt to take in the overwhelming greatness of the sublime. In a second movement, this inadequacy is transformed into a triumph over the object: the subject realizes, as it were, that what proves inadequate is not the mind but its sensible faculties, which can never measure up to the greatness of its abstract idea." David Martyn, *Sublime Failures: The Ethics of Kant and Sade* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002) 136.

³⁰⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak. 257.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Ak. 261.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Ak. 262.

posit the Infinite as an idea, which helps the subject to *overcome* the initial moment of alterity in a sublime experience.

According to Adorno, Kant's subordination of the sensible to the supposedly higher principles of Reason places him in a lineage of philosophical thought that suppresses what is other – sensible nature – in order to elevate the rational subject to an absolute. Susan Buck-Morss characterizes this Kantian tendency as typical of an “asensual” and “anaesthetic”³¹¹ emphasis in modern aesthetics, arguing that Kant's sublime literally overcomes the sensible through the supersensible and thus reverses the original meaning of the Greek word *Aisthitikos*, as what is “perceptive by feeling.”³¹² Kant's aesthetic judgment, in other words, “is robbed of its senses.”³¹³ However, while Adorno would agree with this analysis of Kant's conclusions, he wants to salvage from Kant the moment prior to the ultimate subordination of the sensible to a rational substrate. According to Adorno, the Kantian sublime is not a completely *asensual* experience, but rather Kant intimates something of an experience of nature – as we have seen, a space of alterity for Adorno – in the initial moment of the sublime.

Adorno chooses to build his own account of the aesthetic out of the initial moment of the Kantian sublime, where the imagination experiences a failure of its powers. Adorno appreciates in Kant's description his emphasis on the “wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation,”³¹⁴ and his comparison between the resulting state of agitation and the experience of standing over an abyss. “If a [thing],” writes Kant, “is excessive for the imagination (and the imagination is driven to [such excess] as it

³¹¹ Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *October* 62 (Autumn, 1992) 18.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Ak. 246.

apprehends [the thing] in intuition), then [the thing] is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself.”³¹⁵ This abyss-like experience, provoked by the boundless diversity of nature, cannot be dismissed simply as inconsequential for Kant’s version of the sublime, no matter how determined his attempt to subordinate it to a principle of reason. It is only because of this moment that a transition to the higher plane of reason is possible, for it leads the mind to experience the Infinite – although only in a negative way.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno reorients Kant’s sublime toward this initial moment of overwhelming objectivity and thereby allows for a more productive comparison with Levinas. The sublime, at least in its initial form for Kant, interrupts the subject’s attempt to posit herself as absolute. There is in the sublime a moment of respect for absolute alterity, which places the emphasis not on the subsumptive power of human reason, but on a certain humility with regard to what overwhelms and exceeds the subject. Adorno describes this Kantian moment as a moment of freedom, because it hints at the possibility of a human comportment not premised on instrumentality but on the relatedness and proximity characteristic of early mimesis. There is a certain potentiality in the sublime, gesturing toward a promise of reconciliation with nature not premised on domination or control. However, for Adorno this moment is only a flash, deftly subordinated to a second moment that chooses to glorify subjective reason and quash the unwieldy potential of the first. Adorno explains that in Kant, “[s]omething of freedom flashes up that philosophy, culpably mistaken, reserves for its opposite, the glorification of the subject. The spell that the subject casts over nature imprisons the subject as well:

³¹⁵ Ibid., Ak. 258.

Freedom awakens in the consciousness of its affinity with nature.”³¹⁶ What is then significant about the Kantian sublime for Adorno is not its power to place human reason above an arcane objectivity, but rather the recognition that our rational capacities have failed and continue to fail with respect to reconciliation. The failure of the subject to classify otherness in the initial experience of the sublime has the power to threaten and thus criticize, if only for a moment, the ‘spell’ that imprisons both the subject and nature as a result of radicalized subsumptive thought.

The second significant change made by Adorno to Kant’s sublime is Adorno’s grounding of the sublime not in nature but in art. According to Adorno, the examples of sublime experience provided by Kant are no longer – or perhaps were never - accessible to us in the way that Kant describes. A commodity culture, a culture within which the Alps, for example, can be mass-produced on a postcard, renders the effect of nature innocuous. Despite the diminishing effect of natural phenomena, sublime experiences do not disappear, for Adorno, but are rather transposed into art. Like the initial moment of the Kantian sublime, modern art shatters the illusion that the objective world is merely a space upon which rationality can exert decisive control.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, modern art encapsulates the elements of the sublime appreciated by Adorno, namely the enacting of a moment of transcendence that forces the subject to capitulate her powers of reason.³¹⁷ The difference between the natural and the aesthetic sublime is that whereas the former speaks directly to the possibility of a comportment not premised on instrumental reason, the latter speaks to such a possibility

³¹⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 276.

³¹⁷ Adorno’s notion of shudder captures those elements of the initial moment of Kant’s sublime that resonate with Levinas, in particular the disorientating experience of being shocked or assaulted by overwhelming alterity. The parallel between Adorno’s notion of shudder and Levinasian ethics will form the basis of my argument in Chapter 5.

only in mediated form. It is for this reason that Adorno describes the sublime in modern art both as “latent” and as “unassuaged negativity”: “[t]he legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity, as stark and illusionless as was once promised as the semblance of the sublime.”³¹⁸ The possibility of reconciliation aborted by Kant in his hasty overturning of the first moment of the sublime reappears in modern art, but only as a negative gesture toward what was lost – and toward what may yet be achieved.³¹⁹

Like Levinas, Adorno finds in Celan’s poetry certain exceptional tendencies. Adorno goes much further than Levinas, however, in his discussion of the aesthetic qualities of Celan’s poems. Adorno argues that Celan’s poetry produces transcendence through an aesthetic experience akin to the Kantian sublime. Celan’s poetry is in line with the imperative of modern art; not to provide beautiful images of consolation, but to bear witness to what is repressed by a society built on the systematic reduction of what is other. As we have seen above, Celan resists the impulse to beautify his reality by refusing to make positive images at all. Analogously, for Kant, what provokes a sublime experience – an infinitely powerful or large phenomenon of nature – is precisely what cannot be expressed through the senses as a positive image. It is then no surprise that Kant cites the Judaic ban on images as an important example of the sublime.³²⁰ Similarly, for Adorno, the modern artworks of Celan cannot present in a positive image what is

³¹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 260.

³¹⁹ It may be helpful to recall here Bernstein’s discussion of Adorno and natural beauty, addressed in Chapter Three. According to Bernstein’s interpretation, natural beauty, for Adorno, once served to remind individuals of what was lost in the Idealist elevation of the subject above the natural world. However, with the increasing disappearance of natural beauty, art has become the keepsake of an alternative comportment toward the sensuous world.

³²⁰ “For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still expands the soul. Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc. (Kant, Ak. 274).

other than the subject, but rather, must express, negatively, what is beyond and other than one's experience. For Adorno, Celan's poetry draws attention to an experience of the natural world once promised by the sublime but made increasingly unattainable through the movement of instrumental rationality; the lifeless, anorganic quality of Celan's poems serve as a negative reminder of a meaningful experience we continue to be denied.

Conclusion

Adorno's reworking of the category of the sublime is a useful supplement to Levinas because it helps us to expand the latter's conception of the aesthetic beyond the beautiful. As we have already seen, Levinas strictly divides the aesthetic from the ethical based on his suspicion of the power of beauty to suppress alterity. Levinas acknowledges the disruptive, transcendent, ethical power of certain works of art, but he must treat these as exceptions and remove them from the aesthetic sphere. I have argued above that the ethical traits ascribed by Levinas to these exceptional cases can be understood in aesthetic terms using Adorno's theory of the sublime. When read alongside Adorno, Levinas's strict division between the ethical and the aesthetic begins to strain.

As we have already seen, both Adorno and Levinas seek ways in which to interrupt the hegemony of the subject, by forcing upon it an experience of something other than itself. Both uncover such an experience in the poetry of Celan. However, their interpretations of Celan also suggest significant differences between them. On the one hand, Levinas, in his frequent equation of art with beauty, tends to reduce art to an ahistorical essence. For Adorno, by contrast, art changes in accordance with the historical conditions in which it finds itself. For this reason, he characterizes Modernist art as

thoroughly steeped in the devastation characteristic of postwar Europe. Adorno speculates that if things were to change for the better, then one could imagine that art, as a form of critique, would no longer be necessary except as a source of pleasure and play. For Levinas, such a historical telos for art or ethics – however refracted – is not his concern. Nonetheless, one of the questions raised by this exploration of the sublime in the writings of Adorno is whether Levinas latently acknowledges a historical shift toward critique in modern art, or, put differently, whether the post-Holocaust writings of Paul Celan or Maurice Blanchot in particular have the power to produce an ethical encounter.

As we have seen in Chapter Three, Adorno's notion of complex totality helps to ease an apparent contradiction between Levinasian ethics and Levinasian form; in this chapter, we have seen that Adorno's theory of the sublime helps to resolve a larger contradiction in Levinas between ethics and beauty. However, it is my view that both of these contradictions are only apparent. By imagining ways in which Levinas's rather narrow aesthetic perspective can be expanded, it becomes clear that Levinas was not as suspicious of the aesthetic as he purported to be. As he himself argues, there is something significant about modern artists progressively performing their own interpretation. However, Levinas did not have the vocabulary to explain how artworks could operate as both sites of totality and transcendence, nor was he interested in pushing further this historical analysis of art. Adorno's aesthetic theory supplements his philosophy on both of these levels – at the level of form, and at the level of art history.

Conversely, Levinas goes much further in his conception of the ethical than Adorno, not only in his major philosophical texts but also in his essay on Celan. Levinas describes Celan's poetry as an ethical Saying, which calls the subject out of herself with a demand

that she be generous and responsible toward the Other human being. For Adorno, by contrast, Celan's poetry is a negative gesture toward alterity, whose silence is a statement in itself. As we saw above, Adorno refuses to describe what is other except in the most elusive of ways; what could be different from the current reality – an experience not based on domination – is always refracted, hidden, a possibility of a possibility projected ahead into the future. Celan's poetry, for Adorno, is silent and deadened because it is at once an indictment of the insufficiency of the current conditions, and an absolute refusal to suggest what could replace them. Based on their differing interpretations of Celan's work, one could argue that Levinas, in suggesting that an ethical encounter with the Other takes place in the poem, goes further in the direction of formulating what could be other than the prevailing form of rationality. The question of whether Levinas may supplement Adorno in this regard will form the basis of the next chapter.

Chapter Five: An Intersection Between Aesthetics and Ethics

One of the central questions raised by my comparison between Levinas and Adorno concerns the place of transcendence within the experience of art. What is the nature of an aesthetic transcendence, and what are its ethical implications? The answer to this question appears quite different within Levinas and Adorno's philosophies. As we have seen, Levinas argues that aesthetic encounters are ultimately excluded as sites of transcendence, which again, he reserves for the face-to-face encounter. I have argued so far that these two categories of the ethical and the aesthetic are not quite as distinct as they may at first appear, and that a closer look at Levinas's reading of art opens a critical space for thinking these two terms together. In Chapter Three, I presented Adorno's account of the work of art as an alternative to Levinas's own, and, in so doing, exposed the narrowness of the latter's conception of artworks as essentially totalizing wholes. Using Adorno's concepts of riddle and mimesis, I showed that works of art are not simply reducible to the totality of their form, but are in fact sites of both transcendence and closure. In Chapter Four, I demonstrated that, despite Levinas's seeming ahistorical equation of art and beauty, he latently endorses a modern art form based not in the beautiful but in a reworked aesthetic category of the sublime. Through these arguments, I have made a case for seeing the moment of the ethical in art as simultaneous with its aesthetic expression and form.

In the following chapter, I ask the complementary question, namely whether Levinas's conception of transcendence helps to open a critical space for considering the ethical implications of Adorno's aesthetics. Based on Levinas's very different

interpretation of art, I argue in the chapter below that he is able to articulate in more productive terms an ethical dimension within aesthetic experience. In particular, I argue that Levinas's ethics addresses a pervasive negativity characteristic of Adorno's conception of transcendence. As we have seen, the transcendence of art is defined for Adorno by its ability, on the one hand, to provoke recognition of the insufficiency of the present reality, and on the other hand, to gesture toward the increasingly limited possibility that current conditions will be transformed for the better. Frequently, artworks are imbued with the capacity to describe, for instance, the "happiness men are denied"³²¹ or "the possibility, however feeble and distant, of redemption."³²² According to Adorno, this possible redemption marks the limit point not only of Modernist art but also of negative dialectics, the former of which produces, as we have seen, only a negative appearance of such a possibility. Hence Adorno's preference for the "radically darkened art"³²³ of Modernism, exemplified by the poetry of Paul Celan, whose poems confront us with just how difficult any actual transformation of objective reality has become.

By attempting to draw out an ethical dimension to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, I move away from more orthodox readings of Adorno's aesthetics as a counterpart to the philosophical project of negative dialectics. Such an orthodox position, presented most convincingly by Jay Bernstein,³²⁴ situates Adorno's theory of the Modernist artwork within his larger philosophical attempt to counter instrumental reason. I would like to spend some time outlining Bernstein's position on Adorno's aesthetics in order to clarify

³²¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 404.

³²² *Ibid.*, 400.

³²³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 50.

³²⁴ See in particular J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and J. M Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

my own divergence from such a reading. In a recent essay on Adorno's theory of Modernist art, which places particular emphasis on Paul Celan,³²⁵ Bernstein builds on his earlier, highly influential argument in *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida*. In both texts, Bernstein reads Adorno's aesthetic theory as a response to the bifurcation between reason and sense characteristic of Western rationality. According to Bernstein, the incommensurability between reason and sense is as much present in Plato's expulsion of the poets in *The Republic*, due to the distracting effects of the sensory on the higher pursuit of reason, as it is in Nietzsche's contrary attempt to elevate aesthetic comportment over enlightened rationality. The aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School outright rejects this division between the sensible and reason. For Bernstein, these thinkers choose to reread the history of philosophical aesthetics as the increasing repression of sense – as a *part* of reason - by scientific or instrumental rationality, and the corresponding displacement of reason's "remnant, the sensory rump"³²⁶ into art and aesthetics.³²⁷ Artworks, as sensuous particulars, become a site of protest against reason in its bifurcated form by serving to remind individuals of what scientific reason has misplaced in its elevation above the natural, sensuous realm. According to Bernstein, Adorno and other critical theorists of the early Frankfurt School understand sense "as a repudiated and hence split off part of reason itself,"³²⁸ which makes art a "social

³²⁵ See Bernstein, "'The dead speaking of stones and stars': Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," As the title of this essay suggests, Bernstein takes as exemplary the passage from *Aesthetic Theory* on Paul Celan that I chose to analyze in Chapter Four. As will become clear, my interpretation of this passage in terms of the sublime differs from Bernstein's emphasis on the modern experience of alienation from nature.

³²⁶ Bernstein, "'The dead speaking of stones and stars': Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*," 144.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-144. According to Bernstein, this reading of history is inseparable from the reading put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Bernstein writes: "The rationalization of reason is the process through which the sensory – the contingent, contextual, and particular – is first dominated and then repudiated as a component of reason, and the remnant, the sensory rump, dispatched into the harmless precinct of art and the aesthetic" (*Ibid.*, 144).

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

repository for the repressed claims of sensuousness.”³²⁹ Bernstein then concludes: “In Critical Theory, philosophical aesthetics is about reason, and only about reason.”³³⁰

To sum up Bernstein’s position, then, modernist artworks and negative dialectics share a goal: both orient themselves toward that which exceeds the claims of instrumental rationality, and thereby suggest the possibility of an alternative relationship between universal and particular, or reason and nature. Negative dialectics does this by thinking against thought’s inevitable universality; artworks do this from the perspective of the particular, protesting the false reconciliation of radicalized identity-thinking by asserting the sensuous particularity of their form.

Bernstein’s reading of Adorno’s aesthetic theory is nothing short of remarkable in both the scope of his interpretation and the careful attentiveness with which he handles Adorno’s texts. I thus do not dispute the legitimacy of Bernstein’s interpretation; indeed much of what I have written up to this point confirms Bernstein’s claim that, for Adorno, the autonomous Modernist work, as a sensuous particular, is a site of protest against instrumentalized reason. Rather, what I attempt to do in the chapter below is focus on certain anomalous passages on aesthetic experience that seem to point beyond Adorno’s standard interpretation of Modernist art, and by extension, Bernstein’s. By reading these passages alongside Levinas, I attempt to loosen the hold of this orthodox interpretation of Adorno as favoring the negativity of Modernist art, much like I have attempted to loosen

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid., 141, 145. Bernstein reads Adorno’s position on Modernist autonomy – the “conceptual key to *Aesthetic Theory*” (Ibid., 147) – as a reflection of this bifurcation between aesthetics and reason. Art becomes autonomous in a negative sense because it has no clear social purpose once the “rationalization of reason” (Ibid., 144) fully takes hold; and art becomes autonomous in a positive sense because art’s freedom from the social order allows it to pursue goals internal to art-making itself, as exemplified in Modernism’s self-reflexive approach to artistic medium. Bernstein holds that this double-character of artistic autonomy is inextricable from the dialectic of reason and sense outlined above; even and especially as an autonomous form, art serves to remind society of the sensuous particularity that instrumental reason has and continues to repress. And thus, Bernstein claims, “autonomous art is the return of the repressed” (Ibid., 147).

the hold of Levinas's ethical phenomenology on his aesthetic views by reading his essay on Celan alongside Adorno. In doing so, I orient the discussion of art away from negative dialectics and from the opposition of reason to nature, or of sensuous particularity to instrumental rationality, in order to interpret the transcendence produced by artworks in a different light.³³¹

In this chapter, I draw out a dimension of aesthetic experience that can be understood as transcendent in Levinasian terms. In order to make this claim, I focus on what I perceive to be a tension within the text of *Aesthetic Theory* regarding transcendence. While in many passages, Adorno clearly aligns the experience of alterity with an overwhelming sense of loss or of alienation from nature, in other passages, particularly on shudder, Adorno is much more ambiguous on what such transcendence entails. In his lengthiest passage on shudder, Adorno's focus is almost exclusively on an artwork's disorienting effect on subjectivity, which, I argue below, allows for a productive comparison with Levinas's account of subjectivity in *Otherwise Than Being*. Adorno's shift in emphasis from the work of art to the shuddering subject allows us to gain distance from the overly narrow reading of modern art as a placeholder for the miscarried promise of reconciliation between nature and reason.

Part of why I think it possible to make this comparison is that Adorno's discussion

³³¹ In attempting to present an alternative to Bernstein's approach, I build on recent work by Peter Hohendahl on Adorno's aesthetics. According to Hohendahl, Bernstein's reading of aesthetic autonomy makes it difficult to imagine Adorno's aesthetics outside of a paradigm of Modernist art. Bernstein interprets autonomy in Adorno's aesthetic theory through its double character. On the one hand, art is said to preserve aesthetic distance from the social and from technological reason, but on the other hand, because art's autonomy emerges out of a historical process of disenchantment, art is said to preserve, negatively, what disenchantment and instrumental rationality continue to deny: the promise of reconciliation between the sensuous and the rational spheres. In response to Bernstein's interpretation of aesthetic autonomy, Hohendahl writes: "aesthetic theory must be about reason or, to be more precise, about the fate of reason in modernism" (Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) 60). Hohendahl goes in a different direction than I intend to here, however, by choosing to focus on the theological in Adorno's aesthetic theory.

of shudder breaks out of his usual framework of cautious negativity. For instance, it is in a passage on shudder that Adorno makes a rare reference to what Alastair Morgan describes as “emphatic life,”³³² as in a life lived rightly as opposed to wrongly, describing shudder as the moment of “life in the subject”³³³ without which consciousness is nothing but “reified consciousness.”³³⁴ What is significant for my comparison with Levinas here is that, for Adorno, shudder, as an experience of life in the emphatic sense of the term, is both an experience of what may predate or point beyond reified subjectivity, and it occurs in response to the Other.³³⁵

Adorno describes the effect of artworks on the subject as a shattering, or shuddering experience, and here comes closest to Levinas’s description of the effect of alterity on the subject in *Otherwise Than Being*. I argue that it is in these passages that Adorno is most ambiguous on the meaning of transcendence; transcendence does not occur through an aesthetic semblance of reconciliation irretrievably past or not-yet-

³³² Alastair Morgan, *Adorno’s Concept of Life* (London; New York: Continuum, 2007) 1.

³³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418.

³³⁴ Ibid. I am indebted here to Alastair Morgan for drawing my attention to the concept of life as a central ethical concern within Adorno’s philosophy. According to Morgan, “the concept of life figures in Adorno’s philosophy as antagonist, ideological consolation, but also as an ethical demand for the possibility of a different way of living...” (Morgan, 1). For an insightful analysis of this passage on shudder within a broader analysis of an emphatic concept of life as embodied subjectivity in Adorno’s philosophy, see Morgan, 97-99. Morgan reads the shudder as intimating an experience momentarily free from the dominant, reified form of experiencing the world. Morgan’s concern here is to draw out “the idea of an emphatic life” (Morgan, 1) from within Adorno’s negative philosophy. The shudder is one moment in Adorno’s text wherein such an idea of life can be heard. Morgan writes: “This shudder is a trace of ‘life’ in an emphatic sense, life in the sense of a reconciled relation between subject and object that is not subsumptive” (Morgan, 98). Morgan explains that the shudder is “a speculative yet bodily experience” (Morgan, 99), which depends on a traditional form of experience (*Erfahrung*) increasingly denied to us.

³³⁵ The discussion of shudder, as a marker of transcendence in the work, is different from Adorno’s discussions elsewhere of the ‘more’ because of its emphasis on the shudder’s affective quality. For instance, Adorno compares the shudder to goosebumps, and describes it as a ‘physical symptom’ of the work. As he puts it: “Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 331). Just as goose bumps are provoked by what is inexplicable or overwhelming and are a physical symptom, or appearance, of this feeling of being overcome, the shudder of aesthetic comportment is an affective, physical symptom of being overcome. For Adorno, this shudder occurs both at the level of the artwork – the shudder is like a physical marker of alterity within the work of art – and at the level of the subject responding to the work.

achieved, and thus as a negative experience of what we do not have, but rather through the shattering of a subject's identifying approach to the world. In the experience of artworks, the individual feels the illusion of mastery and self-control dissolve. And while Adorno insists that the experience of shudder is not real, he paradoxically claims that the shudder is not completely illusory either. In his words, these aesthetic "[e]xperiences are not 'as if;'"³³⁶ they are not metaphorical. And thus, even if the shudder does not actually transform the subject's approach to the world, Adorno writes that "for a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility."³³⁷

Here, I am interested in these few moments, which, in 'real terms,' allow the subject to shift from a comportment of domination over objectivity to a comportment of affinity. It is my view that this other comportment, even if it cannot be actualized outside of the aesthetic sphere, significantly resembles Levinas's description of the ethical relation between self and Other. Furthermore, if we can accept that certain similarities exist between these two accounts of subjectivity in an encounter with alterity, it becomes possible to attribute a Levinasian ethical dimension to Adornian aesthetic experience.

In drawing out a dimension of transcendence in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* by reading him next to Levinas, I do not mean to downplay the historical nature of Adorno's critique. It is not my intention to collapse the important distinction between Adorno's notion of transcendence and the ahistorical horizon of alterity maintained by the deconstruction movement, with which Levinas is often aligned.³³⁸ Rather, I argue that it

³³⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 320.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Many thinkers have attempted to diminish the importance of the historical, utopian dimension of Adorno's thought in order to bring him closer to deconstruction. See in particular: Christoph Menke, *The*

is possible to preserve the historical aspect of Adorno's account, while at the same time expanding beyond his negative description of what transcendent experience entails.

In making this claim, I build on Asher Horowitz's argument that the difference between the two thinkers – the difficulty in breaking out of the immanence of Adorno's social critique on the one hand, and the lack of historical analysis in the transcendental phenomenology of Levinas on the other – is overcome when the two are read side-by-side. What Horowitz describes as the “surplus of the social,”³³⁹ expressed by the Levinasian ethical relation, extends beyond the negativity of Adorno's dialectic, whereas, as we have seen in Chapter Four, the socio-historical critique of identity in Adorno supplements Levinas on the question of history. In what follows, I build on Horowitz's claim that Levinas can help to push Adorno beyond his reliance on a privative description of ethics by developing a conception of the ethical which is presupposed by and underlying the various structures of human experience. However, I do so not so much as a means of expanding Adorno's critical social philosophy, as Horowitz does, but rather Adorno's view of aesthetic experience.

In the first section below, I select a few terms used by Levinas in his essay on Celan that most resonate with Adorno's description of aesthetic experience. Building from this initial analysis of Levinas, I proceed to argue that despite Levinas's reticence toward aesthetics, his use of terms such as donation and proximity indicate a break up of subjectivity very similar to Adorno's own description of the aesthetic shudder as an

Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998); Martin Jay, *Adorno*; Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London; New York: Verso, 1987); and Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

³³⁹ Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, xx.

overwhelmed response to alterity. I thereby present the aesthetic experience of shudder as inherently defined by a moment of transcendence that is also ethical in Levinas's terms.

Donation, Proximity, Obsession

In this section, I draw out some of the terms employed by Levinas in his writings on poetry and on the ethical relation in *Otherwise Than Being*. In so doing, I accept Seán Hand's argument that there is a direct correlation between Levinas's later conception of the ethical in *Otherwise Than Being* and his engagement with poetry. However, whereas Hand examines the impact of poetry on the ethical relation, I examine the impact of the ethical relation on poetry, or more broadly, on aesthetic experience understood in Adornian terms. In order to make this argument, I begin by performing a close reading of Levinas's essay on Celan and his later work on ethics, *Otherwise Than Being*. Based on the striking similarity in tone and in language between these two texts,³⁴⁰ I develop a set of terms that will allow for a productive comparison between Levinas's ethics and Adorno's notion of aesthetic experience as shudder. More specifically, these Levinasian terms of transcendence form the basis through which Adorno's conception of aesthetic transcendence will be imagined as ethical.

³⁴⁰ *Otherwise Than Being* is particularly useful for my comparison between Levinas' ethics and Adorno's aesthetics because of what Michael Morgan has aptly described as a shift from a language of distance and height to a language of disturbance and disorder. In these later works, according to Morgan, "[t]he face not only pleases and commands; it is strange and disorienting; it unsettles – and overwhelms" (Michael L Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 81). As we will see below, Adorno describes shudder in a similarly urgent and troubling tone. Morgan notes that Levinas begins to use the language of proximity, obsession, persecution and hostage to highlight the urgency of ethics and give it "a disturbing, almost assaulting register" (Morgan, 82). According to Morgan, this new language highlights the way that the ethical relation consistently intrudes upon our everyday lives, but also serves to reorient us toward a foundational experience wherein the subject is responsible for the other, obsessed by her and held hostage before the freedom to choose such a path. "Ethics at this level is an assault; we are deluged by responsibility" (Morgan, 82), but it is also "an unavoidable feature of our existence" (Morgan, 85).

One of the basic similarities between Levinas's description of Celan's poetry and of the ethical relation in *Otherwise Than Being* is the way in which both enact a transcendence of the self – as a supposedly closed, autonomous entity – toward the Other human being. In his essay on Celan, Levinas claims that Celan's poetry captures a movement from self to Other within the confines of the poem. To call the poem a “handshake,”³⁴¹ as Celan does in his essay *The Meridian*, is for Levinas to see it as “a sign to one's neighbour,”³⁴² “a seeking, dedicating itself to the other in the form of the poem,”³⁴³ or a “way of giving, right up to and including the hand that gives.”³⁴⁴ Building on Celan's description in *The Meridian* of the poem moving “in one bound out in front of that other whom it presumes reachable,”³⁴⁵ Levinas describes Celan's poetry as a personal journey “from myself to the other.”³⁴⁶ The movement enacted by the poem is for Levinas an attempt to move beyond the self in an act of transcendence toward the other, which Levinas here describes as a movement “from place to the non-place,”³⁴⁷ or utopia: “as if in going toward the other man we transcended the human, toward utopia.”³⁴⁸ There is a clear parallel between this description of Celan's poetry as a movement toward utopia – or toward a ‘non-place’ – and Levinas's discussion of responsibility for the Other in *Otherwise Than Being*. In this later text, Levinas repeatedly describes the ethical encounter as effecting “a restlessness, null-site, outside of

³⁴¹ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 40.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid., 47.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

³⁴⁵ Quoted in Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 42.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 44. In *The Meridian*, Celan describes the poem as always on the way towards the Other as a seeking without end. He writes: “The poem wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, it needs an Over-Against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it. For the poem making toward an Other, each thing, each human being is a form of this Other.” For Celan, the poem is a movement toward the Other and at the same time an interruption of the subject, much as for Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*, the ethical represents a giving to the other to the point of substitution of the I for the Other.

the place of rest,³⁴⁹ wherein the subject is incapable of returning to herself in the face of the transcendence of the Other. In other words, the individual experiences a disorienting loss of place similar to the experience of the ‘non-place’, or what Levinas also describes as the “statelessness,³⁵⁰” enacted by Celan’s poetry. Responsibility for the Other, writes Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*, is “the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question ‘Where?’ no longer holds.”³⁵¹ Levinas attributes a similarly dislocating effect to Celan’s poetry, which is said to provoke a ceaseless movement away from the self and her established place in the world, away from ontology and from “all enrootedness and all dwelling.”³⁵²

In both *Otherwise Than Being* and his essay on Celan, Levinas repeatedly employs a spatial metaphor to highlight the contrast between the ‘place of rest’ of the subject, as a closed totality, and the ‘non-place,’ ‘null-site’ or ‘statelessness’ experienced through the ethical relation. These terms describe for Levinas the demand to destabilize and dislocate the self in the ethical encounter and, as we will see in the section on shudder below, resonate strongly with Adorno's description of the disorienting loss of self in the aesthetic experience of shudder.

To develop Levinas’s analysis of the ethics of Celan’s poetry a bit further, I would like to compare Levinas’s characterization of Celan’s poems as sites of passivity and donation to the language of proximity and obsession in *Otherwise Than Being*. For Levinas, Celan’s poems sustain an unwavering attention toward the other, which requires

³⁴⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 82.

³⁵⁰ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 44.

³⁵¹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 10.

³⁵² Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 44.

both a state of “extreme receptivity” and “extreme donation.”³⁵³ Levinas here equates the ability to be receptive toward the Other with the ability to give oneself up completely. Put differently, in heeding the Other, the poet is forced to relinquish “his proud sovereignty”³⁵⁴ as creator of the work. The important point for any comparison with the ethical relation is the poem’s thwarting of a subject’s self-mastery; there is no return to a stable ‘I’, but rather a persistent call upon the self to give herself up in the face of alterity. Coming back to the metaphor of the handshake, the poem does not presume to know anything about the Other being addressed; rather, the poem is a gesture of greeting without knowledge, a ‘sign to one’s neighbour’, and thus a responsibility for the Other prior to any signification or meaning – it is “a saying without a said.”³⁵⁵ For this reason, Levinas describes the poem as a pure sign, which completely dislocates the self as a center of meaning: the poem effects “[a] singular de-substantiation of the *I!* To make oneself completely into a sign, perhaps that is it.”³⁵⁶ The subject must, in a sense, donate or relinquish herself down to her very core – de-substantiate herself – in order to give herself, completely, to the Other.

In order to clarify the meaning of attention and donation within the poem, Levinas cites a passage by Simone Weil on prayer. Weil describes prayer as an almost violent relinquishment of the self to God: “Father, tear this body and this soul away from me, to make of them your things, and let nothing remain of me eternally but that tearing-away itself.”³⁵⁷ By including this quote by Weil, Levinas underscores the extreme donation of the self demanded by the poem. In using these terms of passivity, attention, prayer –

³⁵³ Ibid., 43.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 176, fn16.

terms that are integral to Levinas's description of the ethical relation in *Otherwise Than Being* – Levinas presents the relinquishment of self from a slightly different angle than that of the spatial metaphors examined above. Here, the emphasis is on both what the self is giving up – her position as a sovereign ego – and the attitude requisite of the ethical encounter – a kind of passive attentiveness that allows the ego to welcome this almost violent annulment of self.

Levinas's description of Celan's poetry echoes very closely the language of proximity and obsession in *Otherwise Than Being*. It is in proximity to the Other that the self is broken up to the point that it is not possible to "say what the ego or I is."³⁵⁸ Proximity is to be obsessed, or entirely preoccupied, by the Other and thus unable to take control of the situation by returning to a solid foundation in the self. The term proximity describes for Levinas the irreducible closeness of the Other in the ethical encounter that makes it impossible to step back from this other person in order to represent her using a concept or theme. Proximity explains how subjectivity emerges not out of an "adventure of cognition"³⁵⁹ grounded in the desire for knowledge, but out of signification itself.³⁶⁰ Through the language of proximity, Levinas finds a way to distinguish between the distance required for a subject to thematize and thereby maintain a stable identity, and an ethical experience wherein the distance of calculative reason is collapsed and the self can find no way to escape the Other with which she is confronted. In other words, proximity demands both an extreme attention toward the Other and a giving up, or a donation, of the unified self.

³⁵⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 82.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

To be in proximity with the Other is also to be obsessed by him or her. The ‘I’ cannot easily return to herself from this proximity with the other, but is, rather, to use Levinas’s language in *Otherwise Than Being*, exposed, denuded, circumscribed by the Other. He explains: “Through the obsession with the other, accusing, persecuting, the uniqueness of oneself is also the defection of the identity that identifies itself in the same. In the coinciding with oneself, this identity would still be protected, would not be exposed enough, would not be passive enough.”³⁶¹ The subject cannot seek security in a unified identity, but rather is troubled to its core by this exposure to alterity. These terms of obsession, persecution, exposure, passivity, emphasize the rending of subjectivity in the ethical relation. In order to recover herself, the ‘I’ would need to ascribe to this relation a meaning, to signify it; by contrast, in proximity it is impossible to do so and thus proximity is the act of signifying itself, prior to all signification and meaning. Levinas describes proximity as a “dehiscence;”³⁶² it is a breaking up of signification, a rupture of mediation, a refusal of themes, and a denial of the primacy of the subject.

In terms that resonate very clearly with Adorno's conception of aesthetic experience, Levinas further describes the breakup of the subject in the ethical relation as a ‘shudder’. Levinas repeatedly describes obsession as a shuddering of the subject in the face of something that refuses the solace of cognition.³⁶³ To be ordered by the Other is to be assaulted and overwhelmed, to be obsessed by him or her, or unable to refuse his or her command. Levinas describes the interruption of the order of consciousness and

³⁶¹ Ibid., 153.

³⁶² Ibid., 84. Levinas writes of Celan’s poetry that it asserts a “language of proximity” (Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 41) and enacts a “dehiscence of the world” (Ibid., 45).

³⁶³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 87.

reason as “the shudder of subjectivity;”³⁶⁴ obsession by the Other is akin to “a modality not of knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition.”³⁶⁵ In his late essay entitled “God and Philosophy” (1975), Levinas again employs the terminology of shudder to contrast the self-consciousness typical of knowledge, the return of the ego to itself, with the awakening of the I in the ethical encounter, described there by Levinas as “a shudder of incarnation through which giving takes on meaning, as the primordial dative of the *for another*, in which a subject becomes a heart, a sensibility, and hands which give.”³⁶⁶ For Levinas, then, what we understand to be the subject emerges out of this initial encounter with absolute alterity.³⁶⁷ The subject is incarnated or awakened by it, in the sense that experience and cognition are grounded in this more fundamental event that continues to interrupt and punctuate everyday life.³⁶⁸

Based on the above reading of *Otherwise Than Being*, there are clear affinities between Levinas’s reading of Celan and his later analysis of the ethical relation. However, whereas in *Otherwise Than Being*, the de-substantiation of the I occurs in response to the Other person, in his essay on Celan it is enacted within the poem. Levinas employs the terminology of the ethical in his writing on Celan because he does not have the vocabulary – nor, to be fair, is he interested in developing one – that could analyze the ethical dimension of Celan’s poetry in aesthetic terms. Levinas thus leaves unresolved

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 84.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 87.

³⁶⁶ Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 168.

³⁶⁷ As will see in the section below, Adorno describes the shudder in very similar terms – as a moment “in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418).

³⁶⁸ John E. Drabinski clarifies Levinas’s meaning here as follows: “For Levinas, the exposed body of ethical subjectivity is animated as a for-the-Other. It is animated to the point of obsession by the Other... The subject is rendered unique – it recurs – as for-the-Other in the interruptive awakening of the body from outside” (John E Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 208).

the issue of how such an experience occurs differently in poetry than in the ethical encounter.

One of the main reasons for this limitation, as we have seen, is Levinas's consistent reliance on classical aesthetics. Because Celan 'rejects beauty' as Levinas himself does, so must the latter place the work of the former outside of the aesthetic sphere. And thus Levinas is forced to equate Celan's poetry with the ethical relation, as opposed to examining the ways in which an artwork's ethical dimension may differ from the encounter with a living human being. It is not my intention to argue that the ethical relation explored by Levinas in his other writings has an aesthetic dimension; my interest has been rather to examine the work of art in particular as a site of the ethical, one that is qualitatively different from what Levinas describes elsewhere as the face-to-face encounter.

By reading Levinas's ethical analysis of Celan – as donation, proximity, obsession – alongside Adorno's description of aesthetic shudder, certain parallels between the ethical encounter and aesthetic experience come to light, and a vocabulary emerges that is both aesthetic and ethical at the same time.³⁶⁹ Through such a constellation of concepts, it suddenly becomes possible to disengage Levinas's terminology from its strictly ethical meaning and expand it to include the aesthetic. For instance, Adorno's notion of shudder helps to explain how a so-called 'dead' work, to use Levinas's language, may impact its viewer as something alive and transcendent. This specifically aesthetic experience Adorno interprets as a shuddering at something that exceeds the

³⁶⁹ It must be noted that for Levinas, the transcendence of the face-to-face encounter is inseparable from the speech and living expression of a living human being, and greatly differs from an aesthetic experience grounded in the sensible response to the play of transcendence and closure in a work of art. My aim here is to demonstrate that the artwork produces an ethical experience from within a specifically aesthetic sphere.

bounds of subjectivity. Furthermore, Adorno, like Levinas, describes shudder as a moment out of which the subject emerges; it is a “shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity.”³⁷⁰ And finally, to return briefly to Adorno's discussion of the sublime analyzed in Chapter Four, shudder differs from the second moment of the Kantian sublime because it does not elevate the subject above the sheer alterity of the objective world, but rather *crushes* the subject's pretense to sovereignty. Along these lines, Adorno describes the shudder as forcing the subject out of herself and producing an “annihilation of the I;”³⁷¹ similar to the ‘abyss-like experience’ described by Kant in the initial moment of the sublime, the shudder makes recipients “forget themselves”³⁷² and “lose their footing”³⁷³ in response to a work of art.³⁷⁴ The shattering of the subject provoked by this experience recalls Levinas's description of the self as assaulted by the presence of the Other in the ethical relation. Like the subject who, when faced with the Other, experiences a disorientation, a restlessness or an inability to return to the safe distance of her cognitive powers, so the subject when faced with a work of art is disoriented and utterly fails to make cognitive sense of an overwhelming aesthetic experience.

In the next section, I approach this comparison between Adorno and Levinas from a different angle, asking whether it is possible to expand Adorno's account of aesthetic transcendence to include a more developed ethical dimension along Levinasian lines. Such an expansion is necessary, I argue, to move beyond what has been often

³⁷⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ Recall here Kant description of the sublime's initial effect as the experience of "an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself" (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, AK, 258).

characterized as the pervasive pessimism of Adorno's ethical stance; and such an expansion is possible for all of the reasons that we have already seen. For one, Levinas, in characterizing Celan's poetry as a movement from self to Other that prevents the work from congealing into a closed form, echoes in many ways Adorno's account of the artistic process as deriving from a mimetic relation between artist and other. Just as in Levinas's interpretation of Celan, the self leaves itself, or goes toward the Other in the poem, so in Adorno's interpretation the artist transcends itself to let something 'more' be heard in the work. In other words, what makes the artwork unique for both Levinas and Adorno is its ability to capture a relation between totality and transcendence. Secondly, both appreciate that the excess evinced by the work expresses a relation with alterity mostly unacknowledged by the subject in her everyday life. And finally, for both thinkers this expression is produced as a shock to subjectivity in its closed, supposedly sovereign existence. However, despite these similarities, Adorno refuses to describe, positively, this 'excess' or 'more', referring to it only, as we have seen, in privative terms. Reading Levinas and Adorno together will allow us to ask more concretely of what this aesthetic experience of alterity consists: the affective dislocation, the shudder, produced in the subject by works of art.

Shudder

As I have already mentioned, one of the biggest obstacles to my correlation between Levinasian ethics and Adornian aesthetics is the mostly negative presentation of transcendence in Adorno's text. Adorno describes the artwork as gesturing toward a

reconciliation that does not, and may never exist, the content of which Adorno describes only in the most minimal of ways.

Adorno typically describes the transcendence of art in terms of its semblance character. As we have seen in Chapter Three, Adorno most often describes the content of this semblance as reconciliation, or as the illusion of unity inherent to an artwork's form; a work produces its unity between artist and nature, subject and other, through mimetic affinity as opposed to instrumental reason, and thus presents an image of reconciliation other than the false identity of instrumental reason. Simply by appearing, aesthetic unity presents an alternative comportment toward objectivity based in reconciliation and not domination, with the caveat that what appears is limited to the aesthetic sphere and thus a semblance. Adorno claims that semblance is ideological in the sense that its reconciliation is unreal, and yet simply by *appearing* this semblance of reconciliation indicates the possible transcendence of alienated conditions. Such transcendence would mean the actualization of potential freedom, of truth, of the Kantian in-itself blocked by the current order: in short, reconciliation is inseparable from a radical transformation of reality, though a transformation spoken of by Adorno only in the most restrained of ways. Artworks, in Adorno's words, "become the semblance of a blocked being-in-itself in whose reality the intentions of the subject would be fulfilled and extinguished."³⁷⁵ Central to Adorno's discussion of transcendence in most parts of *Aesthetic Theory* is precisely the play between the semblance of a *possible* reconciliation in artworks, and the recognition that such possibility does not yet exist.

Art achieves transcendence, then, by producing a semblance of reconciliation through the harmony of its form, or, as in modern works, by a negative gesture toward

³⁷⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148-149.

reconciliation through formal disharmony or fragmentation. When presented with a work, the audience is made to feel a loss or mourning at what they do not have: reconciliation with nature, or a meaningful, non-alienated relationship to the world. One senses that things ought somehow to be different; semblance evokes a feeling of insufficiency, mourning or alienation at what seems irretrievably lost or forever unfulfilled.³⁷⁶ Transcendence here remains tied to a concept of a ‘not yet,’ or a deferred horizon of reconciliation between subject and object, nature and freedom.

Admittedly, any reading of shudder as a Levinasian moment in Adorno's aesthetics must dislodge aesthetic experience from such negativity. Ethical transcendence in Levinas is more than a sense of the insufficiency of current conditions; ethics is a fundamental human experience, an encounter with alterity that is both recurrent and foundational. I attempt to move beyond Adorno's negative conception of transcendence through a close reading of his passages on shudder. I thereby address a frequent criticism of Adorno's work as trapped within a confining Enlightenment logic. One such criticism appears in a recent work by Miguel de Beistegui, entitled *Aesthetics After Metaphysics*, which places Adorno in a lineage of Western thinkers who continue to uphold traditional metaphysical distinctions such as nature and spirit, intelligible and sensible, or particular and universal, despite concerted efforts to the contrary. Adorno, whose “aesthetics seems to unfold at the very limit of metaphysics,”³⁷⁷ remains bound to the metaphysical framework that he criticizes. According to Beistegui, this is evident in, among other

³⁷⁶ As we have seen in Chapter Two, this feeling that things ought to be different, of protest against needless suffering, is the somatic motive behind Adorno's revised categorical imperative at the end of *Negative Dialectics*: to prevent the event of Auschwitz from being repeated. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

³⁷⁷ Miguel de Beistegui, *Aesthetics after Metaphysics: From Mimesis to Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 42.

things, the horizon of reconciliation between subject and object that acts as a kind of Hegelian limit point for both philosophy and art, as well as a binding of art to a truth content whose unlikely, if not impossible, realization would spell an end to art.³⁷⁸ This “death of art” thesis is especially problematic for Beistegui, for it implies that Adorno, despite having carefully inverted previous metaphysical hierarchies between philosophy and art, truth and semblance, continues, like Hegel, to present art as a sensuous manifestation of an intelligible truth – albeit with the caveat that such a truth may never be actualized. And precisely because such a truth can only ever be intimated through an experience of what Jay Bernstein has described as the mourning or loss at the alienation of art from truth, Beistegui claims that Adorno risks “descending into melancholy pessimism,” wherein “every attempt to move beyond such aporias will inevitably result in the further affirmation of instrumental reason and consummation of the enlightenment project.”³⁷⁹ Thierry De Duve expresses similar frustration with the pathos of Adorno's philosophy, which he claims is impossible to refuse without falling into an affirmative, and therefore for Adorno, regressive ideology. De Duve argues that this pathos is ultimately bound up in the notion of reconciliation; it is no coincidence that Adorno uses the German word *Affirmation* to imply a reconciliation that is false or premature. Ultimately, what this betrays, according to de Duve and implicitly Beistegui as well, is a

³⁷⁸ According to Beistegui: “What we have, in the end, are the elements or moments of the Hegelian dialectic, but without the moment of resolution” (Beistegui, 55). Thierry de Duve describes Adorno's shortcomings with regard to the notion of reconciliation in art in much harsher terms. He writes: “His aesthetic theory is fraught with Hegelian readings of Kantian issues (never the other way around, of course): solvable antinomies interpreted as irresolvable contradictions, ideas of reason recast as moments of spirit, ethical imperatives rewritten as historical programs, and so on. I am tempted to read the particular brand of pathos the *Aesthetic Theory* yields as the symptom of the willfully impossible reconciliation of Kant and Hegel” (De Duve, 258).

³⁷⁹ Beistegui, 3, 56.

“self-defeating obsession with totality”³⁸⁰ on the part of Adorno, despite his concerted effort to resist totality in all of his work. De Duve explains:

Adorno is never satisfied with a partial or temporary or local reconciliation. Unless the totality is redeemed, redemption is illegitimate, untrue, and fraudulent. Since, however, no one but the most naïve optimist will place bets on global redemption, what remains is global despair in the name of global redemption... If despair, then hope; if hope, then despair: opting for the fragment in the name of totality is the only move *desperate hope* (that oxymoron!) allows.³⁸¹

While I do not go as far as De Duve in his critique of Adorno, who he will also claim “rarely helps me think,”³⁸² I do agree with both Beistegui and De Duve that Adorno's continued emphasis on a reconciliation-not-yet-achieved, particularly in his reading of art, makes it difficult to approach art outside of a framework of negativity and fragmentation, or of what de Duve describes here as ‘desperate hope.’ I differ from both Beistegui and De Duve in terms of how to approach Adorno's overemphasis on reconciliation. Both De Duve and Beistegui seek alternatives to Adorno's approach – De Duve in a theory of transcendental materialism derived from Kant's third *Critique*,³⁸³ Beistegui in a notion of metaphor³⁸⁴ – and both argue that it is necessary to leave Adorno

³⁸⁰ De Duve, 260.

³⁸¹ De Duve, 260-1.

³⁸² De Duve, 261.

³⁸³ De Duve makes his argument for transcendentalism over dialectics, or for Kant over Hegel, by rereading Kant's “Analytic of the Beautiful” from the third *Critique*. According to De Duve, Kant's transcendentalism need not be construed as idealist, nor must his analytic of the beautiful be construed as affirmative relative to the negativity of the sublime. See De Duve, 263-266.

³⁸⁴ Beistegui's criticism of Adorno is part of a much larger critique of the emphasis on mimesis in metaphysical aesthetics, which Beistegui argues must be replaced with a renewed concept of metaphor. Metaphor allows for what Beistegui describes as the hypersensible, or “the site of an excess of the sensible” (Beistegui, 57), to emerge. Beistegui develops this notion out of the writings of Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Deleuze, among others, in order to emphasize a space between the traditional dichotomies of idealism and realism, spirit and nature, etc., a space of artistic vision that is affective, bodily and incarnate (3-6). My own project is similarly interested in the work of art as a ‘site of excess’, though I am interested in the ethical implications of this excess as opposed to its phenomenological dimensions. I also do not agree that we must leave Adorno behind in order to break out of this metaphysical framework, but

behind in order to do so. While I agree that Adorno remains trapped to some extent within the immanence of his system, rather than imposing on Adorno a set of concepts from the outside, I choose to bring to light a conception of alterity within his aesthetic theory, alluded to in his notion of shudder, that speaks of a transcendence along Levinasian ethical lines.

What I intend to do below is dislodge the notion of transcendence from its usual association with reconciliation in *Aesthetic Theory* by focusing on Adorno's discussion of shudder.³⁸⁵ I do so in order to problematize Adorno's frequent description of art as preserving a “promise of reconciliation,”³⁸⁶ which ends up confining art to the role of supplement to a philosophical project seeking to preserve – however minimally – the Enlightenment promise to reconcile nature and reason.

In the only lengthy passage on shudder in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno seems to attribute to semblance – and with it, transcendence – two different meanings. The first use of the term lines up fairly well with the standard interpretation of semblance presented above. Here, Adorno attributes semblance not to the experience of shudder itself – the recipient experiences something “psychologically real”³⁸⁷ in submitting to the work of art – but to the idea that this experience has actual implications beyond the aesthetic sphere. In his words: “It is not the aesthetic shudder that is semblance but rather [the shudder’s] attitude to objectivity.”³⁸⁸ The semblance of shudder, then, occurs when

rather than latent in his conception of mimesis (and shudder) is precisely the kind of disruptive, post-metaphysical aesthetic that Beistegui seeks.

³⁸⁵ My objective here is to problematize the relationship between reconciliation and semblance in Adorno's philosophy, not semblance itself. I thus do not align myself with those artists and theorists who attempt to move beyond semblance as a vestige of Modernism (and aesthetics) in general (see in particular the collection of essays in Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic*).

³⁸⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 41.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

an individual imagines that this aesthetic experience will be carried over into everyday life. Adorno explains that when recipients are faced with a work of art, they “reenact its process,”³⁸⁹ which I take to mean that they recreate the reconciliation-based comportment at the heart of the work. This is confirmed in Adorno's description of shudder as a fleeting experience of “letting self-preservation fall away,”³⁹⁰ or in other words, as a fleeting experience of a non-instrumental comportment. However, because such comportment does not actually exist, this experience achieves the status of a potential freedom not yet actualized in objective reality; like the reconciliation promised by aesthetic form, shudder “does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility.”³⁹¹ The semblance of aesthetic reconciliation examined in Chapter Three, within which is lodged the promise of a different comportment toward the world, matches up with the semblance of shudder as the momentary experience of precisely this alternative comportment. Thus, in this first use of the term in Adorno's passage on shudder, the semblance of shudder is the counterpart to the semblance of reconciliation in aesthetic form, with the only difference that the former refers to aesthetic experience and the latter to the work of art itself.

In his second use of semblance, Adorno suggests a departure from his standard interpretation of the term, and in my view allows for a more a productive comparison between Adornian transcendence and Levinasian ethics. Adorno here places emphasis on the semblance of the ‘I’ as opposed to the semblance of an alternative comportment based in reconciliation. I am particularly interested in the following phrase from *Aesthetic Theory* on aesthetic experience: “The I is seized by the unmetaphorical, semblance-

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 160.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 320.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

shattering consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance.”³⁹² According to this formulation, the shudder shatters the semblance of the ‘I’; what is illusory in shudder is the subject taking herself as an absolute, or, as ‘ultimate’. This denotes a shift in emphasis here away from the illusion of unity propagated by the *work* to the illusion of unity propagated by the *subject*. The shudder, Adorno claims, is a real experience of the ‘I’ relinquishing its claim to sovereignty, and in this moment, it is not the experience of relinquishment that is semblance, but the ‘I’ itself. The semblance of mastery perpetuated by the ‘I’ is literally shattered, according to Adorno's account, by the alterity of this aesthetic experience. It is here that Adorno most resembles Levinas’s description of the ‘de-substantiation of the I’ produced by the ethical relation. The full passage, which includes both uses of the term semblance, reads as follows:

For a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of the possibility of letting self-preservation fall away, though it does not actually succeed in realizing this possibility. It is not the aesthetic shudder that is semblance but rather its attitude to objectivity: In its immediacy the shudder feels the potential as if it were actual. The I is seized by the unmetaphorical, semblance-shattering consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance.³⁹³

As we have seen above, the first use of semblance refers to an experience of reconciliation that artworks have no power to actualize; however, the second suggests something different. Semblance is here described not in terms of reconciliation, both promising and at the same time withholding possibility, nor as a reminder that aesthetic experience is, at the end of the day, an illusion. Rather, to say that shudder is a ‘semblance-shattering consciousness’ is to orient the discussion towards a dislocating effect of art on subjectivity itself. In this brief moment of ‘semblance-shattering

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

consciousness,' the individual is 'seized' by a consciousness suddenly aware of her own limitations, of the fact that the 'I' 'is not ultimate, but semblance'.

To be sure, the two usages of the term are not mutually exclusive; this experience of a unified consciousness breaking up or being shaken is also semblance in the negative sense that it is a potential that cannot be realized outside of the aesthetic sphere. I draw attention to this description of semblance relative to subjectivity because it is here that an affinity with Levinas's description of the ethical relation is most clear. The discursive openness of this passage allows us to conceive of artworks as more than keepsakes of an as-yet-unfulfilled promise. Artworks are also able to induce the breakdown of an illusory subjectivity.

What makes this distinction significant, in my view, is that it addresses a certain over-determination symptomatic of Adornian criticism, both in his writings and in those of his followers. It seems that while in theory Adorno remains open to the particularity of every work of art, in practice his inherited framework for interpreting art repeatedly anticipates an experience of loss and negativity. In my view, by placing the emphasis on the challenging of the subject in aesthetic experience, it becomes possible to loosen the hold of a certain negativity on the Adornian interpretation of artworks. It also becomes possible to broaden Adorno's aesthetics to include a Levinasian ethical dimension.

Adorno's description of aesthetic shudder makes for a fruitful comparison with Levinas because shudder is said to dethrone a supposedly unified subjectivity in front of a work of art; to use the terms of Levinasian ethics, the totality of an ego is shattered in the face of overwhelming, irreducible alterity. As we saw above, Levinas describes within Celan's poetry a movement from self to Other, where the 'I' is disoriented and unable to

return from its 'statelessness,' or exile, to the stability of self-consciousness. Furthermore, Levinas compares the disposition of this poetry to what Weil describes as an extreme 'tearing-away' of the self in prayer, a state of 'extreme receptivity', of passivity, a complete de-substantiation of the I'. The similarity between Adorno's description of the 'annihilation of the I' in the shudder and the 'stripping away of the weight of identity' in the ethical relation is perhaps most clear in the following lines by Levinas, already examined above: the ethical relation is the "defection of the identity that identifies itself in the same."³⁹⁴ Adorno's description of shudder is uncannily similar. The subject is shaken by the shudder, disoriented, its footing lost, shocked, utterly shattered. The brief 'glimpse beyond the prison' of the subject is the glimpse of a relation based not in totality, but in an alternative comportment toward otherness that can be understood in Levinas's ethical terms.

Adorno's description of shudder also echoes Levinas's description of proximity, as an irreducible closeness between self and Other that prevents the distancing effect of cognition from being achieved. For instance, Adorno writes: "That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it."³⁹⁵ Adorno contrasts the assimilating comportment of shudder with a comportment of subordination, the former of which accesses a moment prior to the emergence of subjectivity as a subjugating force. Levinas describes the proximity of Celan's poetry in a similar way: "[F]or Celan the poem is situated precisely at that pre-syntactic and... pre-logical level, but a level also pre-disclosing: at the moment of pure touching, pure

³⁹⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 153.

³⁹⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 418-419.

contact, grasping, squeezing – which is, perhaps, a way of giving, right up to and including the hand that gives.”³⁹⁶ Levinas here describes the poem as producing a relation with alterity akin to the proximity of the ethical relation, where proximity means a nearness with alterity in which the self as a stable, closed entity cannot exist. For Levinas, this moment of proximity is both the primordial ground out of which subjectivity emerges, but it is also an experience that repeatedly recurs – through the ethical encounter with the Other, but also, when read alongside Adorno's very similar characterization of aesthetic shudder, through the work of art.

Despite these similarities, important differences between Levinas and Adorno must be acknowledged. Adorno is not describing a primordial dimension to human experience, nor is he interested in doing so. Adorno's critique of both phenomenology and ontology is based in a deep suspicion of any philosophy that would posit an ahistorical essence or ontological ground. Shudder, an experience of what is prior to the emergence of subjectivity, does not reveal a transcendental ethical structure underpinning human subjectivity. This marks Adorno's biggest difference from Levinas. For Adorno, shudder is inextricable from the emergence of subjectivity historically, out of a dialectic of enlightenment; it harkens the subject back to an archaic phase of human history where the individual was not yet freed from the fear of alterity characteristic of the early shudder, where the subject had not yet emerged.³⁹⁷ Adorno explains: “Shudder... is a

³⁹⁶ Levinas, “Paul Celan: From Being to Other,” 41.

³⁹⁷ As we have seen in Chapter Three, Adorno and Horkheimer trace the history of the modern Western subject to an archaic stage dominated by magic and myth. This same dialectic reappears in *Aesthetic Theory*, but with an important change. Adorno introduces the “primordial shudder”(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 106) as characteristic of this early stage of human history. It is useful here to recall Adorno's argument examined in previous chapters, that Western culture has progressively eliminated a concrete relation with the material world as it moved away from its earliest stages. Adorno views the shudder as a remnant of this early experience of the natural world as something overwhelming and frightening – or to put this in more Levinasian terms, as something inspiring and transcendent. “The

memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.”³⁹⁸ In the experience of shudder in front of works of art, the subject is thrown back into something akin to this early moment of fear and anxiety at the overwhelming. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues that art preserves something of the archaic shudder in the work; “art is its legacy”³⁹⁹ and its “afterimage.”⁴⁰⁰ The shudder preserved by the work, for Adorno, is an experience modeled on a relation with the world that is “transsubjective;”⁴⁰¹ it provides access to what precedes the division between the subject and object by cognitive knowledge, and thus to the possibility of a non-totalizing relationship with the world.⁴⁰²

Though this emphasis on the historical in Adorno somewhat complicates my comparison with Levinas, it in no way makes their views incommensurable. Rather, I argue that history and ethics come together in this experience of shudder – history in that the subject is connected through the shudder with the dialectic of Enlightenment in its very origins, and ethical in that the subject is forced by this experience of alterity to

shudder is a response,” Adorno writes, “coloured by fear of the overwhelming”(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 319). As we have seen, for Adorno this moment of terror in front of the unknown is precisely what the spirit of Western thought has progressively sought to overcome.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 245.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 364.

⁴⁰² While such acknowledgment of transcendence was once built into the way societies approached the world, Adorno claims that modern society has constructed itself on the principle that transcendent experience could eventually be explained away by scientific rationality. The consequence of this for Adorno has been a diminishing of experience (*Erfahrung*) outside of the narrow purview of what calculative reason will allow, with dehumanizing and indeed horrific effects. Crucial to Adorno's argument on the historically mediated quality of shudder is a distinction between full, comprehending experience [*Erfahrung*] and lived experience [*Erlebnis*]. According to Adorno, through the experience of art as ‘more’ or ‘shudder’, individuals become aware of something more than their conventional experience (*Erlebnis*) and realize the possibility of a “full comprehending experience”(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 319) (*Erfahrung*) now denied to them. “For the subject, this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I, that internal agent of repression. This subjective experience [*Erfahrung*] directed against the I is an element of the objective truth of art”(Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 320). See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 318-320.

glimpse “beyond the prison that [the ‘I] itself is.”⁴⁰³ Such a glimpse is not necessarily a feeling of loss or of mourning, but rather may be construed as a call to responsibility by the presence of alterity.

Levinas’s phenomenological description of the subject dislocated by an experience of the Other helps us to see how art enacts a similar movement out of the self in ways that Adorno himself was reticent to develop. This comparison allows us to loosen the hold of ‘melancholy pessimism’ on his dominant description of art. Celan’s poetry is not necessarily emblematic of our lost relation with the natural, expressed through ‘the dead speaking of stones and stars’, but rather may also be an experience of ethics in its dislocation of the self. Levinas describes within the poem what Adorno attributes to aesthetic experience in general: a momentary suspension of identity-thinking in a movement out of the self toward alterity. This parallel between Adorno and Levinas helps us to emphasize not the feeling of a lost unity or reconciliation, but rather an experience of self-annihilation that does not occur as lack. This ethical dimension to aesthetic shudder explains the ethical importance of a subject being rattled out of her conventional attitude, from within the aesthetic sphere.

Ethically Aesthetic Experience

By examining aesthetic experience from the perspective of its effect on the subject, it becomes possible to loosen the hold of a confining negativity on Adorno’s discussion of ethics. Semblance is no longer attributed to the artwork’s ideological form, but to the attitude of the subject experiencing the work. This emphasis on a disorienting

⁴⁰³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 319.

aesthetic experience helps to distance semblance from its tie to reconciliation, expressed through the unity (or disunity) of aesthetic form. It also allows for a much more fluid comparison with Levinas, who, as we have seen, maintains a strong suspicion of the totalizing form of artworks throughout his career. While I have already shown, using Adorno's defense of aesthetic form, that Levinas's critique of art has limitations, it is possible that the reverse is true as well. Perhaps Adorno is not suspicious enough of the ideological effect of art; one goal of my reading of these two thinkers in this chapter is to shift Adorno's emphasis from aesthetic unity to the dislocating, affective dimension of aesthetic experience.

Placing Levinas's discussion of proximity and donation next to Adorno's discussion of shudder allows us to do two things. On the one hand, it allows us to imagine how artworks may produce an *aesthetic* experience akin to the experience of alterity described by Levinas in the ethical relation. On the other hand, it allows us to explore a Levinasian ethical dimension within Adorno's account of shudder, and thus develop more concretely what Adorno gestures toward only in the most negative terms. If shudder is an aesthetic counterpart to a Levinasian experience of alterity, then it is no longer necessary to determine the import of artworks based only on a historical narrative of reconciliation and freedom. In other words, it may no longer be necessary to limit 'authentic' art to Modernist works that overwhelm us with their negativity, but to conceive of a much more diverse body of works capable of producing an aesthetic experience of proximity or shudder. If Adorno lends to Levinas a notion of complex totality that problematizes Levinas's reductive definition of art, we might say that Levinas helps draw out of Adorno a more complex notion of negativity that

problematizes a tendency on Adorno's part – and on the part of some of his followers – to interpret artworks according to a recurring narrative of redemption and loss.

One of the difficulties of drawing on Adorno's aesthetic theory is separating his work from the postwar moment in which he was producing his most extensive writings on art. How is it possible to engage with Adorno's philosophy without also interpreting every artwork according to a narrative of alienation and loss? By throwing into question what Leo Bersani has described as a “culture of redemption”⁴⁰⁴ in early Frankfurt School theories of art, I do not mean to argue that such a historical reading must entirely disappear. Rather, it is my view that art's disruption of subjectivity need not be filtered solely through the lens of this Enlightenment frame. In reading Adorno next to Levinas's more nuanced discussion of the challenge to subjectivity as an experience of donation, proximity and obsession, it is possible to expand Adorno's discussion of aesthetic shudder beyond the confines of Modernist negativity.⁴⁰⁵ Levinas interprets the experience of alterity as fundamental to subjectivity, as what underlies and is presupposed by the subject in her everyday life. When such an interpretation is placed alongside Adorno's

⁴⁰⁴ See Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁴⁰⁵ As Anthony J. Cascardi has noted, aesthetic theory in general, as the theory that studies art as a set of objects distinctive from other experience, seems outdated in a contemporary art world set on breaking down precisely this division between art and life. In response to this question, Cascardi wants to salvage from Adorno his alignment of art with an alternative, sensuous particular truth for its ability to counter the continued tendency to place instrumental rationality above other ways of producing meaning – including the “embodied meaning” (Anthony J. Cascardi, “Prolegomena to any Future Aesthetics,” in *Art and Aesthetics after Adorno*, 10) of works of art. In order to get around this problem, Cascardi extends Adorno's opposition between the sensuous particularity of art and instrumental rationality beyond the Modernist context. He does so by reading Adorno alongside other thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty, who makes embodied meaning an essential aspect of art. In so doing, Cascardi argues that it becomes possible for aesthetic theory to read artworks as producing a response to instrumental reason in a wider variety of contexts and through a wider variety of forms, thereby extending Adorno's aesthetic theory beyond the confines of his unfinished text (see Cascardi, 19-22). I am similarly trying to extend Adorno's aesthetic theory to a more contemporary context, but I do so by drawing out the ethical dimension of what Cascardi accurately describes as “a domain of meaningful sensuous particulars in a world that otherwise continues to believe that rationality is something radically other than, indeed higher than, whatever meaning is carried by art” (Cascardi, 10).

view of aesthetic experience, artworks are suddenly more than a refuge for a lost experience, reminding subjects of what they continue to be denied.

Levinas's emphasis on the speech between I and other enacted within a poem resonates with much post-1960's art, which is often marked by its ability to produce a space of proximity between viewer and performer. Because Adorno reads art in extremely negative terms – recall here his interpretation of Celan, or his claim that “art is modern art through the mimesis of the hardened and alienated”⁴⁰⁶ – his criterion for ‘authentic and truthful’ art seems narrowly predisposed to offering a diagnosis of Modernist loss. This is particularly problematic when much art since the 1960's has been interested in doing more than diagnose this modern condition.

In previous chapters, I have shown that there is much to be gained from a re-reading of Adorno's aesthetics. Adorno's definition of artworks as complex totalities, as we saw in Chapter Three, helps to explain that works of art are essentially open and dynamic forms. And his refreshing take on the sublime attributes to modern artworks the power to rupture and fragment modern capitalist effects of complacency and conformity. Both of these arguments help to explain how artworks are sites of transcendence in ways Levinas did not imagine. In this chapter, I have looked at this pairing from the other side, and have employed Levinasian ethics to imagine Adorno's aesthetic experience in more complex terms than Adorno would allow. Levinas lends to Adorno a kind of complex negativity; read in Levinasian terms, aesthetic shudder is still an experience of negativity, but in the sense that it defamiliarizes and shatters the subject's pretense to sovereignty. Aesthetic negativity, in other words, need not be predetermined according to an Enlightenment narrative. What occurs in shudder is a further dislodging of the Kantian

⁴⁰⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 28.

sublime from its second moment, wherein the subject is elevated to an absolute. Adorno's desire to retain a notion of reconciliation between nature and reason – falsely promised in the Kantian sublime – falls further into the background when the focus is on the instant of shattering as opposed to what may be to come. The former moment retains its power of negativity as the critique of totality, of the continued dominance of calculative reason, but not in anticipation of a possible future or in mourning for a lost past.

In other words, what Levinas contributes to this conversation about art is a much more positive account of transcendence. Levinas helps us to expand Adorno's philosophy of art by conceiving of transcendence not through negative sublimity, the muted voice of a fallen nature, or a reconciliation not yet achieved, but rather as an ethical relation that grounds and pervades our experience. Art continues to be produced despite Adorno's dire predictions of its demise, and it continues to be produced in various forms not premised on a Modernist negativity. If we can allow that artworks do push beyond the self along the lines of Adorno's aesthetic theory, and if we can allow that this transcendence echoes in many ways Levinas's ethical relation, then it becomes possible to conceive of artworks – produced during and after Modernism – as reminders of an ethical demand much more fundamental than our everyday experience. Such a conception of ethically aesthetic experience serves to expand both our conception of artworks and our understanding of the role of ethics in our encounters with them.

Afterword

Over the past two decades, art has proliferated in forms centered on collaboration with the viewer / participant. These practices have been the subject of much debate, from the issue of classification, with titles ranging from relational, to participatory, to socially engaged and community-based, to a more fundamental dispute over whether or not such art forms are emancipatory, or critical, or both. The comparative study of Levinas and Adorno undertaken in this dissertation can do much to address an insufficiency within these recent discussions. This insufficiency stems from the refusal, on the part of many theorists, to engage with the status of these projects as works of art. As I pointed out in the Introduction to this dissertation, while the writings of Levinas have been employed to elucidate the ethical nature of a wide variety of recent artistic experiments, almost all of these applications privilege the role of art as a social practice, while neglecting the traditional work character of the aesthetic object, performance, collaboration, etc. By bringing Levinas and Adorno together, I provide one set of terms for understanding how the aesthetic can be theorized as an autonomous sphere, while also retaining significant ethical and political implications.

In her recent book *Artificial Hells*,⁴⁰⁷ Claire Bishop has done much to situate the now widespread interest in socially engaged artistic practice within a broader theoretical and historical framework. Under the name of participatory art, she argues that this recent

⁴⁰⁷ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012).

turn to the social is not a new phenomenon,⁴⁰⁸ but rather must be shown in relation to previous avant-garde movements, including the Futurists, the Dadaists, and the Situationists, as theorized by Guy Debord.⁴⁰⁹ For Bishop, one of the problems with recent discussions of participatory art stems from the refusal to consider these works in aesthetic terms. Many critics base their evaluation of collaborative practices on how successful a work is in facilitating community amongst its participants. However, according to Bishop, the often blanket appreciation for the collective, utopian, and even revolutionary elements of these practices, preemptively neutralizes the critic's ability to evaluate them as art. Bishop explains:

But the urgency of this *social* task has led to a situation in which socially collaborative practices are all perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of participatory art, because all are equally essential to the task of repairing the social bond.⁴¹⁰

According to Bishop, the reliance on social forms of inclusion and collaboration in these works makes it difficult to describe, let alone assess, their artistic value. Ethics comes to predominate over questions of the aesthetic, politics over practice: an artwork is good if its collaboration promotes equality and creativity amongst its participants, and bad if it engenders marginalization or exploitation.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ Hal Foster responds in similar fashion to the claim to newness made by proponents of relational art: “when has art, at least since the Renaissance, not involved discursivity and sociability?” (Hal Foster, “Arty Party,” *London Review of Books*, December 4, 2003) 22.

⁴⁰⁹ Bishop's concern here is to ground the contemporary phenomenon of participatory art in a tradition of artistic practices critical of the atomizing effects of a ‘spectacular society’. According to Guy Debord, the most profound effect of such a society is that of passivity: “It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory” (Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 15).

⁴¹⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13.

⁴¹¹ Thomas Hirsschorn's *Bataille Monument* at Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002, or his *Gramsci Monument* (2013) in the Bronx are often cited as examples of more problematic forms of collaboration, on the grounds that these works marginalize or exoticize the communities in which they are placed, as opposed to produce an empathetic exchange. Bishop points out that the criterion of evaluation in such discussions is often the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the collaboration, and not their *specificity* as works of art. She

One of the most outspoken critics of Bishop's analysis of participatory art is art historian Grant Kester. Sitting squarely within the anti-aesthetic position first embraced by proponents of Postmodernism in the 1980's,⁴¹² Kester embraces the emphasis on the viewer / participant in collaborative art for its decisive break from the autonomous artistic form. In his response to an essay by Bishop initially published in 2006,⁴¹³ Kester accuses Bishop of policing the divide between a legitimate artistic practice centered on autonomy – supposedly political by virtue of its maintenance of a 'skeptical distance' – and the illegitimate activist artwork – which, by virtue of its reliance on an audience of supposedly naïve collaborators, can only become political in the most facile way. According to Kester:

For Bishop, art can become legitimately 'political' only indirectly, by exposing the limits and contradictions of political discourse itself...from the quasi-detached perspective of the artist. In this view, artists who choose to work in alliance with specific collectives, social movements, or political struggles will inevitably be consigned to decorating floats for the annual May Day parade. Without the detachment and autonomy of conventional art to insulate them, they are doomed to 'represent', in the most naïve and facile manner possible, a given political issue or constituency.⁴¹⁴

Particularly problematic, for Kester, is the way in which the autonomous work continues to legitimize the role of the critic, who must enlist the tools of critical theory in order to decipher the work for an untrained viewer / participant. According to Kester, to advocate

writes: "This line of thinking has led to an ethically charged climate in which participatory and socially engaged art has become largely exempt from art criticism: emphasis is continually shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given practice and onto a *generalized* set of ethical precepts" (Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 23). For a discussion of Hirschhorn in comparison to the supposedly more ethical collaboration work Oda Projesi in Turkey, see Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 20-23.

⁴¹² As was already discussed in the Introduction, the anti-aesthetic position is most clearly presented in Hal Foster's collection of essays entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

⁴¹³ Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum International*, 44, no. 6 (2006): 178-185.

⁴¹⁴ Grant Kester, "Another Turn," *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 22.

for autonomous art not only flatters the critic, but also continues to grant the artist a privileged position as guardian of a work's meaning; it "places the artist in a position of ethical oversight, unveiling or revealing the contingency of systems of meaning that the viewer would otherwise submit to without thinking."⁴¹⁵ Ultimately, Kester seeks an alternative to traditional art – marked by a perceived tension between the all-knowing artist and an ignorant viewer – in the "less violent and more convivial relationship"⁴¹⁶ produced by community-based practices.

According to Bishop, in praising participatory art for its ability to facilitate "discursive exchange and negotiation,"⁴¹⁷ Kester provides an important antidote to the "atomized pseudocommunity of consumers"⁴¹⁸ characteristic of our contemporary landscape. However, Bishop continues to argue that Kester's continued emphasis on collaboration makes it very difficult to assess an artwork on aesthetic grounds. "At present," Bishop argues, "the discursive criteria of participatory and socially engaged art is drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian 'good soul'; it is an ethical reasoning that fails to accommodate the aesthetic or to understand it as an

⁴¹⁵ Ibid. Underpinning Kester's response to Bishop is a continued suspicion toward the shock tactics of the historical avant-garde. In his book *Conversation Pieces*, Kester presents the historical avant-garde, ranging from Realism to Cubism to Dadaism, as motivated by a desire to disrupt the course of instrumental rationality by provoking its viewers with an experience more receptive both to the natural world and to other human beings (Grant H Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 27). Kester is suspicious of the way in which a divide is posited between the artist, as the bearer of privileged insight, and the viewer, who must be made to realize their oppression through shocking and disruptive aesthetic tactics. "The tension between the openness of, sensitivity to difference, and vulnerability that characterizes the artist's own relationship to the world and the paradoxical drive to 'master' viewers by violently attacking the semantic system through which they understand and situate themselves in the same world remains unresolved" (Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 27).

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Quoted in Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 23.

⁴¹⁸ Quoted in Ibid., 11.

autonomous realm of experience.”⁴¹⁹ To repeat, for Bishop, the danger in this kind of analysis is what it must preclude: any work that does not take a dialogue between equals, empathy for the other and sensitivity to difference as its goals – in short, a work centered on disruption, antagonism or intervention – is deemed authoritarian, elitist, and, therefore, unethical.⁴²⁰ Put simply, for Bishop, Kester ends up “[sacrificing the aesthetic] at the altar of social change.”⁴²¹

Bishop’s point here is not to denigrate socially engaged art, but to ask how it is possible to examine the aesthetic merit of works centered on participation. To this end, she enlists Jacques Rancière’s theory that an artwork is political in its ability to produce a rupture, or dissensus, in our everyday experience of the sensible world. For Rancière, this means to disrupt the current distribution of who can be seen and heard, who is invisible and who is visible, in the current order. The aesthetic thus retains its autonomy, i.e. as a unique mode of sensible perception, but at the same time, it is directly involved in questions of a political nature.⁴²² According to Bishop, Rancière’s aesthetic of disruption allows us finally to move away from “old-fashioned autonomy versus radical engagement, since a dialectical pull between autonomy and heteronomy is itself constitutive of the aesthetic.”⁴²³ Kester thus misses the mark in his claim that Bishop is simply an apologist for autonomous art; it is clear from Bishop’s analysis that she is concerned with those practices operating between these two poles of the autonomous and

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 39-40. In Claire Bishop’s response to Grant Kester, in *Artforum*, she accuses him of advocating for a position of populism: “His righteous aversion to authorship can only lead to the end of provocative art and thinking” (Claire Bishop, “Letter to the Editor,” *Artforum* 45, No. 10 (June 2006)).

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 25-26.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 29.

⁴²² Ibid., 27-29.

⁴²³ Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” 185.

the social, and that one of her main concerns is to move away from precisely the kind of binary Kester continues to insist upon in his criticism of her work.⁴²⁴

The polemic between Bishop and Kester hinges on terms reminiscent of the reaction against the aesthetic by postmodern art critics. As we have already seen in the Introduction to this dissertation, for a certain generation of critics, the aesthetic was taken as synonymous with a conservative Greenbergian Formalism, which depoliticized artistic practice by suppressing questions of race, gender and class. In her analysis of participatory art, Bishop attempts to bridge this now old and tired divide between autonomy and heteronomy, and is in this sense pursuing a project complementary to my own effort to review the intersection between the aesthetic and the ethical. Where I part ways with Bishop concerns the place to be occupied by the work of art. While Bishop does claim to be interested in the “highly authored”⁴²⁵ elements of collaborative constructions, which are said to “fuse reality with carefully calculated artifice,”⁴²⁶ she tends to emphasize the importance of the affective experience of the viewer/participant over form itself. Bishop’s turn to Rancière, as a means of drawing attention to “the work of art in all its singularity,”⁴²⁷ is not in itself problematic, but is not the only means of ‘rehabilitating the category of the aesthetic.’⁴²⁸ While it does much to theorize the

⁴²⁴ According to Kester: “Bishop seems determined to enforce a fixed and rigid boundary between ‘aesthetic’ projects (‘provocative,’ ‘uncomfortable,’ and ‘multilayered’) and activist works (‘predictable,’ ‘benevolent,’ and ‘ineffectual’)” (Kester, “Another Turn,” 22).

⁴²⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 39.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 18. Nonetheless, Bishop’s employment of Rancière provides an interesting counterpoint to my own exploration of Levinas and Adorno, and would make for a fruitful area of inquiry in future study. It would be an interesting project to read Adorno alongside Rancière on the question of aesthetic autonomy and commitment. For there is quite a bit of overlap between the two thinkers, in that both thinkers attribute to modern art a tension between a drive toward autonomy, on the one hand, and the undeniable entrenchment of the work in its empirical reality. The tension between their approaches seems to rest on the question of aesthetic form, with Adorno examining the work of art as a demarcated formal space, and Rancière emphasizing instead the affective response produced by a given work.

aesthetic as a unique mode of perception, it does so by mostly bracketing the question of form.⁴²⁹ In other words, the realm of the aesthetic is treated by Bishop predominantly as a category of perception, and understood in terms of the affective experience of the viewer / participant. Where I think there is room for further inquiry concerns how aesthetic perception is structured, historically, through the tradition of the work. A taboo has emerged against the history of autonomous artistic practices, in large part because interest in form has become associated with critics like Clement Greenberg. In recent discussions of socially engaged practice, this taboo is obvious in the continued distancing of the conversation from the tradition of autonomous works; when autonomy *is* revived, it is theorized along the lines of affect, or of aesthetic perception.

One of the reasons for this blind spot in current debates over participatory art stems from the desire to see collaborative artistic practice as a new category: as a fresh lens through which to read 20th century art;⁴³⁰ as a way of producing a continuum between political works of the 1980's with works of today;⁴³¹ or as announcing the unprecedented emergence of a relational aesthetic.⁴³² This emphasis on the newness of collaborative art obscures the way in which the terms of this debate echo a much earlier debate over autonomous art and socially engaged practice in the writings of Adorno. For readers of Adorno, Bishop's criticism of didactic art is quite familiar, as is her claim that the work of art cannot be completely separated from the social world in which it stands. The work of art, according to Adorno, is characterized by precisely the same dialectic

⁴²⁹ "Rather than considering the *work of art* to be autonomous, [Rancière] draws attention to the autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art" (Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 27). Bishop also employs psychoanalytic terms derived from Jacques Lacan to frame Rancière's discussion of enjoyment and disruption in the viewing of art (Ibid., 39-40).

⁴³⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 3.

⁴³¹ Kester, "Another Turn," 22.

⁴³² Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14-15.

pull between these two poles of heteronomy and autonomy; in his language, the work is “both autonomous and fait social.”⁴³³ Thinking through how these two terms intersect forms a major part of Adorno’s project *Aesthetic Theory*, but his position is perhaps best encapsulated in his 1967 essay, “Commitment.” This essay has particular relevance for the current debate over autonomy and social practice between Bishop and Kester. One of Adorno’s key contributions can be found in his discussion of form.

Adorno’s main concern, in his essay “Commitment,” is to demonstrate the dialectical relationship between autonomy and commitment, in response to Jean-Paul Sartre’s defense of committed art in *What is Literature?*. While the forms of art examined here are certainly different from those considered by Bishop and Kester – the latter concern themselves with art whose central component is the interaction with the audience, Adorno with the more traditional mediums of theatre, music, literature and painting – I nonetheless argue that their basic concerns are the same. According to Adorno, autonomy does not entail purity, as though artworks are sealed off from the reality in which they exist. Rather, an artwork, regardless of medium, takes its cue from external reality – it has an “ineradicable connection with reality”⁴³⁴ – and rearranges the elements of that reality according to the law of a work’s form. As we saw in Chapter Three, an artwork mimes instrumental reality; it pulls reality into the work and rearranges it in such a way that it becomes visible to us in all of its inadequacy. For Adorno, it is thus through their form that artworks have the capacity for critique: “The organizing, unifying principle of each and every work of art is borrowed from that very rationality

⁴³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5. Compare this passage by Adorno to the following by Bishop: “Good art would therefore sustain this antinomy in the simultaneous impulse to preserve itself from instrumentality and to self-dissolve in social praxis” (Bishop, “Letter to the Editor”).

⁴³⁴ Adorno, “Commitment,” 178.

whose claim to totality it seeks to defy.”⁴³⁵ Art is not a palliative, capable of holding up an alternative of freedom to its unfree recipients; rather, Adorno argues that through the form of a work, the actual conditions of an administered reality are revealed. “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives,” Adorno writes, “but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads.”⁴³⁶ Put differently, the artwork is not a vehicle for a political message, to which Sartre ends up reducing it, but rather a formal reconfiguration of the conditions of the existing order. Adorno’s criticism of what he calls “thesis-art,”⁴³⁷ then, is that by claiming to produce conditions that would compel audiences to a state of supposed freedom, an artist like Sartre ends up producing an ameliorative art, which apologizes for the current reality of administered individuality: “The notion of a message in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world.”⁴³⁸ Committed art produces the illusion of freedom from alienation, or from an administered reality, and, therein, becomes merely consolatory as opposed to disruptive or critical.

Bishop similarly argues against the unequivocal acceptance of practices that can be said to “[repair] the social bond.”⁴³⁹ According to Bishop, such practices promote an illusion of social consensus, an illusion that not only conceals the continued presence of antagonism and contradiction in everyday experience, but also ends up playing into the hands of power by reaffirming the status quo. Bishop cites as evidence the recent co-opting of a collaborative artistic model by New Labour in the UK, which has extolled the virtue of art forms centered on social inclusion, participation and creativity for their

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 191.

⁴³⁹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 13.

ability to foster a community of creative individuals more attuned to the entrepreneurial demands of a deregulated economy and a weakened welfare state.⁴⁴⁰ Bishop describes the antagonistic work, by contrast, as retaining “an element of critical negation and an ability to sustain contradiction that cannot be reconciled with the quantifiable imperatives of positivist economics.”⁴⁴¹ Such art forms “operate in a space of antagonism or negation vis-à-vis society,”⁴⁴² and seek to challenge the desire for social consensus at the heart of a neoliberal narrative.

Bishop argues against proponents of relational art, such as Nicholas Bourriaud, on similar grounds. Relational art is often praised for its lack of closure; like a laboratory, artworks of this new paradigm are open-ended and experimental. The meaning of such works is produced inter-subjectively, unfolding through a series of contingent interactions with the viewer / participants, and thereby never complete. There is no autonomous, separate art object, but rather a constructed situation in which individuals are able to relate to each other within a temporary community.⁴⁴³ According to Bishop, participatory art can be defined as art in which human beings are the primary medium and material of these works. She explains:

But regardless of geographical location, the hallmark of an artistic orientation towards the social in the 1990’s has been a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience. To put it simply: the artist is

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 14-16.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 16. Adorno, like Bishop, is suspicious of discussions of art that seek to assess, in positivist terms, a work’s ‘relevance’ for social progress. Adorno claims that such “[e]ulogists of relevance” (Adorno, “Commitment,” 179) refuse the challenge of artworks which “[revolt] in advance against positivist subordination of meaning” (Adorno, “Commitment,” 179). Adorno reiterates this point in *Aesthetic Theory*, where he claims that such an approach to art ends up subordinating interest in form to a study of aesthetic reception. “The study of social effect neither comes close to understanding what is social in art nor is it in any position to dictate norms for art, as it is inclined to do by positivist spirit” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 311).

⁴⁴² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 16.

⁴⁴³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14-18.

conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder,’ is now repositioned as a co-producer of *participant*.⁴⁴⁴

For Bourriaud, these artistic ‘situations’ are catalysts for positive collaborations between people, and thus can also serve as models for a more emancipated, democratic social form. Again, the problem, for Bishop, is Bourriaud’s refusal to examine the work of art and his accompanying assumption that, as collaborative, dialogical, relational, such an experience is democratic and, therefore, good.

Bishop uses the work of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra as examples of collaborative practices that do not fit so easily into this positivist form of relationality. Revealed by these works is a tension, or antagonism, between art and the social, which cannot simply be celebrated as an experience of social cohesion within the realm of art. Sierra’s work, “Six People Who Cannot be Renumerated for the Staying in the Interior of Cardboard Boxes,” for instance, paid asylum seekers to sit in cardboard boxes for four hours a day for the duration of an exhibit in Berlin, in 2011. Sierra offers not an experience of communion with one’s fellow human beings, but rather produces a harsh reminder of the silencing – or, the invisibility of certain individuals – within a given set of social conditions. Bishop explains:

The work does not offer an experience of transcendent human empathy that smooths over the awkward situation before us, but a pointed racial and economic nonidentification: “this is not me.” The persistence of this friction, its awkwardness and discomfort, alerts us to the relational antagonism of Sierra’s work.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴⁴ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2.

⁴⁴⁵ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 1, no. 110 (2004) 79.

For Bishop, the viewer / participant is revealed not as a unified subject, capable of achieving togetherness with other recipients of such works, but rather as a subject troubled by incompleteness, by friction, and by an experience of disharmony with the broader social conditions in which it is implicated. Bishop contrasts this experience of relational antagonism with the relational ‘togetherness’ advocated by Bourriaud; the former “would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony.”⁴⁴⁶ Bishop makes a compelling case for a disruptive and antagonistic form of art and rightly criticizes much of the celebratory rhetoric surrounding collaborative practice. She demonstrates that many of these practices, supposedly modeled on consensus and equality, actually suppress difference and obscure a set of antagonistic social relations in our current order.

Like Bishop, Adorno is concerned with how art is capable of producing a disruption of the status quo. The difference is that for Adorno, art achieves this ‘relational antagonism’ at the level of form. To revisit an argument presented in Chapter Five, Adorno describes aesthetic experience using the notion of shudder, which occurs as a reaction to an antagonism at the heart of the work. There is an inherent tension within the structure and the language of the complex totality of the work, between its form and its mimetic expression. The combination of these two elements produces a friction between the semblance of unity produced by rational form, and the disruption of that unity by the element of mimesis. Something about the work cannot be resolved. As we have seen, this tension does not exist solely within the confines of the work; for Adorno, it requires the viewer to be activated. In Chapter Three, we saw that Adorno insists that artworks retain a dialogical quality; a viewer, in seeking to understand the riddle of the artwork,

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

literally brings the work to life. An artwork is not a static object, but a processual one.

Adorno explains:

Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze... Through contemplative immersion the immanent processual quality of the work is set free. By speaking, it becomes something that moves in itself. Whatever in the artifact may be called the unity of its meaning is not static but processual, the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself.⁴⁴⁷

Missing from the debate between Kester and Bishop is a consideration of how relational antagonism is produced not only at the level of an affective disruption on the part of the viewer/participant, but also at the level of the artwork itself. Antagonism is at the heart of a work of art, but not quite in the way that Bishop allows. The antagonism of a work, its tension, exists within the form of the work itself, and it is then transmitted to the viewer in the experience of it. The viewer activates the work; it gives it life, so to speak. Adorno argues that the heart of an artwork's form is a set of antagonisms, which provoke an aesthetic experience that reenacts that antagonism at the heart of the work. An interactive process ensues, between the work and the viewer that seeks to understand it. In this sense, Adorno attributes to artworks a fundamentally relational character, defined by the experience of antagonism.

As was argued in Chapter Five, one of the issues with bringing Adorno's theory to bear on contemporary art is his consistent privileging Modernist art. Or, more precisely, a Modernism defined by Adorno in particularly negative terms. This makes it especially difficult to adapt his theory of art to a different historical moment, and explains his absence from many of these discussions of participatory art. According to Adorno,

⁴⁴⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 241.

Modernist artworks, “[b]y emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world’s transformation.”⁴⁴⁸ This narrow reading of Modernism is evident again in his essay, “Commitment,” which includes a familiar lexicon of references ranging from Picasso to Schoenberg, Kafka and Beckett – in other words, artists whose works can be said to preserve, however minimally, a gesture toward reconciliation. Because his thinking is so implicated in this definition of Modernism, it becomes very difficult to dislodge him from these orientations and to reappropriate his critical models for artistic projects that do not share the same Modernist sensibility. By reading Adorno next to Levinas, I have tried to loosen the hold of this Modernist narrative, and make his critical understanding of the work – in all of its antagonisms – available to a contemporary generation of artists. More specifically, I have done this by reinterpreting Adorno's notion of shudder as an aesthetic experience with a Levinasian ethical dimension. In other words, I have tried to show how the antagonisms that Adorno theorized within the work have an ethical counterpart in the moment of aesthetic experience. Adorno gives us the tools for seeing how a work of art contains an antagonism within itself – a tension between the desire for completion, for the authored, and the desire for rupture, for dissensus, which is reproduced by the viewer in her experience of the work.

While Bishop has done much to rehabilitate the category of the aesthetic for discussions of participatory art using the writings of Jacques Rancière, what continues to be missing from these discussions is a theory of the work of art. This is not to say that aesthetic experience should be ignored, but that it overlooks the way in which aesthetic

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 242.

experience occurs in response to the demarcated field of the work. To be clear, the way in which a work is demarcated has been problematized and reinvented in fundamental ways since Adorno's time. The logic of the work – under the name of traditional medium-specificity – is rightly being challenged on all fronts by contemporary art. Despite these dramatic shifts in the contemporary approach to form, I would argue that the demarcated element of artworks must still be acknowledged as playing an important role. Adorno and Levinas, when read together, provide us with a rehabilitated theory of the work that will have numerous repercussions for the analysis of contemporary art.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁹ This discussion need not be limited to artworks with a collaborative component. My current interest, for instance, is in the implications of this analysis of form for recent photographic projects by Taryn Simon. The application of the terms set out above to concrete works of art, however, takes me beyond the parameters of this dissertation.

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